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Donatella Montini
"Sapienza" Università di Roma

Tracing Speech Acts Through Text and Genre: Directives and Commissives in Queen Elizabeth I's Political Speeches and in Shakespeare's Henry V

Abstract

The essay investigates some stylistic and pragmatic variations across two genres and text-types pertaining to political oratory in Early Modern England. The speaker in question is the Renaissance monarch who, as many studies have shown from a cultural perspective, appropriates the forms of stage performance and, by manipulating them, acts his power and performs a relationship with his subjects. In this respect my study proposes to analyse and compare some aspects of non-literary and literary texts, Queen Elizabeth I's parliamentary speeches and Shakespeare's Henry V's monologues, as text-types which share a strong persuasive and argumentative aim and are both speech-purposed. The working hypothesis of my case study is that, by drawing attention to two specific speech-acts, directives and commissives, the evaluation of the illocutionary force of their speeches will shed light also on some typical features of the political discourse of Early Modern England.

1. *Introduction*

In reply to the Lords gathered in the Parliament of 1563 who had submitted their umpteenth petition on marriage and succession, the young Elizabeth I, the Queen who was never to comply with the first request and would satisfy the second only at the end of her long reign, introduced her words, the word of a prince, with a formidable premise: «Since there can be no duer debt than princes' word, to keep that un-

spotted for my part […] I will an answer give» (Marcus 2000: 79).[1] A Renaissance, hence an absolute monarch, offered her reply to her subjects as part of a necessary prerogative the sovereign owed to her people, as a duty and a debt, as a moral obligation which even a monarch could not shirk.

It is this aspect of the early modern political discourse, that special communication, which I would like to discuss in my essay by investigating stylistic and pragmatic variations across two genres and text-types, specifically pertaining to political oratory in Early Modern England. In this respect my study proposes to analyse and compare some aspects of non-literary and literary texts, Queen Elizabeth I's parliamentary speeches and Shakespeare's Henry V's monologues, as text-types which share a strong persuasive and argumentative aim and are both speech-purposed. Elizabeth and Henry, historical and fictional figures as they are, have been compared and contrasted in many studies because of their similar political stories, their biographies, and, especially, their charisma over their subjects. Apart from affinities in political history, however, I would like to show here how common codes of self-representation may be detected in their discourse, in a linguistic and pragmatic perspective (Montini 1999; 2010; 2011). The working hypothesis of my case study is that the evaluation of the illocutionary force of their speeches sheds light also on some typical features of the political discourse of Early Modern England, and of the Renaissance monarch as the most relevant representative of Renaissance political discourse.

In the 1980s many studies based on a cultural perspective investigated the connection between royal power and its manifestations in Renaissance England, between state and stage, showing how Renaissance monarchs appropriated the forms of stage performance and by

[1] Source to the text: British Library, MS, Additional 32379. The speech was written by the Queen herself and delivered by Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper. See also J.E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, I vol., Jonathan Cape, London, 1953, pp. 125-128.

manipulating them, acted out their power and performed their relationship with their subjects, ultimately exercising what has been called «the prince's privileged visibility» (Orgel 1975; Axton 1977; Greenblatt 1980; Wilson, Dutton 1992).

What has been largely neglected, however, and may be updated with the tools of more recent linguistic approaches, is an inquiry into the linguistic performance of the encounter between state and stage, the stylistic and pragmatic moves which both the historical and the theatre sovereign may share possibly.[2]

The small corpus I have selected focuses on Elizabeth and Henry V's speeches during their political and linguistic rise-to-leadership phase, in which they are still consolidating their charisma and pursuing consensus. Although linguistic and stylistic clues to interpersonal relationships such as the use of pronouns, or modality, are to be taken into account, my focus in this essay will be on the dialectical network of speech-acts which occur in them. Directive speech acts seem to be the first and perhaps most natural pragmatic moves to be taken into consideration: ultimately, a monarch can only give orders and be obeyed: the sovereign's discourse could be defined as "a macro-directive" speech act. In my case study, however, I would also like to show how directives are closely connected with commissives. As is known, both these speech acts are used for purposes of suasion: directives serve to get the hearer to do something; commissives to commit the speaker to

[2] My study is part of a broader multidisciplinary on-going project dedicated to the linguistic strategies connected to leadership building processes in a historical perspective. A small-scale corpus containing Elizabeth I's and James I's speeches, and Shakespeare's history plays, is being compiled by employing more traditional, philological methods, as the analysis is proceeding manually. Speech acts, personal pronouns and terms of address, lexical choices, as well as FTA are some aspects which are being investigated, but considering the work in progress status of my project, this essay is conceived as a public sharing of hypotheses and any results I report are qualitative and suggestive rather than comprehensive.

