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How to Do (Dangerous) Things with Words: Pragmatics of a Pandemic Context

The goal of this paper is to establish a new view of the performative aspect of speech acts, taking into account the pandemic context. Austin's speech acts are defined either as something expressed to present information or as something that also performs an action. I posit that media language during various health crises changes pragmatically, shifting its strength from the locutionary aspect (what was explicitly asserted and meant) to illocution (what was done) and perlocution (what actually happened as a result). The pragmatic notion of a speech act is now intertwined with discourse and cultural studies and takes into account the extralinguistic reality – i.e., the pandemic. The main contribution here is to state that media discourse becomes an active participant and has the power to act performatively. The new pragmatic context during a period of a global pandemic comprises media discourses as producers and the general audience on the receiving side. Such a discourse has implicit performative power, since it deliberately does not focus only on the assertive aspect of providing information, but provides less information than needed in order to implicitly act as a source of ambiguity that invokes panic and produces various cultural decodings of such messages. I will examine typical examples of such ambiguous news texts on the most popular news website in the United States and review standard functions of ordinary language to be able to compare them to a new level of discourse in a pandemic context.

Key words: speech act, news, perlocution, COVID-19, performatives, J. L. Austin

Margins and Centers

The most visited news website in the United States, according to statista.com and similarweb.com, with 175 million unique monthly visitors and ranking as number one in the news and media category, is Yahoo! News on the website yahoo.com. This is a website that originated as a part of Yahoo!, a digital and mobile media company operating under Verizon ("Verizon Media"). Yahoo.com and its various subsites are visited by about 700 million people per month, and Yahoo! is available in 30 languages ("Yahoo Statistics"). When the Yahoo! homepage is opened, various subsections can be found there, including Mail, Coronavirus, News, Finance, Sports, Life, Entertainment, and more. The homepage is arranged in such a way that many headlines bombard the user at every visit. The headlines are from various subsections, as well as different sources, and if a reader clicks on one of them, that subsection is displayed. The headlines are presented as pieces of news, and upon opening the homepage, the reader is not immediately aware from which section of the website the headline comes. Since February 2020, these headlines have been mostly about the coronavirus pandemic, and as I have uncomfortably noticed, they have been anything but just informative, which is what one expects primarily when reading the news. The ensuing anxiety has led me to explore the pragmatics of these texts and to inquire into how they operate and what effect they might have on the reader.

A piece of text may be seen as a pragmatic unit, a speech act. The term speech act was introduced by J. L. Austin in 1962, and it is his work that I will be focusing on and drawing upon in this article. In a series of lectures he delivered at Harvard University in the 1950s, Austin went from distinguishing between constative utterances, which state something true or false, and performative utterances, which *do* something when uttered, to a new, more general, theory of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts. Austin realized that, whenever we utter something, it can have the forces of two or even all three of these types of speech act. For instance, if someone says, "I'll shoot you," they have performed a locutionary act of uttering a meaningful

sentence in the English language while simultaneously performing an illocutionary act of threatening as well as a perlocutionary act of alarming someone. In Austin's words: "Thus, for example: '*In* saying I would shoot him I was threatening him'. '*By* saying I would shoot him I alarmed him'" (121). Another example that illustrates the difference between these types of acts is distinguishing "the locutionary act 'he said that . . .' from the illocutionary act 'he argued that . . .' and the perlocutionary act 'he convinced me that . . .'" (102).

Whenever we say something, we are performing a locutionary act, and at the same time, an illocutionary act. In Austin's terms, to state something is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce; it is on a level with arguing, betting, and warning. In saying, "I state that this is so-and-so," we are performing an explicit illocutionary act of stating. Austin distinguished between explicit performatives and implicit ones, the former being the ones that had an explicit performative verb within them (*I warn . . ., I order . . .*) and the latter being those that could be reformulated into an explicit performative (*This is dangerous = I warn you that this is dangerous*). The illocutionary force of an utterance was what Austin was mostly focused on, but here, I am more concerned with the performative force that utterances can have.

