

Promise as a Speech Act

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1. Introduction

One of the topics in the philosophy of language is concerned with the general epistemological and metaphysical problems of the relationship between linguistic acts and what these acts are supposed to refer to and do in the world. Apart from the fundamental question of whether words refer at all, the specific question of speech acts is the relationship between the utterer of a word or sentence, the utterance and persons or things to whom the words and sentences are directed.

This position also is implicated in the theory of meaning. The question is what it is for a word to have a meaning. One leading theory of meaning that is also associated with speech acts is that of Locke. Lowe (2005, 99) summarised Locke's theory of meaning in three statements: (1) the primary purpose of language is the communication of thought; (2) thought itself consists of the entertaining of ideas in the mind; and (3) words serve to express thought by being made, through custom or convention, to signify ideas in the mind of those who entertain them. A contemporary version of the ideational theory has been advocated by Grice (1974, 509). According to Grice, '**A meant something by x**' means that "A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention" This theory of meaning is a recognition of a classical position enunciated by Thomas Aquinas- that the function of speech is to communicate to others what is in our minds and that when we use words to mislead others, we are using them contrary to their proper function.

Apart from the theoretical dimension of speech acts, there is also the practical question about what words and sentences are expected to do on the assumption that there is a correspondence between the intention of the utterer and the understanding of this intention by the hearer. This question borders on another linguistic term often referred to as performative utterances. Performative utterances take ethical and identity dimensions when such utterances are made unto another person, of which the sincerity and integrity of the utterer are as stake.

This paper has two objectives: the first is to discuss the idea of an illocutionary act as a position in the philosophy of language, especially as it relates to the acts of promising. The second objective is to discuss the implications of the theory for the notion of promising in general and the Jamaican conception of promise.

In relation to the latter objective, the paper examines two traditional theories of promising, that of Hume and Kant, and the implication which the two theories have for the Jamaican saying that "Promise is a comfort to a fool".

The methodology employed in the paper took the form of administering questionnaires and interviewing a cross section of persons within the Jamaican society to ascertain their views about the origin of promise and the motivation for the saying that “promise is comfort to a fool” and how the saying has impacted upon the issues of human relationship in the Jamaican society. The responses were analysed against the backdrop of the positions whether promising is a human convention or an ethical concept.

The paper found out that when persons perform a speech act in relation to promising, it does not generate any obligation to keep the promise. Consequently, persons in the Jamaican society often view promising with scepticism. The experiences which persons have had about the making and breaking of promises on both individuals and institutional levels have accounted for the distrust that has led to the popular saying that “a promise is a comfort to a fool”.

The paper identifies and discusses the impact of distrust among the Jamaican population and suggests the need for a restoration of trust and confidence that are encapsulated in acts of promising. The paper suggests a theory of promising based on the rethink about the power of words within the Jamaican society, a rethink that would be able to hold persons and government accountable for what they say that is intended to convey the message of promising.

2 The notion of illocutionary act-

According to Austin (1962), an illocutionary act is a speech act which is performed when a person makes statements, asks questions, issues commands, gives reports, greets, and warns.

The idea of an illocutionary act is related to fundamental problems in the philosophy of language: What is the relationship between words as linguistic entities and things that they stand for and do in the world, outside of such linguistic acts. How do words and sentences of language acquire semantic properties, such as reference, meaning and truth? (Lowe 2005, 100) Metaphysically speaking, the question borders on the question about the power/potency in/of words. Put in this way, the problem is a universal one, but the responses to the problem differ from one philosophical tradition to the other.

The predominant view in Western philosophy is that there is no natural connection between linguistic entities and reality as it obtains in the actual world; the relationship is rather that of convention.

This view is well illustrated by Locke (as earlier stated) and Hume; both of whom were classical British empiricists. On his part, Hume denied the idea of necessary connection between cause and effect, the type of connection exemplified in illocutionary acts. His view is that such necessary connections cannot be observed in human experience. For

Hume, connection between one idea and the other is based on convention midwived by custom and instinct.

