

“I hope you can let this go”/ “Ich hoffe, Sie können das fallen lassen”—Focus on the Perlocutionary in Contrastive Pragmatics

Claire Kramsch

University of California at Berkeley California, USA

ckramsch@berkeley.edu

Abstract

Pragmatics has focused predominantly on the locutionary form and illocutionary force of utterances but largely ignored their perlocutionary effects. A shift toward the perlocutionary would require much greater attention being given to the historical and political context in the production and reception of utterances, as well as to interpretation as a performative process. This paper takes as empirical data a press report on the performance of a particular speech act by Donald Trump and its perlocutionary effect both on his addressee and on the readers of the incident as reported in the online versions of the *New York Times* and *Die Zeit*. It shows the value of focusing on perlocution for the study of political discourse in these global times. It also shows what pedagogical purchase can be gained by discussing perlocutionary acts and effects in communicative language teaching, rather than focusing exclusively on illocutionary acts.

Keywords

perlocutionary effect – performative – complexity – ecology – communicative language teaching

1 Introduction

In *How to do things with words*, John Austin (1962) distinguished perlocutionary acts from locutionary and illocutionary acts in the performance of utterances. Correlated with the notion of illocutionary acts, perlocutionary

acts bring about consequences or effects on the actions, thoughts, or beliefs of hearers by means of uttering words. For example, by requesting something I may *get someone to do* what I requested, by threatening him I may *scare* him, by expressing an opinion I may *persuade* her. Perlocutionary effects have not received the same level of attention in the field of pragmatics as other aspects of speech acts. Instead two aspects of interlocution have attracted the attention of researchers.

The first aspect is the question of what relative weight to give illocutionary intention versus social convention in the meaning of speech acts. John Searle insisted that meaning is not in the intention of the speaker but in the convention that gets recognised as such by the hearer. (Searle, 1983: 179). Stephen Levinson made the important distinction between the conventional force of the illocutionary versus the non-conventional force of the perlocutionary act. While the illocutionary act, he argued, has to be in accordance with conventional procedure in order to be recognised as such, the perlocutionary act is specific to the context and is therefore not conventionally achieved just by uttering the words; rather, it includes all those effects, intended or unintended, and often indeterminate, that some particular utterance in a particular situation may cause (Levinson, 1983: 237). William Hanks reinforced the idea of the non-conventionality of perlocutionary acts and their effects. Such acts can be accomplished without any words, he argued, for example through gestures, and their effects can be triggered irrespective of the actor's intentions, as the result of the interaction between communicator and context (Hanks, 1996: 97).

More recently, both the conventionality and intentionality of the illocutionary act have begun to be questioned. Distinctions have been made between communicative intention and informative intention (Haugh and Jaszczolt, 2012), and between speakers' and hearers' implicatures (Bach, 2012), distinctions that further complexify Austin and Searle's original straightforward view of speech acts. Fetzer linked communicative and perlocutionary intention, arguing that "it is plausible to suppose that identifying a speaker's perlocutionary intentions and broader plans is often relevant to identifying his communicative intention" (Fetzer, 2012: 460). Most recently, Kadar and House (forthcoming) show how intriguingly complex convention really is, especially in contexts where the speakers share the same native tongue but have different socioeconomic backgrounds, and, one could add, different political views. Thus, cultural and pragmatic norms and conventions are seen today as being as difficult to systematise as communicative intentions.

The second aspect that has been an object of inquiry is the relationship between an utterance and its perlocutionary effects. The fact that these effects

or consequences may occur independently of the speaker's intention introduces a much more complex notion of causality than was conceived in the early days of speech act theory, and the calls by Levinson (1983: 237), Stubbs (1983: 152), and Mey (1993: 125) to pay more attention to the perlocutionary clearly resonate with researchers in the current era of global migration and its multilingual composition, the increasing number of English speakers with English grammar but non-English pragmatics, and the hybrid pragmatics displayed by users of social media. Perlocutionary effects, that had been researched merely as conversational uptakes and interactional scaffolding, can be seen today to be complex, non-linear and unpredictable events.

Indeed, it is only with the interest in complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997), ecological theory (Kramsch, 2002; van Lier, 2004) and the post-structuralist turn (McNamara, 2012; Pennycook, 2007), that interest in the perlocutionary has re-emerged in a broader way in applied linguistics. In the same way that Austin's notion of the performative was re-interpreted in the performativity theory proposed by Judith Butler (1997) in post-modern cultural studies and Douglas Robinson (2003) in performative linguistics, Austin's notion of the perlocutionary has been picked up again by Jan Blommaert (2015: 25) in post-structuralist sociolinguistics. The renewed interest in the performative and the perlocutionary problematises an approach to language teaching which has traditionally focused mainly on the constative/informational and the illocutionary. As Robinson writes:

[Learners] of a foreign language, who have been lulled by its apparent ... 'stable structures' into thinking that they have *learned* the language and can just coast from now on, open themselves up to the vital dynamic *performative* nature of all language

ROBINSON 2003: 215 italics in the text

In other words, language not only relates and represents events, but it constructs and performs them through its unique grammatical and discourse features. In communication across cultures, one language performs social conventions, human intentions and legitimate effects differently from another because their words have a different history (Robinson, 2003: 205). A focus on perlocutionary effects challenges us to think non-linearly, and to see events in their historical relationships.