When he talks about perlocution, Austin notes that when we say something, we normally produce certain consequential effects regarding the feelings, thoughts, or actions of others, and that this may be done intentionally or unintentionally: "since our acts are acts, we must always remember that the distinction between producing effects or consequences which are intended or unintended; and (i) when the speaker intends to produce an effect it may nevertheless not occur, and (ii) when he does not intend to produce it or intends not to produce it it may nevertheless occur" (105). Austin continues to elaborate on this difference between illocution and perlocution when we use language or perform utterances and says that we also perform illocutionary acts, such as informing, ordering, and warning, which are utterances that

have a certain (conventional) force, but that we also perform perlocutionary acts when we bring about or achieve something by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even surprising or misleading (108). As he puts it, "We must distinguish the illocutionary from the perlocutionary act: for example we must distinguish 'in saying it I was warning him' from 'by saying it I convinced him, or surprised him, or got him to stop'" (109). He does point out that some effect must be produced in certain senses by illocutionary acts if they are to be successfully performed (115) but this is different from the characteristic effects produced by perlocutionary acts, whose response achieved (or the sequel) can also be achieved by non-locutionary means; for example, we may alarm someone by pointing a gun at them. The illocutionary act *takes effect* in certain ways, i.e., it leads to changes in the natural course of events, but this is distinguished from producing consequences (perlocution). Some perlocutionary acts always have sequels rather than objects, specifically those where there is no illocutionary formula; thus, I may surprise you or upset you or humiliate you by a *locution*, even though there is no illocutionary formula such as the following: "'I surprise you by. . .', 'I upset you by. . .', 'I humiliate you by. . . '" (117).

Austin was mostly confined to utterances in speech or conversations; however, he noted that this was only due to simplicity (113 n2), and he does mention written utterances on a few occasions: "the utterance (in writing) of the sentence" (57); "In written utterances (or *inscriptions*)" (60). Moreover, he says that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation and that the intents and purposes of the utterance and its context are important (100). I argue that we may observe a piece of written news, an article, as a speech act, or rather, as a pragmatic unit consisting of several speech acts. These speech acts are performed by the authors of the news articles who are communicating with the readers, primarily trying to state the facts or inform on important pieces of news. In Austin's terms, "to state is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce" (133). Austin goes on to inspect whether an utterance

that is a statement is liable to be true or false (or as he calls it, happy or unhappy) and finds that statements indeed "*are* liable to every kind of infelicity to which performatives are liable" (135), meaning that, if we state something and we do not have the authority to do so, or all the information to make such a statement, or the thing to which we refer does not exist, then that statement is void. Austin also emphasizes that it is important to take the speech situation as a whole and that, "once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act" and that "in stating we are or may be performing perlocutionary acts of all kinds" (138). Thus, news articles written ("uttered") in a specific speech situation (on a news website), with the purpose of stating facts or informing the readers, can be viewed as speech acts (with illocutionary force) and as such, produce certain effects (perlocutionary force) on the readers.

The distinction between attempt and achievement in speech acts is important when we observe the news discourse. We expect the news to inform us, to be impartial, to provide full and truthful information. Indeed, when analyzing examples of news on the Yahoo! News website, most of them use locutionary acts and illocutionary acts of quoting, stating, reporting, and informing, and to some extent, warning, criticizing, or advising. However, how the information they contain is presented and what effects it can have on the readers who are the receivers of the message, is another matter, that of perlocutionary force. According to van Dijk, there are principles according to which news reports are organized; these include relevance, importance, and recency. Even though news stories are stories, they are different from everyday stories that people share and which follow a chronological pattern. A news story begins with the headline and lead which are essentially a summary containing the most important information of the discourse. "Then the story in a news report is delivered in installments – the most important information of each category comes first, followed by the less important information of each category" (194). Van Dijk continues to elaborate:

> If the most important information should be contained in the headlines and leads, this is what most readers will usually focus on, and we might even say that this is what they will take away from the piece of news they read. Indeed, according to Ziming Liu, our reading of digital sources is fragmented, discontinuous, and shallow, and this leads to lower comprehension. The digital environment influences how we read. In Liu's own words, screen-based reading behavior is characterized by spending more time on browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, nonlinear reading, and reading more selectively, while less time is spent on in-depth reading, concentrated reading, and decreasing sustained attention. While people today spend more time reading than they did in the print-only past, the depth and concentration associated with reading has declined. (88)

Taking all this into account, we may observe the headline and the lead as one speech act, the one with the most force, and the rest of the article as another, one with less force. We will notice then that there is a discrepancy between these two forces and between the messages that these two speech acts convey. We also expect when reading the news that we will get the most important information at the beginning.