In elaborating a similar view, Searle (1964, 1965) observes that a linguistic communication is concerned with verbal, non-verbal and written signs produced by a being with certain intentions. According to him, to perform an illocutionary act is to engage in a rule governed form of behaviour.

According to Searle, there are two kinds of rules-constitutive and regulative rules. Constitutive rules create and define forms of behaviour. For example, the activity of football is governed by rules which create and define the game. The game of football makes sense by observing these rules. On the other hand, regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity which is logically independent of the existing rules. Thus, such rules guiding offside, throwing, corner kick are constitutive of the game of football, while the rules of fair play regulate pre-existing activity of football. For instance, FIFA's motto, "The name of my game is fair play", is a regulative rule.

One outstanding question for both Hume and Searle is the status of regulative rules, which appears to be somehow beyond mere convention. Thus, in the example of the game of football, constitutive rules could be conventional given the human origin of such rules coupled with the fact that participants in the game are expected to understand such rules and act according to their precepts for a game of football to take place. However, such regulative rules as that of FIFA, could not be regarded as mere convention; rather, it is an ethical requirement that governs any form of game whatsoever.

However, within the African belief system, which holds that all things are organically connected, there is the belief that there is a natural connection between words and the actual reality in the world. This position is predicated on the African belief in the natural order of things and that if words are said in accordance with certain principles (metaphysical) governing them, the words will perform certain functions in accordance to how they are uttered. The act of naming whether human, animal and plants, and the phenomenon of *ofo* (incantation) are illustrations of this position. *Oro rere a yo obi lapo; oro buruku a yo ako ninu apo* (good words will draw kolanut (gift, goodwill) from the pocket (of the person to whom the sentence is uttered) ; while bad words will draw the sword from its sheath).

3. Promise as an illocutionary act.

The philosophical problem relating to speech acts of promise making, promise keeping and promise breaking cuts across many areas of philosophical discourse. It features in

epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, ethics, and philosophical anthropology.

Epistemologically, promise is about the status of the kind of knowledge that could provide basis for making a promise. In other words, does one have to know the full facts about a situation on which a promise is made? Since most promises are forward looking to the future, could a person at the point of making a promise be in the full knowledge of the facts before making a promise? In the areas of metaphysics, philosophy of mind and philosophy of language, questions could be raised about the type of person and the mind-set that can make promises and the types of persons to whom promises are made. The issue of the relationship between language and reality rears its head here and the relevant question is whether language mirrors reality? Thus, the question could be asked, how, just by uttering a particular word, could certain things happen as if there is a (natural) connection between the words uttered and the occurrence of certain events and actions in the world? In its ethical dimension, promise raises ethical issues about notions of sincerity, dignity, trustworthiness and whether one has an absolute duty or only a *prima facie* duty to keep promises. The question whether there are certain cultures that do not believe in promise making and promise keeping is the one that could be inquired into by philosophical anthropology.

One of the philosophical questions about promising relates to Prichard's (1941) question, "How can one by merely using a word "promise" create an obligation where none existed before? The assumption here is that when somebody makes a promise, there is the belief that one has raised an expectation in the mind of the promisee. However, Prichard held the view that there is something in the concept of promising which goes beyond raising an expectation. For him, it is one thing to express an intention to another person, thereby leading him/her to expect something that s/he wants; it is another, different thing to *promise* it to him/her. What is needed to do to go beyond raising an expectation is to utter the word "promise"- This means that an act of speech can "bring" something into existence- Consider, God's statement in Genesis 1:3: "Let there be light (and) there is light" Also, Berkeley's - *esse est percipi* - to be is to be perceived.

In this connection, it has been observed by Hanfling (1974/75, 15) that recent developments in ethics and the philosophy of language have led to a conception of promising that sees it as an "institution" or "practice" governed by "rules" in the same sort of way as a game. However, Hanfling thought that this conception is both false and unnecessary because, according to him, there is no special problem about the obligation of promises. There is a further question as to whether a promise is a game (Hanfling 2008).