The current study is based on the following hypothesis: If the grammatical and discursive features of a text have a performative effect on its readers, the same event reported in two different languages will have different perlocutionary effects on the speakers of these languages. In order to test this

hypothesis I explored one speech act performed by U.S. President Donald Trump, as reported in the American press in English and in the German press in German, and some of the many responses it received from English-speaking and German-speaking readers. I discuss the perlocutionary effects of both the original speech act and the responses received. Finally, I consider the implications that a focus on the perlocutionary has for contrastive pragmatic research and communicative language teaching.

2 The Study

On May 16, 2017 the *New York Times* reported on a controversial incident that had taken place in the Oval Office at the White House on 14 February, 2017. After a cabinet meeting, the President of the United States took the then director of the FBI, James Comey, aside and, referring to the FBI's investigation of Michael Flynn, his former national security adviser, regarding possible collusion with Russia, he told him: "I hope you can let this go. I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go." Comey was uncomfortable with the President's suggestion and, as soon as he left the room, he wrote himself a memo documenting what had been said. He continued his investigation of Flynn and later allowed one of his associates to leak the memo to the press. On May 9, Trump fired James Comey. One month later, Comey was called to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee in a potential investigation as to whether Donald Trump had committed an obstruction of justice by asking the FBI director to drop the case. The White House denied the version of events described in the memo.

3 Analysis of Trump's Speech Act

Trump's highly controversial utterance above constitutes what pragmatics scholars have called "a requestive hint" (Weizman, 1989), i.e., "an utterance which, under certain circumstances, may be interpreted as an indirect request; but which, being inherently opaque, leaves the hearer uncertain as to the speaker's intentions, and leaves the speaker the possibility to opt out" (p.73). A requestive hint implies a gap between the speaker's meaning and the utterance meaning (Grice, 1971). In the case at hand, this gap is between the conventional meaning of the utterance "I hope you can let him go", and the non-conventional meaning of that same utterance "I order you to stop investigating Flynn". The opacity of meaning created by this gap is both an

illocutionary opacity (is Trump's utterance an expression of hope, a wish, a request or an order?), and a propositional opacity (what does "see your way clear" and "let him go" actually mean?). This double opacity is compounded by the way the speaker grounds his speech act, i.e., gives reasons for it ("he is a good guy"). While an indirect request in the form of a question (for instance: will you be able to let Flynn go?) would have been a more transparent strategy involving the hearer (see Weizman, 1989), Trump's series of opaque illocutionary and locutionary acts, combined with a grounder, contribute to a high degree of ambiguity in his speech.

This interpretation is confirmed by considering the circumstances in which the speech act was performed: Trump's prior request for loyalty from James Comey, his dismissal of any potential witnesses to the conversation, the fact that this is the President speaking etc. The high degree of opacity in Trump's statement can hardly be considered to be the most effective way of attaining the requestive end, but, as Weizman points out, it has the highest deniability potential. It also has the highest risk of being viewed by Congress as an impeachable obstruction of justice, and so the stakes are high.

Given the high degree of ambiguity and the high stakes of this speech event, I decided to compare its perlocutionary effect on readers of a U.S. American and a foreign newspaper. I chose to compare the report as it appeared on May 16 and 17, 2017 respectively in the *New York Times* online and the German *Die Zeit Online*, both daily national newspapers with a readership of similar socioeconomic and sociocultural background, that could be relied upon to be politically up to date with U.S. politics. The analysis focuses on readers' responses to: 1) Trump's speech act as reported by Comey, 2) the speech act of the newspaper report itself.

Given that there was an enormous discrepancy in the number of responses elicited by the *New York Times* article (n=5,394) and *Die Zeit's* article (n=420), I selected the first 15% of responses to each article and out of these focused on those that were directly and explicitly oriented to the article at hand. This equated to 270 (33%) English and 23 (37%) German responses, and thus approximately 1/3 of the responses obtained in English and German were direct, explicit responses to both the Trump speech act and the journals' discourse. The other responses, as could be expected, circled around Trump's policies and impeachment prospects for readers of the *New York Times*, and around Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel and U.S. politics as seen from the German perspective for readers of *Die Zeit*. The responses to the English and German articles presented below, together with the answers they elicited from other respondents, are representative of the postings received for this subgroup of the total corpus.