doing something (Searle 1969). As such, they are particularly relevant to Elizabeth's and Henry's speeches where the speaker, that special speaker who would be entitled to get her addressee to do everything she requires, in return, seems to show her willingness to commit herself to a course of action.[3]

In the following paragraphs I will start with a short discussion of a few aspects of the speech-act and politeness theory, relevant to the hypothesis I am proposing; then, I will consider some examples of the special language inaugurated by Elizabeth in addressing her subjects and compare it with Shakespeare's Henry V.

2. *Methodological issues and problems*

The tracing of speech acts in texts of past eras and the very possibility of diachronic speech act research have been variously investigated and carried out by a few scholars who testify to the "fuzziness" of historical speech-acts.[4] Various important issues have been raised such as the form of speech acts, their grammatical features, the level of indirectness, the historical context, even the possibility of diachronic speech act theory (Arnovick 1999; Bertuccelli Papi 2000; Valkonen 2008; Jucker, Taavitsainen 2008; Kohnen 2008a, 2008b; Del Lungo 2008).

Comparing literary and non literary texts may raise other methodological problems, concerning agency, for example, or data reliability. Following Jucker amongst others, I will accept that spoken language in fiction is «of sufficient interest […] to warrant pragmatic analyses»

[3] I have decided to use the standard convention of employing a generic female pronoun for the speaker.

[4] Interestingly, Dawn Archer interprets Taavitsainen and Jucker's definition of speech acts as «fuzzy concepts that show both diachronic and synchronic variation» (Jucker, Taavitsainen 2008:4), as «a rejection of the application of speech-act theory in its most conservative Searlean sense in favour of a view of speech acts as 'prototypes' linked by a shared multidimensional 'pragmatic space' ». (Archer 2010:380).

(Jucker 2004:201), and if we cannot expect to obtain from literary material a picture of the actual speech act practice of the period in which the texts analysed are set, speech act studies can give us insights from within society into its norms.

In fact, a number of studies have used fictional data to investigate the speech-act phenomena of times past and among Searlean speech act categories, directives and commissives play a special role in the analysis of the Renaissance royal political discourse. Directives, for example, have been widely and successfully studied in Shakespeare's corpus: Ulrich Busse on *King Lear* offers a detailed classification of grammatical sentence types which could be used in Early Modern English to perform directive speech acts (Busse 2008); Juahani Rudanko provides an extended study of speech acts in *Coriolanus* (Rudanko 1993). Both directives and commissives are used to try to get someone to bring about a future situation, which is precisely the covert or overt agenda of politics and political discourse.

As Taavitsainen and Jucker put it, «Commissives and directives have a common feature in that they have the same direction of fit, word-to-world. They express in words what is to happen in the world» (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008:11). In the case of the directive, it is the addressee who is expected to bring about the fit, who is to carry out what the speaker asks him to do. Commissives, on the other hand, are those illocutionary acts the point of which is to commit the speaker to some course of action. «What directives and commissives also have in common is that they constitute face threats to the negative face. In the case of a directive, it is the negative face of the addressee that is threatened, in the case of commissives, the speaker threatens her own negative face in that she reduces her own freedom of action by committing herself to a particular course of action» (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008:11).[5] Dawn Archer has suggested that further research

[5] On face, face wants and face work see Brown and Levinson 1987.

might be undertaken into whether speech acts of times past were only determined by the interlocutors' understanding of shared norms for their context of situation (Archer 2010), but my claim is that, given the speaker(s) in question, the relationship between speech-acts and facework should be reframed: if «the force of the asking can, of course, range from a well-meant piece of advice, which leaves the addressee a lot of freedom to comply, to an unequivocal command, which demands incontrovertible and immediate compliance» (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008:11), the absolute monarch's word is supposed to occur as a direct command and even her commitment is theoretically defined as freely given. However, if issues of politeness regarding the negative face of the *addressee* are to be taken for granted, it is precisely the threat to the *addresser*'s negative face which is an action of greater interest here, especially when referred to "the word of a prince".

3. *The word of a Prince*

A number of political as well as biographical aspects allow for a comparison between Elizabeth I and Shakespeare's Henry V: the issue of legitimacy, the constant fear for treason and rebellion, the instability of a country to be ruled. Chronicles, historiography and literary criticism tend to contrast them on account of their relationship with the (Reformed) Church, of their diplomatic and military success, and because they acted to consolidate a monarchy which was still at risk from subversion. The climax of such an interaction is reached in their speeches.