We also expect the news report to be true. This is especially important, and if we observe the news article as a speech situation composed of various speech acts with the illocutionary force of informing or stating, we may subject those speech acts or statements to the truth or falsity test, considering not just the information or facts they contain, but also the context and manner in which they are presented or delivered. Austin says that facts come in as well as our knowledge or opinion about facts and that the intents and purposes of an utterance, as well as context, are important (142). We may state something and we may exaggerate it, which may be acceptable in certain contexts. We may also leave something out or mislead with our statement. This would certainly be inappropriate and considered false in the context of a news report or statement. Indeed, something stated, although it contains (some) facts, may not be the right or proper thing to say in certain circumstances, to a specific

audience, "for these purposes and with these intentions" (144), or simply, whether a statement is true or false will depend not only on the meanings of words but "on what act you were performing in what circumstances" (144). When we deal with performative utterances, we deal with the illocutionary force, in the case of news articles of stating (and informing), but as we will see, the intended performative of stating (or informing) is not always successfully achieved, or perhaps the intention was not just that of stating (or informing) to begin with.

With this in mind, I will now analyze ten articles available on the yahoo.com website, where they were presented as news about COVID-19. These articles were accessed from the homepage, and when accessed, they belonged to (i.e., were linked to and available in) the subsections Yahoo News and Yahoo Life, even though some of them were actually from other resources. They could be accessed by regular browsing and visiting the homepage in the period from July until September 2020.

The first example begins with the headline: "COVID patient didn't recognize body after double transplant"and begins with the following lead: "A Chicago woman who last month became the nation's first COVID-19 patient to undergo a double lung transplant said Thursday that she woke up days later, unaware about the surgery and unable to 'recognize my body'" ("COVID patient").

In this example of a speech act, we have the illocutionary force of informing/stating, perhaps of warning (about a dangerous consequence of the disease), but also the perlocutionary force of causing worry and alarming, because a reader might believe this is something that generally happens to COVID-19 patients. Later, upon reading carefully the rest of the article (the second speech act), one learns that only two people in the United States had undergone such an operation and that they were both doing fine. One does not learn much more about the cases, not even the percentage of such pa-

tients in the overall affected population, which is a case of manipulation by omission. According to Austin, "The truth or falsity of statements is affected by what they leave out or put in and by their being misleading" (143).

Example 2 has the following headline: "New research suggests COVID-19 can spread via aerosol transmission – and might affect tall people more." Its lead reads: "A new survey has found more evidence to suggest that people can become infected with COVID-19 through aerosol transmission, which could be prevented by wearing a mask" ("New research").

Later, it is stated that taller individuals appear to be at a higher risk and that individuals over 6ft tall seem to have more than double the chance of having a COVID-19 medical diagnosis or testing positive. However, we also learn that the findings were posted on the preprint website medrxiv.org, and have not yet been peer-reviewed, meaning that they have not been verified by experts. Here we have illocutionary acts of stating, warning, suggesting and/or reporting, as well as the perlocutionary acts of alarming and frightening. The progression of information is what creates the discrepancy, because at first it seems like the article is stating the facts and reporting verified information, but later it becomes clear the information has not been verified. If the most important information should be contained at the beginning of the article, why are we only learning at the very end that this piece of "alarming" information has not been verified?

Example 3 is an article reporting on pets falling victim to the virus. Headline: "Buddy, the first dog to test positive for COVID-19 in the US, has died." Lead: "Buddy the German Shepherd has died. He was the first pet dog in the United States to test positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus" (Rodriguez).

The illocutionary force here is the one of reporting and stating. This information is worrisome (perlocution) and implies that pets can be infected

with and *die from* the virus. Later in the article, however, it is stated that Buddy died from something else:

> On the morning of his death, Buddy was throwing up clotted blood in the kitchen. Vets discovered from blood work that he almost certainly had lymphoma and the family knew nothing could be done, according to the magazine. Buddy's family and doctors were unable to confirm whether it was the lymphoma or the virus that ultimately took his life. The family's surviving dog, Duke, tested positive for antibodies but was never sick. (Rodriguez)

This diverges from the initial proposition that pets who are infected with COVID-19 die from it. Some pets who are infected do die, but we do not learn of the exact numbers or the context of such events.

Example 4 presents numbers in an alarming way with both the headline and the lead. Headline: "COVID-19 deaths spike 27% even as new cases decline." Lead: "Even as the U.S. has seen moderate declines in new COVID-19 cases, the nation experienced a sharp rise in deaths related to the disease last week, according to a new government document reviewed by Yahoo News" (Wilson).