4 US-American Press Release

New York Times May 16, 2017

Comey Memo Says Trump Asked Him to End Flynn Investigation

by Michael S. Schmidt

WASHINGTON –

1. President Trump asked the F.B.I. director, James B. Comey, to shut down the federal investigation into Mr. Trump's former national security adviser, Michael T. Flynn, in an Oval Office meeting in February, according to a memo Mr. Comey wrote shortly after the meeting.
2. "I hope you can let this go," the president told Mr. Comey, according to the memo.
3. Mr. Comey shared the existence of the memo with senior F.B.I. officials and close associates. The *New York Times* has not viewed a copy of the memo, which is unclassified, but one of Mr. Comey's associates read parts of it to a *Times* reporter.
4. "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go," Mr. Trump told Mr. Comey, according to the memo. "He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go."
5. Mr. Trump told Mr. Comey that Mr. Flynn had done nothing wrong, according to the memo.
6. Mr. Comey did not say anything to Mr. Trump about curtailing the investigation, replying only: "I agree he is a good guy."
7. In a statement, the White House denied the version of events in the memo.

4.1 *Analysis of the American Text*

The American news report places the English reader directly *in medias res*, as a piece of factual news. This is clearly not an opinion piece. The title, with its sentence-initial declarative, foregrounds the source of the news item ("Comey memo says.."). Sentence #1 reports on Trump's speech act in the unambiguous indicative mode as a statement of fact; only three lines down are we given the source of the statement – "according to a memo Mr. Comey wrote". Considering the well-known suspicions that were circulating at the time suggesting that President Trump was looking to conceal his collusion with the Russians in the 2016 election, the perlocutionary effect of this first sentence, "President Trump asked the F.B.I director ... to shut down the federal investigation", is one of shock. Sentence #2 with its direct citation, and the mention of the source again in sentence-final position ("according to the memo") reinforces the shock effect. The reader has namely been primed by the title and the first sentence

to interpret the second “I hope you can let this go” as a request (“Trump *asked* the FBI director to shut down the federal investigation”). Sentence #3 elaborates on the sources used by the *NYTimes* (I return to this below). Sentence #4 again mentions the source only in sentence-final position, giving the direct quote by Trump the full impact it will retain in the history books. Sentence #5 states yet another fact, this time in indirect speech, followed again by the name of the source. Sentence #6 mentions Comey’s silence about the investigation as a narrator’s representation of a (negative) speech act (“Mr. Comey did not say anything”), followed by a citation in direct speech. Finally, the statement by the White House is reported as a narrator’s representation of speech (“The White House denied the version of events”).

We notice that while sentences # 2, 4 and 6 with their direct speech give a sense of immediacy and thus authenticity to the report, sentences # 1, 5, and 7 with their reporting clauses and indirect speech increase the distance between narrator and the facts narrated, and possibly increase the perlocutionary perception of narratorial control on the part of the *New York Times* (Short, 1996: Ch.10). Sentence #3 reveals explicitly from whom the *New York Times* received its information (the FBI and a Comey associate), but at the same time it admits that these are second-hand sources. The indeterminacy of meaning that hovers over the whole report and the multiple interpretations it lends itself to could account for the intensity of the responses that the article elicited.

4.2 *Responses to the American Text*

This article elicited 5,394 responses, all dated May 17, 2017, an unusually high response rate. As one respondent wrote: “The largest number of responses I’ve ever seen to an article in the NYT on line”. They are primarily concerned with the nature of Trump’s speech act, and secondarily with the credibility of the *New York Times* and its source, the Comey memo. (Responses to the English article are indicated with E, responses to the German article with G).

4.2.1 On Trump’s Speech Act

E1) M.E.HUBBARD: If what Trump said is accurately portrayed here, then it is false to say he “asked” Comey to drop the investigation. He is quoted here as expressing his opinion in a declarative sentence. He didn’t say “Will you let this drop?” That’s a question. He didn’t say, “Drop the Flynn investigation,” which would have been an order. He expressed an opinion, “I hope that....” I don’t think you can impeach a president for expressing an opinion.

E2) MARK TWAIN: Trump didn’t “ask” Comey to terminate the investigation, Trump “told” Comey to terminate the investigation. The firing of Comey being the critical evidence of Trump’s intent.

E3) NoWAY: I don't know how you get from "I hope you can let this go" to "Trump asked Comey to end an investigation." Seems to me that is a pretty big leap. I'm no Trump fan, but I am beginning to see what the president means by "fake news."

E3.1 JLC: You get there by way of Comey being fired for not doing what Trump asked, for not dropping the investigation, and for not letting Flynn off the hook. Get it?

E3.2 JLC: Actions, not words. Trump asked him to let Flynn and the investigation go, Comey did not. Comey got fired – with Trump's intent of torpedoing the investigation. Why would an innocent person need to do this? Get it now?

E4) MY-NAME-IS-NOT-SUSAN: "I hope you can let this go" represents a wish; it is not an ORDER, it is not a DEMAND, it is not even a piece of advice, it is only a WISH.