By the times of Elizabeth I, Parliament, already an old institution preceding the Tudors, had become an important part of the governing system. Between 1558 and 1603, the year of the Queen's death, ten parliaments and 13 sessions had been convened. At the beginning of every parliamentary session, there was a speech by the Lord Chancellor who, in the name of the Queen, declared why parliament had been

convened and during the session there were frequent missives sent by the Queen or even actual speeches read aloud by the Lord Chancellor. However, as the relationship between the crown and parliament evolved, the Queen herself, in line with her self-promotion strategies, began to intervene directly with the verbal and gestural affirmation of her charisma which usually won the consensus of all those listening. The recipients of these pronouncements were the various components of Parliament, the Commons, the Lords, the bishops, delegations, or the entire parliament, so an audience which could reach approximately five hundred spectators (Neale 1953; Montini 1999).

In Tudor England, a complex, rhetorical ceremony controlled the enunciation of the sovereign. Training in the art of rhetoric was, in fact, a constituent part of the humanistic reform, and politics and religion were the main fields in which «Tudor humanism aimed to form men who could apply rhetorical skills and moral understanding» (Mack 2002: 176). The excellent humanistic education which Elizabeth was able to enjoy, her mastery of Latin and Greek, her knowledge of modern languages which she loved to show off constantly – with ambassadors for example – were all combined in her impressive oratory techniques. Elizabeth made explicit and recurrent use of this wealth of knowledge in her speeches to define her political role and her authority according to the humanistic ideal and through the use of rhetoric (Crane 1988).

Elizabeth's speeches on marriage and succession, until 1566, present a recurrent interplay between the Queen's apparently angered answers to the Lords' and Commons' requests that she marry and long paragraphs where she tries accurate redressive strategies by engaging in and committing herself to her future actions. The speech dated 10th February 1559, the first speech to the Commons in reply to the first petition on marriage, is one of the best examples and displays strategies which will be part of Elizabeth's successive oratorical style. The opening prepares the logical distribution of the speech, then follows a

summary of the sovereign's past actions and then the queen concentrates on the parliamentarians' request that she marry, meditating on her condition of unmarried female monarch. A strong subjectivity is established through a marked *émbrayage actantiel*: "we" as a *pluralis maiestatis* is never used in favour of an "I" who takes on all the locutive, deictic and pragmatic force of orientation of the speech. Such an assumption of ethical and pragmatic subjectivity is associated with a special attention on the addressee by the use of linguistic traits which show a constant exercise of a conative and phatic function. The lexical choice points to a sequence of commonplaces about what is expected of and what is befitting to the subject when addressing the sovereign and this is managed via an accurate sequence of antitheses ("require"/"command"; "appoint"/"desire"; "bind and limit"/"obey"), ending up with a confrontation between addresser and addressee, as typical of Elizabeth's style («draw my love to your liking»; «frame my will to your fantasies»).

The speaker seems to be negotiating her role, but then she starts a more explicit strategy conveyed through the use of directives and commissives (ex.1):

1. Nevertheless, if any of you be in suspect that, whensoever it may please God to incline my heart to another kind of life, *ye may well assure yourselves* my meaning is not to do or determine anything wherewith the realm may or shall have just cause to be discontended. And therefore *put that clean out of your heads*. For *I assure* you*, what credit my assurance may have with you I cannot tell*, *but what credit it shall deserve to have, the sequel shall declare*. *I will* never in that matter conclude anything that shall be prejudicial to the realm, for the weal, good and safety whereof *I will* never shame to spend my life. And whomsoever my chance shall be to light upon, *I trust he shall be* as careful for the realm and you – I will not say as myself, because I cannot so certainly determine of any other – but at the leastways, *by my goodwill and desire, he shall be* such as *shall be* as careful for the preservation of the realm and you as myself. (Marcus 2000: 57; my emphasis).[6]

[6] Source: British Library, MS Landsdowne 94 art. 14, fol.29; copy.

The commissive "assure" introduces the sequence of utterances, «*ye may well assure yourselves* my meaning is not to do or determine anything wherewith the realm may or shall have just cause to be discontended», then a directive speech act follows, conveyed by the 2nd person pure Imperative which reaches the pragmatic force of an insult: «And therefore put that clean out of your heads». Finally, a sequence of promises is again introduced by "assure" which draws the attention to the speaker who declares her intention to dedicate her function to the country and the subjects: «*I will* never in that matter conclude anything that shall be prejudicial to the realm». The act of promising is performed through a list of "I will", whereas "shall" is used for 3rd person subjects, when the queen's commitment expands to the commitment of a potential husband and king.