The title and the lead report data (illocution) but in an alarming way, using loaded lexical items such as *spike* and *sharp rise* (perlocution). Upon superficial reading, we might infer that the death rate has increased to 27% even though there are fewer cases. Upon further and closer reading, we learn that a senior leadership brief dated July 31 said there were 7,631 deaths in the week ranging from July 24 to July 30, a 27.1 percent increase over the previous seven days. The document, which was prepared by the Departments of Health and Human Services and Homeland Security, cited a case fatality rate of 1.7 percent over the past seven days. This is substantially different from what is reported and insinuated by the first speech act.

Example 5 is the one that might cast some light on how conspiracy theories develop. Headline: "The White House Begs Governors to Help Sell a COVID-19 Vaccine." Lead: "Over the last several weeks, President Donald Trump has approached the White House press podium with one resounding message: The coronavirus vaccine is just around the corner and it will soon make its way to Americans across the country" (Suebsaeng and Banco).

The next paragraph reads: "But behind closed doors, Trump's closest advisers, including those officials working on the White House coronavirus task force, are increasingly concerned about public confidence in the vaccine process. Now, White House officials are leaning on the nation's governors to help promote the vaccine's safety and efficacy" (Suebsaeng and Banco).

The illocutionary force of reporting/informing or maybe even warning the general public in this case, is shifted toward the perlocution of convincing or startling the reader that something's *cooking behind closed doors*. If the vaccine is safe and efficient, why would the governors need to be begged to sell it (title)? Later, we learn that the administration is persuading them to *promote* it.

Then there is example 6, in which COVID-19 is mysterious and one pregnant woman has *survived* it. Headline: "I got COVID-19 while pregnant after months of strict isolation, and my case remains a medical mystery." Lead: "I spent months strictly isolating before I tested positive for the coronavirus in June, when I was 19 weeks pregnant. Since then, I've struggled to understand the mystery of my infection. I now count myself among the fortunate survivors of this virus, but I feel little lasting relief" (Peterson).

The illocutionary force is that of reporting or informing about a specific case; however, the perlocutionary force conveyed is that of casting doubt, creating insecurities and alarming the public because the case is a *medical mystery*, implying that, if the medical experts cannot decipher this disease, what hope do we have? Also, *strict isolation* is emphasized in the title and lead,

despite which the woman was infected, which casts doubt on this verified epidemiological method of preventing the virus's spread. If one continues to read the article, they will learn that the woman and her husband were under constant surveillance of their family physician and had such mild symptoms that the doctor, a medical expert, did not even consider a test to be warranted and treated the couple accordingly. However, due to the global situation, the woman was worried and asked for the test anyway and received a positive result. This positive result and her perception of it were what caused her anxiety and difficulties, not the course of her illness, which was reported as mild. Despite this, the couple are dubbed as *survivors* in the lead, which would imply a serious struggle (there was none). In the article, the author continues to muse over the possible sources of her infection emphasizing the mystery but cites no scientific opinions or research to corroborate this *mystery*. The entire article is written from one woman's point of view, someone who is not a medical expert, and no experts are weighing in on this case, which she, a laywoman, proclaims a mystery, and only due to the fact that she herself was not able to locate the source of her infection.

The focus of example 7 is on children, an especially sensitive and emotional topic. Headline: "The First Data On Kids, COVID-19 And Race Is Here — And It's Not Good." Lead:

> The coronavirus pandemic in the United States has been marked by stark racial and socioeconomic disparities. Black and Latinx adults in this country are more likely to get the disease. They're more likely to die from it. The same holds true for lower-income earners. There has, however, been relatively little scientific evidence on how this all breaks down in children — until now. (Pearson)

The headline and the lead have the illocutionary force of reporting and warning; however, the perlocution is again that of alarming. Using the terms *not good, stark*, and *die* draws attention and creates a negative and grim tone.

If one were to read only the headline and the lead, one would think that it is race that plays a role in the severity of the disease and that children of color are somehow, due to their race, biologically more prone to getting the disease and dying from it, while there is no scientific evidence for that. Income is mentioned as something casual, the focus being on race. However, in the remainder of the article, it becomes clear that these differences are not due to biology, which is clearly stated in a quote of a medical expert, but rather to socioeconomic and cultural differences. Furthermore, the reported research was done on a small number of children (1000) in one area of Washington D.C. and the researchers say they cannot extrapolate their data to what is happening nationally but can only guess that there is a similar trend. The children are reported as having relatively mild symptoms.