E4.1 ILLOGICAL: So impressive that you can determine the inner workings of a "mind" by reading a quote. The next time your boss tells you he "wishes" you would do something, try responding in the negative. Good luck.

E4.2 PJ: How about this interpretation – "Comey – I know you were fond of him, but I hope you can see your way clear to let him go."

The responses to Trump's speech act by English-speaking readers express their awareness of what is at stake here (accusations of an obstruction of justice, potentially leading to impeachment proceedings) and, possibly, their political views. They also shed light on the fundamental ambiguity of the utterance "I hope you can let this go" that has since then become a major issue of contention on Capitol Hill with the publication of the Mueller Report, in which this quote figures prominently as evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the President. Since this was the first time that the American public was officially confronted with potential evidence of Trump's obstruction of justice, it was to be expected that most of the online responses would focus on the illocutionary force of the President's utterance. But we already notice the way respondents E2, E3.1, and E4.1 do not seek to resolve the opacity of this utterance by recourse to the intention of the speaker of the illocutionary act, but to its perlocutionary effect instead – the subsequent firing of Comey. For them, as for many other

American respondents, it is this later effect that proves that Trump committed an “obvious obstruction of justice”.

4.2.2 On the New York Times' Report of the Incident

E5) MALCOLM BEIFONG: When you publish non-stories like this, Times, it just makes it look like you have no journalistic ethics, that you will reach for unsubstantiated smears about our President, regardless of the harm you do to our country in the process. And you're better than that, right?

E6) RAY: A memo that's never been seen, partially quoted by unknown third party, about an event that no one else witnessed. That's some pretty solid evidence.

E6.1 PAUL: Yep, did the same in private business for years. That was called a “memo to file”. Stood up in court incidentally.

E6.2 ARCHER717: Just hearsay, right? Inadmissible evidence, say Trump's stooges. Not quite. First of all, Comey's reputation, which is, in spite of what said stooges may claim, sterling. Secondly, Trump's firing of Comey has no other reasonable explanation than punishment for refusing to obey his commands, such as “letting off” Flynn. Mere “circumstantial evidence”? Yes, but contrary to popular belief, such evidence can be more convincing than so-called “direct” evidence. There's something rotten in the Trump WH and we need no ghost come from the dead to tell us what it is.

E7) RJM: NYT uses only two “quotes” attributed by Comey's associates to Trump. #1: “I hope you can let this go,” the president told Mr. Comey, according to the memo. #2: “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go,” Mr. Trump told Mr. Comey, according to the memo. Newspapers and TV are using the terms: end, drop, halt, stop the investigation. Whether a person is a never-Trumper or a pro-Trumper, the wildfire of creative language around two quotes is representative of why many citizens don't trust media hysteria on this topic and many others.

We sense in these responses how American public opinion is currently divided between Trump supporters and Trump critics, the heightened linguistic awareness raised by online communication, and the general helplessness in an era of post-truth and fake news. The criticism levelled here at the journalists themselves (e.g., E5 “you have no journalistic ethics”) takes on a legal flavour, and attention to the text lends itself to sarcasm (E5 “you're better than that, right”?; E6 “pretty solid evidence”; E6.2 “just hearsay, right?”).

One has the feeling that the American responses to this *New York Times* article in May 2017 are already adopting the kind of adversarial courtroom debate style that would later permeate the June 8, 2017 Senate hearing on the matter.¹

To determine to what extent these responses might themselves be a perlocutionary effect of the way in which the *New York Times* article was written, let us now consider the same event reported in *Die Zeit* the following day, 17 May 2017 (for my English translation, see below).

5 German Press Release

USA: Trump soll Ende der Ermittlungen gegen Flynn gefordert haben
17. Mai 2017, 1:58 Uhr Aktualisiert am 17. Mai 2017, 8:00 Uhr Quelle: ZEIT
ONLINE, dpa, AFP, AP, Reuters, spo, tsch, kg 420 Kommentare

In der Affäre um die umstrittenen Russlandkontakte seiner Berater gerät US-Präsident Donald Trump durch weitere Enthüllungen in Bedrängnis. Wie zunächst die *New York Times* und in der Folge auch die Nachrichtenagenturen Reuters und Associated Press (AP) berichten, hat Trump versucht, die Ermittlungen des FBI zu behindern. Demnach bat er nur einen Tag nach dem Rücktritt seines Nationalen Sicherheitsberaters Michael Flynn den mittlerweile von ihm entlassenen Chef der Bundespolizei, James Comey, um eine Einstellung der Ermittlungen gegen Flynn. "Ich hoffe, Sie können das fallen lassen", soll Trump zu Comey gesagt haben. Flynn sei "ein guter Kerl".

1 The arguments adduced by these readers mirror those made by Democrats and Republicans at the various hearings that have taken place since then. See, for example, *New York Times* 8 June 2017, "James Comey's testimony on Capitol Hill." (James Comey, former FBI Director; James Risch, Republican Senator for Idaho).