The 1563 speech proposes a similar interplay between a vindication of the Prince's absolute right to take decisions about the realm and her subjects, and reassuring declarations of care and acceptance of the subjects' will; here the linguistic strategy is fulfilled by juxtaposing two forms of commitment, the addressee's and the addresser's, as the following examples will show:

2. […] wherein *I assure you* the consideration of my own safety (although I thank you for the great care that you seem to have thereof) shall be little in comparison of that great regard that I mean to have of the safety and surety of you all. (Marcus 2000: 71)

3. And though I am determined in this so great and weighty a matter to defer mine answer till some other time because I will not in so deep matter wade with so shallow a wit, yet have I thought good to use these few words, as well to show you that I am neither careless nor unmindful of your safety in this case, as *I trust you likewise do not forget* that by me you were delivered whilst you were hanging on the bough ready to fall into mud –yea, to be drowned in the dung; *neither yet the promise which you have here made concerning your duties and due obedience,* wherewith, *I assure you,* I mean to charge you as further to let you understand that

I neither mislike any of your requests herein, nor the great care you seem to have of the surety and safety of yourselves in this matter. (Marcus 2000: 72)

4. And so *I assure you* all that, though after my death you may have many stepdames, yet shall you never have a more natural mother than I mean to be unto you all. (Marcus 2000: 72).[7]

Elizabeth's word reminds her subjects of their duties and of their condition (ex.2) with the most explicit and insulting metaphor (ex.3) («*I trust you likewise do not forget* that by me you were delivered whilst you were hanging on the bough ready to fall into mud – yea, to be drowned in the dung»), but, unlike her royal father and her successor (Walker 1991; Goldberg 1989), she keeps reassuring her subjects of her commitment and love of a natural mother (ex.4). Gender is crucial in the sovereign/subject relationship, and the presence of a woman on the throne undermined the very concept of power and of its forms. Elizabeth was highly aware of her condition and fashioned her discourse through a multifaceted gallery of *dramatis personae*, in order to cope with and bypass the claims and demands of a patriarchal system.

Finally, in 1566, to the last Parliament that will submit a petition on succession, Elizabeth addresses a fiery speech: she vents her anger on the Commons and bishops, vindicating again her care for the country. The linguistic strategy, however, has changed and the speech presents a long list of questions, rhetorical questions in fact, as forms of indirect speech acts, which are examples of face threatening acts to the positive and negative face of the addressee:

5. Was I not born in the realm? Were my parents born in any foreign country? Is there any cause I should alienate myself from being careful over this country? Is

[7] Queen Elizabeth's answer to the Commons, January 28, 1563. Source: Public Record Office, State Paper Domestic, Elizabeth 12/27/36, fols. 143r-144r.

not my kingdom here? […] How have I governed since my reign? (Marcus 2000: 95)

Interestingly, the speech goes on by discussing the perlocutionary force of the Queen's word:

6. I did send them answer by my Council I would marry […]. But that was not accepted nor credited, *although spoken by their prince*. And yet I used so many words that I could say no more. And were it not now I had spoken those words, I would never speak them again. I will never break the word of a prince spoken in public place for my honor sake. And therefore I say again I will as soon as I can conveniently. […] A strange order of petitioners that will make a request and cannot be otherwise ascertained but by the prince's word, and yet will not believe it when it is spoken! (Marcus 2000: 95, my emphasis).[8]

Elizabeth wonders whether her own word and her own utterance are meaningful and effective («I did send them answer by my Council I would marry […]. But that was not accepted nor credited, *although spoken by their prince*»). The sincerity condition is under consideration («I will never break the word of a prince spoken in public place for my honor sake») and the queen tries to reiterate her verbal commitment («And therefore I say again I will as soon as I can conveniently»), in the end only to lament the failure of its perlocutionary force.