Example 8 is an article whose headline reads: "You're Twice as Likely to Die of Coronavirus If You Live Here, Study Says." Its lead:

> There isn't a single state in the U.S. that hasn't experienced hardship and tragic loss at the hands of the COVID pandemic. As outbreaks spread from cities to rural areas across the country, it became clear that no area was safe from potential infection. But do different places affect how a brush with the deadly disease will play out? According to a new report from NPR, **you're twice as likely to die of coronavirus if you live in a large city.** (Mack)

The boldface was used in the lead, thus emphasizing the message. Also, the present tense is used. The illocutionary force of this speech act is reporting and informing; however, by using boldface and loaded wording, the perlocution of alarming is achieved. A reader living in a large city might read this information and take it as is. Is there any hope for urban dwellers? If the study says so, it must be true. Reporting on numbers and statistics can be tricky and especially manipulative to suit one's needs. In this case, if readers continue to explore the article, they will learn, for example, that "New York City was an

early epicenter in the pandemic in the U.S. – and at that time, there was also less of an understanding of how to treat the virus, which led to more deaths" (Mack). Furthermore, an epidemiologist is quoted as saying: "People live far apart, are less likely to see each other, but we have events that bring us together. And the cases follow that" (Mack). By this, he meant that there were more cases – and consequently, more fatalities ¬ in large cities because more people lived in those areas, and at the beginning of the pandemic, they had little knowledge on how to prevent the spread.

The final two examples involve articles published on the same day, using similar language and loaded terms. The two articles quote the same medical expert and were written by the same author, Leah Groth. On yahoo.com, in the section yahoo!life, on September 23, 2020, the two articles were published with the following headlines: "The New COVID Symptom That is Alarming Even Dr. Fauci" and "These 21 States See an Alarming COVID Spike." The leads are, respectively:

> Over the course of the last nine months since COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, we have continued to learn more about the highly infectious virus, responsible for the deaths of over 200,000 Americans. One of the scariest things about coronavirus, is that even those with mild symptoms – or none at all – are experiencing long-term damage as a result of their infection. And, recent studies have pinpointed that some of that devastation is occurring in the heart. On Wednesday morning, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and explained why he is so concerned about two troubling new studies. (Groth)

> On Tuesday, the first day of fall, America hit a grim milestone in the COVID-19 pandemic, passing the 200,000 mark of lives lost as a result of being infected with coronavirus. While the number of infections, deaths, and fateful testing positivity rate started dropping in many states across the nation over the summer, health experts have continued to warn that fall and winter could bring a host of new complications—including the introduction of cold

> and flu season, the falling temperatures bringing people indoors, and children and young adults returning to school —all of which could easily result in an upward trend. And, according to the latest statistics from Johns Hopkins University we are already starting to experience it. (Groth)

It is clear from the headlines and leads that the illocutionary force is that of reporting and warning the public of new findings, all corroborated by the latest research. However, upon reading the remaining portions of the articles, we learn that *alarming* is used quite liberally, thus actually creating a perlocutionary force of alarming, provoking panic in the reader. We are doomed, one might think. If the medical experts are panicking, all hope is lost. The articles do not use the illocutionary force of alarming – they do not state explicitly "be alarmed" or "be warned" – rather, they are merely reporting on this, but they do use the adjective alarming, which is a loaded term and thus creates the aforementioned perlocutionary force. The headlines and leads are full of loaded terms – e.g., *scariest things, long-term damage, devastation, troubling, grim, fateful*, and *host of new complications*. The remaining portions of the articles reveal that, in the case of heart damage, the experts still do not know what the long-term effects will be and it could go either way, the patients could recover completely and have no problems at all or they could have some damage, but there is still a lot to learn. In other words, there are no conclusions yet, only scientific research which is ongoing. In the case of the rising numbers, we learn that the spike in the number of positive cases was not as unexpected due to it coming weeks after Labor Day and after many students had returned to colleges and universities. This trend is certainly not desirable, but using loaded terms to simply report on numbers after they have been expected contributes to the spread of panic.

As can be seen in these examples, instead of just informing and stating the facts in a condensed way in titles and leads, the part of the news mostly read when skimming and scanning, these utterances very often misrepresent the facts and using loaded terms, which when read, can alter the readers' per-

ception of reality and stated facts, and as a consequence, can change their behavior. This is especially problematic in a viral global pandemic, in which the behavior of individuals is particularly important for curbing the spread of the virus. If mistrust is generated through news pieces, which should be impartial and informative, it is hard to expect people to follow the rules and guidelines to curb the virus's spread served to them through the same media.