Risch: There's 28 words there that are in quotes, and it says, quote, "I hope" – this is the president speaking – "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go." Now those are his exact words, is that correct?

Comey: Correct.

Risch: He did not direct you to let it go.

Comey: Not in his words, no.

Risch: He said, "I hope." Do you know of any case where a person has been charged for obstruction of justice or, for that matter, any other criminal offense, where – they said, or thought, they hoped for an outcome?

Comey: I don't know well enough to answer. [But] I mean, this is the president of the United States, with me alone, saying, "I hope" this. I took it as a directive, this is what he wants me to do.

Sowohl die Zeitung als auch die Agenturen berufen sich auf ein Gesprächsprotokoll, das Comey von seinem Treffen mit dem Präsidenten verfasst haben soll. Allerdings lagen die Notizen den Medien nicht selbst vor, sodass sie keine direkte Einsicht haben konnten. Sie berufen sich stattdessen auf Vertraute des früheren FBI-Chefs, die aus dem Memo zitiert und im Fall der *New York Times* Textpassagen daraus vorgelesen haben sollen.

Nach einem Bericht des US-Senders CNN sei Comey so "entsetzt" über die Aufforderung des Präsidenten gewesen, dass er den Inhalt des Gesprächs in einem Memo festgehalten und im Anschluss hochrangigen Mitarbeitern seiner Behörde gezeigt habe.

Das Präsidentsamt wies die Berichte über die mögliche Einflussnahme des Präsidenten umgehend zurück.

5.1 *English Translation of the German Article*

5.1.1 USA: Trump is Said to Have Required the End of Investigations Against Flynn

In the affair regarding the controversial Russian contacts of his advisors, US President Donald Trump is getting in trouble with further revelations. As first the *New York Times*, then the news agencies Reuters and Associated Press (AP) report, Trump has attempted to impede the FBI's investigations. According to these sources, one day after his National Security Advisor Michael Flynn stepped down, he asked the director of the FBI, James Comey, whom he has since fired, to drop the investigations against Flynn. Trump is reported to have told Comey: "I hope you can let this go." According to him, Flynn is "a good guy". Both the newspaper and the news agencies rely on a memo of the conversation that Comey is said to have written after his encounter with the President. However, these notes were not accessed by the media, so that they could not have direct knowledge of them. They rely instead on associates of the former FBI director who are said to have quoted from the memo and in the case of the *New York Times* to have read passages of it aloud [to a Times reporter]. According to a report of the television chain CNN, Comey was so "horrified" at the President's request, that he recorded the content of the conversation in a memo and subsequently showed this memo to high-ranking associates at the FBI. The White House immediately rejected any report of alleged interference on the part of the President (*my translation*).

5.2 *Analysis of the German Text*

The first thing that strikes the reader is the framing provided by *Die Zeit* to its readers: "In the affair regarding the controversial Russian contacts of his

advisers, US President Donald J. Trump is getting in trouble through further revelations” (my translation). Unlike the *New York Times*, *Die Zeit* finds it necessary to remind its readers of the context in which the story unfolds (potential collusion with Russia, Michael Flynn, past revelations). The second noteworthy feature is the explicit foregrounding of sources that makes it clear that *Die Zeit* is relating an event that had been published the previous day by the *New York Times*, a serious journal known for its reliability.

A third feature which contrasts with the American report is the paucity of direct quotes and the abundance of reported speech in Subjunctive I. Only one quote remains: “*Ich hoffe, Sie können das fallen lassen*” [I hope, you can let this go], and even that is followed by: “*soll Trump zu Comey gesagt haben*” [Trump is reported to have said to Comey]. Even the utterance: “Flynn is a good guy”, that could have been left in direct speech in quotation marks, was transformed into indirect speech with only “a good guy” remaining in quotation marks: *Flynn sei “ein guter Kerl”* [Flynn, he is reported to have said, is “a good guy”] which removes the utterance from being a direct quote and increases the ambiguity of the narrator’s voice. Similarly, most of the other verbs are cast in the indirect discourse subjunctive: “*Comey sei entsetzt gewesen; Comey soll ein Gesprächsprotokoll verfasst haben; er habe den Inhalt gezeigt; Vertraute sollen aus dem Memo zitiert haben ... und Textpassagen aus dem Memo vorgelesen haben*”. Others are preceded by heavy reference to sources: “*Wie zunächst die New York Times und in der Folge auch die Nachrichtenagenturen Reuters und Associated Press (AP) berichten*”. *Die Zeit*’s article takes great pains to attribute all its statements explicitly to its sources, but with the additional advantage of being able to rely on the *New York Times*, *Reuters* and *Associated Press*, and on the special resources of German grammar (i.e., its indirect discourse subjunctive). Thus, it feels as if it is delegating the responsibility for its report to other news outlets and sources.