For Hanfling, one reason why promising has been regarded as a special problem lies with the peculiar force of the expression, "I promise", which is often taken to be the normal way of making a promise. For those who see a special problem in the obligation of promises, it is the special obligation created by this expression that is at issue. It is Hanfling's contention

that it is not enough to say “I promise” to create an obligation. The promisee must, according to him, have an interest in whatever it is that is being promised. Hanfling defines a promise as “essentially a matter of telling a person that one will do something which that person wants, together with the recognition that the latter has a justified grievance in case of non-fulfilment (1974/75-p. 26) This is very similar to how Hume (Hume 1740, 2005, 396) defines promise as ,”When a man says *he promises anything*, he in effect expresses a *resolution* of performing it; and along with that, by making use of this *form of words* , subjects himself to the penalty of never being trusted again in case of failure”

In accordance with Hanfling’s formulation of this problem, Smith (1997, 153) sees promising essentially in moral terms. According to him, promising as a moral institution gives agents the power to control the moral status of their future actions. By making a promise to do A an agent makes A obligatory for him/her and thus typically changes its moral status”

However, arguments have been raised about the status of morality itself and hence about the moral status of promise. Morality has been seen as human invention and moral ideas vary from one society to another. Thus, according to Hanfling (1974/75, 26) “Not only are such practices as incest or infanticide approved in one society and not in another, but the very concepts of morality, and hence the possibilities of stating moral fact, differ between societies”. However, moral relativism, as this position suggests, does not constitute a moral point of view. Thus Slater (2006, 197) observes that what constitutes a moral point of view is always categorical. And for him, categorical morality holds that there are certain rules and principles that must never be violated, regardless of the circumstances. Circumstances here might mean such things as culture, self - interest or practically conducive consequences. This also turns on the distinction between “morally complete” and “morally contested” concepts (Bamikole 2017) Morally complete concepts are concepts that are unconditionally wrong because what makes them wrong does not depend on the view of individual, culture, class, race, ethnic and religious affiliations. Some examples of morally complete concepts are murder, oppression, exploitation, genocide, racism, slavery, among others.

Hanfling raised a question which seems to apply to the Jamaican society’s conception of promising. He asked, what would a society without promising be like? Having defined promising as in the previous paragraph, he observed that the idea of a non-promising society must entail some very radical supposition. He went on to specify how this idea might be understood. For him, a non-promising society would be a society in which persons who have been misled in what we would regard as a promising situation feel no resentment against the person responsible. As strange as this situation is, it is still logically possible state of human nature. However, given the view that a promisee wants the action involved in the promise, it will appear strange that s/he is not troubled by the non- fulfilment of the promise. On the other hand, can we imagine that the promisee is troubled, but does not feel any resentment against the person who s/he knows to be responsible? Hanfling holds that if these facts obtain, then questions would have to be asked about the nature of persons and the type of society in which such a scenario is possible.

4. Hume and Kant on Promising

Hume's conception of promise in his work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Book 3, part II, Section 5), entitled, "Of the Obligation of Promises". In consonance with his general philosophical position, that ideas should be devoid of metaphysical pretensions, Hume argued that promises have no natural obligation, and that promises are mere artificial contrivances for the convenience and advantage of society. In his own words, "A promise would not be intelligible, before human conventions had established it; and that even if it were intelligible, it would not be attended with any moral obligation" (Hume, 2005, 392).

Vitek (1986, 160) explicates Hume's notion of promise as a two-step process: (1). That act of promising arises because each person sees his/her mutual advantage in it and (2). Afterwards a sentiment of morals concurs with interest and becomes a new obligation upon humankind. This suggests that act of promising is motivated by self-interest and it is only when the interests of those that are involved in the act of promising coalesce that promise becomes intelligible. The controversial issue in Hume's notion of promising is the relationship between self-interest that motivates an act of promising and the reasoning that connects it to an (moral) obligation. (The is/ought dichotomy)

On his own part, Kant claimed that act of promising is intuitively connected with moral obligation. It is an exemplification of the categorical imperative. Kant said, "The duty to keep promise is a categorical imperative. And any further proof of this imperative is simply impossible-indeed as impossible as it would be for a geometer to prove that I need three lines to construct a triangle" (Byrd & Hruschka 2005, 47-48)