In June 2020, a paper on the topic of how people respond to the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was published in preprint. The researchers focused on Reddit and Wikipedia to quantify user activity. They collected a

> heterogeneous dataset that includes COVID-19 related news articles and Youtube videos published online by mainstream information media, relevant posts, and relative discussion of geolocalized Reddit users, as well as country-specific views to Wikipedia pages related to COVID-19 for Italy, United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. (Gozzi et al. 2)

By studying news articles and videos, they could estimate the exposure of the public to the COVID-19 pandemic through traditional news media, and, by studying users' discussions and response on social media (through Reddit) and information seeking (through Wikipedia page views), they could quantify the reaction of individuals to both the COVID-19 pandemic and news exposure. They also mentioned that previous studies had shown that social media, internet use, and search trends were useful in analyzing health-related information streams and monitoring public reaction to infectious diseases. They found that about 60% of adults in the United States consulted online sources to gather health information (2) and that traditional and social media were integral parts of people's perception and opinions which have the potential of triggering a change in behavior, which in turn influences pandemic spreading. Their findings confirmed the central role of media, showing how media exposure is capable of shaping and driving col-

lective attention during a national and global health emergency. They say that the timing and framing of information disseminated by the media can actually modulate the attention and ultimately the behavior of individuals (4). They conclude that, since people are highly reactive to the news they are exposed to, especially in the beginning of an outbreak, the quality and type of information they are given might have critical effects on risk perception, behaviors, and – most importantly – the unfolding of the disease (6).

In the case of the aforementioned article reporting on people living in large cities and being twice as likely to die of COVID-19 infection, we see how the information is presented differently in the first part and second parts of the article, which we can observe as different speech acts. There is a discrepancy between these utterances. If the intention is reporting, the illocution and perlocution should coincide. The utterance should be delivered in an impartial manner, thus achieving the effect of the reader feeling informed, not alarmed. Of course, even presenting information in an impartial manner without the overuse of loaded terms and devices (e.g., boldface) may invoke the reaction of alarming in some readers; however, news reports should at least strive for the ideal, to be impartial and informative and not add fuel to the fire in the time of a global pandemic. In the aforementioned article, if the information had been presented in a neutral way, a reader might have concluded that more cases and, consequently, more fatalities in large cities would be expected because more people generally live in those areas, and at the beginning of the pandemic, people had little knowledge on how to prevent its spread, but now they know more, and these numbers of fatalities may be reduced by using appropriate measures. Furthermore, the reported study was conducted in late June; thus, it would have been more appropriate to use the past tense when reporting, because the conditions have changed since then. The perlocutionary force might have matched the illocutionary force of informing in that case, and neutral language could have been used for that purpose to merely report on the data on one study conducted in June. In this case, we again see how an alarming effect is achieved by contrasting the con-

tent of the first and second speech acts. Whether or not this was intended does not matter because the consequences and effects are there. In Austin's terms, by uttering locutionary or illocutionary speech acts that were not uttered for that specific purpose, we can still produce effects or consequences which are intended or unintended – what the speaker (in this case author) intends to produce with their utterance may or may not happen, and even when they do not intend to produce a certain effect, that effect may still be achieved.

In an article published in *Nature* in 2009, John M. Berry said that in the next influenza pandemic, whether it happens now or in the future, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication (324). In the case of news articles, the illocutionary acts of stating and informing should be an ideal to strive for, but as we have seen, they are not always successfully produced, because due to the way in which these speech acts are performed and the context in which we find them, the perlocutionary forces of alarming and intimidating are very much present, thus creating distrust and making readers feel anxious and change their perception and behavior. These pieces of news, presented in such a way, may make us click more. They may produce more visits to the websites, but they also create insecurities in readers who no longer trust anything in the sea of (mis)information, including the relevant expert guidelines and facts, which could save lives. We must ask ourselves what the real price is, the one we as a society are paying in terms of the outcome that these "unhappy" news articles have on the course of the pandemic. With all this in mind, we would be well advised to carefully choose our locutionary and illocutionary forces in news articles and employ them not to create distrust or alarm people unnecessarily in an effort to generate more clicks, but rather to provide them with the most important information that can help them and in turn all of us.

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