5.3 Responses to the German Text

The overwhelming majority of the 420 responses posted voiced their general opinions on the future of the Trump presidency, its relevance for Germany, and comparisons between Trump’s America and Putin’s Russia. In the following I consider some of the responses that were given to the same two topics addressed by the American respondents (for my English translation, see below).

5.3.1 On Trump’s Speech Act

G1. CHAGALL 1985: Trump: “Ich wünschte, Sie könnten die Ermittlungen sein lassen. Er ist ein feiner Kerl.” Ist das Beeinflussung der Justiz? Klingt für mich eher nach einer Stellungnahme zum Wohle eines Freundes.

G1.1 SONO IO: Nein, er hat laut NYT folgendes gesagt: *“I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go,” Mr. Trump told Mr. Comey, according to the memo. “He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go.”* Der Präsident teilt – möglicherweise suggestiv – dem Leiter des FBI seine Präferenz über die Ermittlungen mit (*to let it go*, auf sich beruhen lassen), und Sie erkennen darin keinen Interessenkonflikt?

G2. WASNOCHZUSAGENSEI: “Trump soll Ende der Ermittlungen gegen Flynn gefordert haben”. Sollte Trump Comey wirklich aufgefordert haben, eventuelle Ermittlungen gegen Flynn einzustellen, hätte Comey sofort das Justizministerium darüber informieren müssen. Ansonsten hat er sich strafbar gemacht. (18 USC 4 und 28 USC 1361). Weshalb hat Comey das Justizministerium nicht informiert?

G2.1 JOHANNES POPANNES: “Weshalb hat Trump das Ende der Ermittlungen gefordert ?” finden Sie jetzt ehrlich nicht die spannendere Frage?

G3. GLADIOLA: In den USA riskiert der Präsident ein Amtsenthebungsverfahren wegen “Behinderung der Justiz”, wenn er auch nur anregt oder darum bittet, missliebige Ermittlungen einzustellen. Erzwingen kann er die Einstellung jedenfalls nicht. In D kann der Justizminister die Einstellung missliebiger Ermittlungen einfach anordnen. Das nennt sich dann ministerielles Weisungsrecht. Die Gewaltenteilung und das System der checks and balances ist in den USA bei weitem ausgereifter als bei uns.

G3.1 ALLES KEIN PROBLEM: Sie haben dieses Argument bereits mehrfach gebracht. Wie oft wollen Sie noch an den Anfang des Diskussionsfadens gelangen mit dem ebenso immer gleichen wie falschen Vergleich?

5.3.1a On Trump’s Speech Act (English Translation)

G1. CHAGALL1985: Trump: “I wish you could let go of the investigations. He is a good guy.” Is that interfering with justice? It sounds to me rather like a statement on behalf of a friend.

G1.1 SONO IO: No, according to the NYT he said the following: *“I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go” Mr. Trump told Mr. Comey, according to the memo. “He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go.”* The President shares with the director of the FBI – possibly

in a suggestive manner – his preference regarding the investigations (*to let it go* = to let go of it), and you don't see in there a conflict of interest?

G2. WASNOCHZUSAGENSEI: “Trump is said to have required the end of the investigations against Flynn”. If Trump had really required Comey to stop any investigations against Flynn, shouldn't Comey have immediately informed the Justice department about it? Or else he has committed a punishable offence (18 USC4 and 28 USC1361). Why didn't Comey inform the Justice Department?

G2.1 JOHANNES POPANNES. “Why did Trump require the end of the investigations?” Don't you honestly think this is a more important question?

G3. GLADIOLA: In the USA the president risks an impeachment process for obstruction of justice when he as much as suggests or asks [someone] to stop any investigation. In any case he may not force anyone to stop [an investigation]. In Germany, the Justice Minister can simply order [someone] to conduct an investigation. That is called ministerial prerogative. The separation of powers and the system of checks and balances is much more developed in the USA than in our country.

G3.1 ALLES KEIN PROBLEM: You have brought up this argument time and again. How often do you want to enter the discussion thread with always this same invalid comparison?

As was the case with readers of the English article, many were concerned about the meaning of Trump's speech act – G1 and G1.1: did he desire (*wünschen*) or did he request (*fordern*) the dropping of the investigation? Is it a request or an opinion (*Stellungnahme*)? Is Flynn a friend (*Freund*) or a criminal under investigation? However, the foreign judicial and political context of the event prompted German readers to attempt to interpret Trump's speech act within its institutional framework. In other words, they did not try to interpret a private individual's words and actions, but the verbal behaviour of an institutional and legal actor, e.g., G1.1: *der Präsident, der Leiter des FBI*. Regarding the ethicality of the incident, some responses like G4 misinterpret the institutional relationship between Trump and Comey as that of boss (*Vorgesetzter*) and employee (*Untergebener*), whereas in the U.S. the Executive and the Justice department are two coequal branches of government (even though the FBI director is hired and fired by the president); G1 recasts the problem

as support of a friend (*Stellungnahme zum Wohle eines Freundes*) and G1.1 renames it a “conflict of interest” (*Interessenkonflikt*) rather than an “interference with justice” (*Beeinflussung der Justiz*).