The debate between Hume's and Kant's notions of promising is very vast, such that I cannot discuss it in this paper; however, what is essential for the paper is to deploy Hume's and Kant's notions of promising to exemplify the philosophical problem about the relationship between language and reality. For Hume, there is no natural connection between words that are uttered by persons and the actions engendered by such words. The relationship between words and reality is a matter of convention. Thus, promising, for Hume is a human convention. On the other hand, for Kant, the connection between language and reality is captured by his notion of *synthetic a priori*- there are certain things that are given to us in experience (human convention) which nevertheless carry the sense of necessity. In other words, for Kant, even when promising is a human convention, we are under an obligation to carry it out as an instance of the postulate of practical reason.

Thus, for Kant, promise is a moral term, which understanding suggests that its utterance assumes that a person (promisor) is under an obligation to carry out an act which is the subject of the promise, to another person (promisee). According to this latter view, there is a connection between the linguistic word "promise" uttered by a person and the obligation on the part of the promisor to carry out what has been promised to the promisee. The

problem however is to specify in clear terms what is involved in this linguistic performance and the obligation that it seems to create. This has been the issue between conventional and non- conventional theories about promising.

5. The notion of promise in the Jamaican society: Promise is a comfort to a fool.

It is often asserted by a broad spectrum of the Jamaican social space that “promise is a comfort to a fool”. Like its twin concept of “Jamaican Time”, this phrase has been held, probably without realising an existing belief in some moral circles that a promise is an ethical concept which relies on the assumption of ethical virtues, such as integrity, veracity, credibility, trustworthiness, and accountability. When carrying out this research, certain members of the Jamaican society were interviewed about the Jamaican saying that “A Promise is a comfort to a fool”:

The demography of the persons interviewed includes:

Academic staff at UWI, Mona, persons under 20 years, persons over 60 years, persons from the inner city of Kingston, persons from uptown location, from rural areas, professionals, working class, high school students and a graduate student in philosophy.

The questions asked are as follows:

1. What is your interpretation of the phrase, “Promise is a comfort to a fool”?
2. How do you think this phrase came about?
3. Based on you answer to question (1), does this interpretation apply to you?
4. Do you believe this interpretation hold true for most Jamaicans?
5. Do you believe that promises should be kept?
6. How do you think that persons will continue to fulfil promises?

All respondents believed that promisee should entertain some elements of scepticism about their expectation that promise will be fulfilled. However, there are variations about the reason why most promises are not fulfilled. They range from the fact that promises are often based on certain interests which the promisor has and if these interests are not fulfilled, the promisor will break the promise. A promise has no basis for fulfilment without material evidence in support of the promise; promises are not static things- they change from time to time. One should trust no one. It is best to keep an open mind for all things. A promise is not binding and hence should not be taken as “gospel truth”. Given that promises lie in the future, a person who makes such promises might cease to exist. We must always remember that anything can happen at any time.

As to the origin of the phrase- The preponderant of opinion is that persons have come to distrust promises because many persons in the past had experienced broken promises and they are no longer putting their faith on any promise except if the persons making the promise had proven to be trustworthy in previous occasions. This view supports the saying

that , *“a same day leaf drop a riva bottam it rotten”* . This patois expression suggests that a from of resilience should be attributed to a persons’ character. Trusting a person in the future depends on how s/he had acted well or otherwise in the past. Thus, the enslaved and colonized people have not trusted slave master and the colonizers because they had always reneged on their promises. The same thing that happened in slavery and colonial society is also happening in post-slavery and colonial societies where elected politicians make promises to garner votes but reneged on them after they have been elected through the voting process.

Persons interviewed also believed that the Jamaican society cannot be regarded as a non-promising society. Acts of promising depend on the type of persons making promising and the situation in which promises are made. They also suggested that promises should not be made if the promisor knows that s/he will not keep it.