The fictional sovereign depicted at the beginning of his leadership presents significant similarities. As J.D.Cox put it: «Henry V's resemblance to the only monarch Shakespeare had ever known at the time he wrote his history plays goes much deeper than parallels in church polity, but such resemblances always elucidate the exercise of centralized power» (Cox 1989: 108). In Henry's speeches the very question of origins is under discussion: what does being and becoming a king mean? And the act of promising, more than the act of order, presents itself as a necessary gateway to establish the terrain of consensus. The mono-

[8] Source: The Syndics of Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.III.34, fols. 208-212.

logue to the Dauphin is probably the most effective speech to show the illocutionary force of Henry's discourse. To the Dauphin who laughs at his claim to any part of France and says that he is still too young to be responsible, Henry gives his famous reply:

KING HENRY V
We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us;
His present and your pains we thank you for:
When we have march'd our rackets to these balls,
We will, in France, by God's grace, *play a set*
Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard.
Tell him he hath made a match with such a wrangler
That all the courts of France will be disturb'd
With chases. And we understand him well,
How he comes o'er us with our wilder days,
Not measuring what use we made of them.
We never valued this poor seat of England;
And therefore, living hence, did give ourself
To barbarous licence; as 'tis ever common
That men are merriest when they are from home.
But tell the Dauphin I will keep my state,
Be like a king and show my sail of greatness
When I do rouse me in my throne of France:
For that I have laid by my majesty
And plodded like a man for working-days,
But I will rise there with so full a glory
That I will dazzle all the eyes of France,
Yea, strike the Dauphin blind to look on us.
And tell the pleasant prince this mock of his
Hath turn'd his balls to gun-stones; and his soul
Shall stand sore charged for the wasteful vengeance
That shall fly with them: for many a thousand widows
Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands;
Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down;
And some are yet ungotten and unborn
That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn.

But this lies all within the will of God,
To whom I do appeal; and in whose name
Tell you the Dauphin I am coming on,
To venge me as I may and to put forth
My rightful hand in a well-hallow'd cause.
So get you hence in peace; and *tell the Dauphin*
His jest will savour but of shallow wit,
When thousands weep more than did laugh at it.
Convey them with safe conduct. Fare you well.

(*HV*, I.2.259-297, my emphasis)[9]

The speech revolves around the act of promising, already set out in *Henry IV* (see 1*HIV,* I.ii.204-226; or 2*HIV*, V.ii.56-61). A list of declarations of commitment is displayed, introduced initially by 'we', as a *pluralis maiestatis*, and then by 'I'. Actions and events are presented in a chronological sequence: a past of the prodigal son («We never valued this poor seat of England» l. 269) turns into a future made of promises which describe features of sacred kingship («I will keep my state», l. 273; «I will rise there» l. 278; «I will dazzle all the eyes» l. 279). Five anaphorical repetitions of directives, bald on-record strategies, conveyed through the form of Imperative («tell the Dauphin», «tell him» l. 264; 273; 281; 291; 294) introduce and embed the long list of promises which Henry is making: as a stylistic strategy which defines his (literally promising) royal identity, the very intertwining of directives and commissives shapes his characterization and his royal power.

According to Joseph Porter, it is precisely these illocutionary forces, whose content is a future action and at the same time "a binding promise", to predominate in Henry V's utterances. This discursive feature distinguishes his *speech action* both from other characters in the play and from the other two sovereigns of the tetralogy, Richard II and

[9] W. Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, J.H.Walter (ed.), Routledge, London 1993.

Henry IV, whose verbal actions seem to be placed outside the tense system and in the past respectively. In *Henry V* the development of tense parade comes to an end and Henry seems to give a new meaning to time itself: «Hal, through his concentration on futurity, redeems time by making tense significant» (Porter 1979: 144-45).

Similar stylistic and pragmatic strategies present in the two genres and text-types under scrutiny seem to confirm the dual speech-act focus as an explicit core of the Renaissance sovereign's discourse, whose illocutionary force highlights also early modern conceptions of power and of the royal utterance. As shown above, both in Elizabeth's and in Henry's discourses, imperatives are usual linguistic moves of the speaker's utterance: a monarch, these monarchs when using directives do not need to mitigate their orders. However, along with orders, commands, and even insults, they constantly undertake commitments and make promises. Indeed, the speaker tends to convey the illocutionary point of the act by linking a directive to a commissive, by conveying the commitment through a proper act of order: "*Tell him…*" introduces "*I will..*", "*put that clean out of your heads*" introduces "*For I assure you...*" In undertaking commitments, the most frequent linguistic form is the use of *will*, by which the speaker explicitly expresses her intention to perform both a future action and a "binding promise" (though its sincerity and essential conditions are only partially satisfied). Eventually, both Elizabeth's and Henry's discourses present a threat to the speaker's negative face by performing self-limiting acts of their power and their will: the recurrent and therefore "infelicitous" appeal to the reliability of the royal word is an illocutionary act which reveals a crisis of its perlocutionary force.

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