5.3.2 On Die Zeit’s Report on the Incident

G4. SOKRATES: Der Bericht, eine Farce. Wer ihm aufsitzt, ist unvernünftig. Wenn ein Vorgesetzter dem Untergebenen nur mal unter vier Augen seine Meinung sagt, nachdem er andere gebeten hat, den Raum zu verlassen, möchte er nur seiner Hoffnung Ausdruck geben. Wenn wir das problematisch finden, müssen wir auf heise.de unser Russlandbild klären. Dann kommen wir geläutert zurück und sehen auch klaren Auges: nicht ein Geisterfahrer, hunderte!

G5. GOOGLEFIX: Wie geil ist das denn? Da feuert Trump Comey und verdonnert ihn zum Stillschweigen mit der Androhung der Veröffentlichung der Unterredung, und dann geht Comey in die Offensive mit der Veröffentlichung von Memos? Wie es aussieht, ist die Schlammschlacht gerade erst eröffnet worden. Dagegen wird der Wahlkampf wie ein Schulausflug aussehen, denn Comey ist ein anderes Kaliber als Clinton und hat andere Kreise hinter sich.

G6. MUCIUS SCAEVOLA. “Medienberichte” ??? Trump “soll” dies, oder das getan haben ... Bitte äußern Sie sich sachlich und nennen Sie Quellen. Liebe ZON! Sie streuen Gerüchte! Sie mobben. Ich stehe auch nicht auf Trump, aber so etwas ist kein seriöser Journalismus mehr. Das ist Tratsch der schlechtesten Waschweiberklasse.

G6.1 DTH: Wenn die Zeit berichtet, was die NYT berichtet, ist das natürlich seriöser Journalismus. Die Quelle ist die NYT. Auch dass die NYT sich auf nicht genannte Personen beruft, ist nicht ungewöhnlich. Sie nicht zu nennen ist Quellenschutz. Als wie verlässlich man das dann bewertet, ist jedem selbst überlassen, aber die Zeit, die NYT und Andere berichten hier offensichtlich sehr genau, welche Informationen ihnen aus welchem Personenkreis zugetragen wurden. So funktioniert Journalismus nunmal.

G7. NETTER KERL. “Die New York Times gab an, die Notiz liege ihr selbst nicht vor. Sie habe auch keine direkte Einsicht gehabt. Als Quelle gab sie zwei Personen an, die Kenntnis davon hätten.” Also mal wieder viel Lärm um nichts. Trump muss weg, egal wie. Eine Annäherung mit Russland muss unbedingt verhindert werden. Die Hexenjagd geht weiter.

5.3.2a On Die Zeit's Report on the Incident (English Translation)

G4. SOKRATES: The report, a joke. Whoever believes it is unreasonable. When a boss expresses his displeasure to a subordinate in private, after he has asked others to leave the room, he only wishes to express his hope? If we find that problematic we only have to check our views on Russia on heise.de. We can have our eyes opened and can come back enlightened: not one conman, hundreds of them!

G5. GOOGLEFIX: How sensational is this? Trump fires Comey and orders him to keep his mouth shut, threatening to make the contents of their conversation public, then Comey goes on the offensive with the publication of memos? The way it looks, the mud fight has only just begun. In comparison, the electoral campaign will look like a walk in the park, for Comey is of a different caliber than Clinton and has other networks behind him.

G6. MUCIUS SCAEVOLA: Media reports? Trump is said to have done this or that. Please stick to the facts and name your sources! Dear Zeit Online! You spread rumors! You gossip. I don't support Trump, but this is no longer serious journalism. This is trash of the worse washerwoman kind.

G6.1 DTH: When the Zeit reports what the NYT reports, of course that's serious journalism! The source is the NYT. The fact that the NYT does not refer to persons by name is not unusual. It is called protecting your sources. How reliable these sources are then judged to be is up to the reader, but the Zeit, the NYT and others report here evidently very accurately which information was given to them by which circles. That is precisely how journalism operates.

G7. NETTER KERL. The NYT reported that it didn't have access to the memo itself, nor was it able to read the memo directly. As source, they quoted two people who had read it. So again much ado about nothing. Trump must go, never mind how. Collaboration with Russia must be avoided at all costs. The witch hunt goes on. (*my translations*)

While both the English and German respondents are concerned about admissible evidence and journalistic ethics, the German respondents express their additional outrage at having their German newspaper unquestioningly report information that has been published by an American newspaper and related agencies. Most responses show a concern for *Die Zeit's* ethics of rationality, truthfulness, and reliability (*sachlich, seriös, verlässlich*) against what G4 and

G7 see as *unvernünftig, eine Farce, Gerüchte*. But there is some disagreement among Germans as to the meaning of these terms. G7.1 reinterprets “serious journalism” as “protection of sources” (*Quellenschutz*) and evokes the responsibility of readers in judging the sources’ reliability; G2.1 and G3.1 reject other respondents’ German perspective on events and suggest seeing things from a more relevant American perspective (the contextual reasons for Trump’s question and the particularities of the American justice system). Most of the German respondents interpret the incident as a rather incomprehensible power struggle (G6. *Schlammschlacht*) within American domestic politics, whereas the American respondents, given the political circumstances of the time, cannot but evaluate the meaning of Trump’s speech act as being linked to Trump’s political fate (see, for example, American response E5).