6. Promise is a comfort to a fool: Some comments.

Just like the Hanfligian suggestion that a non-promising society entails some very radical supposition, the Jamaican saying that “Promise is a comfort to a fool” engenders a curious logic. In some cultures, the (ethical) assessment about promise making, keeping, and breaking is often put on the promisor. Thus, a person who makes a promise and keeps it is often regarded as a virtuous person whereas a person who makes a promise but does not keep it is often looked at with disdain. On the other hand, within the Jamaican context, the burden of assessment is put on the promisee. The promisee is regarded as a fool if s/he relies on the words of a promisor in relation to a promise made against the future. Within the context of this saying, for a typical Jamaican, promise is nothing but a mere word. Thus, if X gives her word to Y that on Saturday, X will loan Y the sum of \$5,000, and Y is only comforted by the words, and therefore a fool if Y does not source for alternative ways to find the money. This is not to suggest that a promisor is not trustworthy; rather, the saying is meant to imply that only a fool would do such thing as believing in a promise because what a promisor gives are mere words that do not necessarily translate into action. Obligations are not created by merely verbalizing, “I Promise”.

The Jamaican saying on promising is supported by Hume’s position on the matter. For Hume, the assertion, “I promise” does not confer obligation to fulfil one’s promise. There must be a mutual interest between the promiser and the promisee. This is borne out of the responses from our interviewees that promising generates expectation. This is also supported by Kolodny and Wallace (2003,119), “Promising is clearly a social practice or convention. By uttering the formula, “I hereby promise to do X”, we can raise in others the expectation that we will in fact do X.

There is a paradox in relation to the power which words confer on reality in the Jamaican society. On one hand, the people proclaim that words are powerful and that one should be mindful of the things they say as their own words may come back to haunt them. This is

confirmed by the saying, “*cock mout kill cock*”. On the other hand, when it comes to trusting one another, the power in words becomes redundant. This is evident in the saying, “*mout cut cross way; it mek fi she anything*”. Literally this saying implies that the way the mouth is designed makes it to say what it says and that what comes out of it only reflects the way it is made. The notion of whether the mouth utters truth or falsity does not matter. Could this position be taken to imply that Jamaican people do not reflect when they make promises?

7. The following issues, which are not given detailed exposition, are relevant to the Jamaican notion of promise.

1. The literature supports the Jamaican saying that *mout cut cross way; it mek shi anything*. Action speaks louder than words.
2. There is nothing that is intrinsically ethical about promise making and that promise depends on interest shared by the promisor and the promisee. On the political level, politicians want votes; voters want hand outs and other good things of life.
3. Impact of the saying on the society.
 - Marriage institutions-rate of divorce, cheating among couples and business partners.
 - Violation of contractual agreement, which can lead to relation turning sour.
 - Distrust between citizens and their leaders-loss of respect for political institutions and personnel

Restoration of trust and confidence in promises

Appeal to the sentiments of the people-This could be moral and religious sentiments.

Promising is a virtuous action. Somebody who keeps promises must be rewarded one way or the other by individuals and institutions. Encourage persons that keeping promises could be habitual. This will enable persons to always do so in the future.

Can promising to be enforced with the law?

African conception of promise has a pragmatic dimension. Strong commitment to promises elevated to oath taking. Concrete actions are undertaken to bind promisor and promisee. Correlation with legal enforcement of promising. Consequences of promise breaking.

8. Conclusion

What I have done in this paper was to examine the notion of speech act as a point of nexus between metaphysics, philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. One aspect of speech act, illocutionary acts, was singled out for examination, especially as it relates to the act of promising. The resultant analysis was applied to the Jamaican attitude to acts of promising. On the surface of it, the Jamaican belief that a promise is a

comfort to a fool reflects the conventional position that there is no natural obligation to carry out promises made to persons, but on a further reflection, evidence shows that the Jamaican people believe in the morality of promise. However, the experiences of broken promises between and among individuals and among the people and their leaders in general has been responsible for the belief that a promise is a comfort to a fool. The paper identified and examined the background and motivation for the Jamaican position on promise by conducting interviews across identified segments of the Jamaican population. Having analysed the responses, the paper argued for a restoration of the trust and confidence that are often believed to accompany the making of promises among individuals and among individuals and their political leaders. However, the issue of the relationship between speech acts and what such acts do in the world, remains a perennial issue, and hence, a philosophical problem.

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