6 Discussion

I had hypothesised that the two newspaper articles and the responses given by their readers would construct the reality of the event according to the affordances of the two languages and the pragmatic and cultural expectations of their readers. And indeed this appears to have been the case. Let us first consider the way in which the grammatical, lexical and discourse features of the two languages might influence their respective readers.

6.1 Grammar

The *New York Times*’ use of direct quotes gives the English reader the full brunt of the problematic speech act and leads English readers to engage personally with the speech act and its perlocutionary effects, e.g., the firing of Comey. By contrast, *Die Zeit*’s abundant use of indirect discourse features – indirect speech (*Flynn sei “ein guter Kerl!”*), reported speech (*er soll ... gesagt haben*) and representation of speech with its abstract nominalisation (*er bat um Einstellung der Ermittlung*) reinforces the emotional distance between German readers and the events being related. The fact that this distance can be inserted in the very fabric of the verb itself through the grammatical subjunctive I ensures an element of reflexivity that cannot be replicated in English, since English has to report on the utterance and its source separately. This stylistic feature of *Die Zeit*’s article is consistent with the rather more academic discussion among the respondents who, while they engage personally and with political gusto with one another, do not respond to the emotional impact of the incident itself but instead respond to the way it is reported and the general ethical integrity of the newspaper.

6.2 *Lexicon*

In the articles, the different illocutionary force of the English verb *to ask* and the much stronger German verb *fordern* no doubt index a stronger indictment of the President in the German version, but this effect is mitigated by the rhetorical distance indexed by the German indirect discourse subjunctive. In the responses, the historic indexicalities of words like “obstruction of justice” and “impeachment” for an American reader versus “*Behinderung der Justiz*” and “*Amtsenthaltungsverfahren*” for a German reader are worlds apart (see Davis, 1980). For an American, they index the national traumas that were generated by the impeachments of Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton and their perlocutionary effects to this day, whereas for a German these terms evoke a foreign judicial system that is perceived as being more or less relevant to the current situation of the German reader (see G2). These effects are mitigated by the different argumentative styles of the English and German respondents. One would also have to add the specificity of online readership, namely, some of the German readers appear to have been able to read the American responses to the *New York Times* article before responding to *Die Zeit*'s article (G2, for example, is a direct translation of an English response) – which adds to the challenge of conducting contrastive pragmatics online and in these global times.

6.3 *Deixis*

The differential effect that Trump's speech act has on English and German readers is also linked to the different level of attention which is paid to the institutional status of the social actors. English respondents refer to Donald Trump, James Comey and the *New York Times* as “Trump”, “Comey”, and “Times” (E5 even addressing the latter as a human interlocutor), i.e., they focus on their civilian identity, or on their political image – “our President” (E5), “pro-Trumper/never-Trumper” (E7), “Trump's stooges” (E6.2).

By contrast, German respondents refer to them mostly by their institutional identity – “*der Präsident, der Leiter des FBI*” (G1.1), “*Vorgesetzter/Untergebener*” (G4), and they interpret their words in light of their institutional legitimacy as speakers. For example, when G1 suggests that Trump's words might be merely a statement on behalf of a friend, G1.1 is quick to remind G1 of the institutional status of the two speakers and therefore of the illocutionary force of a speech act performed by the President of the United States to the Director of the FBI.²

2 The ambiguity of this illocutionary force – an effect of the ambiguity of a President who refuses to “act presidential”, correlates to some extent with the accusation that Donald Trump

6.4 *Discourse Structure*

Let us now consider the way in which the respective discourses of the online versions of the *New York Times* and *Die Zeit* could affect the reading of these two articles. We see clear differences in the presentation of information. The American title “Comey Memo Says Trump Asked Him to End Flynn Investigation” channels the attention of readers in a different way to that achieved by the German title. The American title states precisely who said what to whom, who asked whom to do what. The focus is clearly on the locutionary and illocutionary acts. The personalisation of the incident in the title is consistent with the direct speech acts in quotation marks throughout the article, followed by repeated mentions of the source of information. But the explosive nature of the revelation and a rhetorical structure that grabs the attention of the reader in a seemingly unmediated way could account, in part, for the lively personal engagement of the respondents, who have of course quite a different stake in the story than the German respondents.

By contrast, the German title, “USA: Trump soll Ende der Ermittlungen gegen Flynn gefordert haben” (USA: Trump is said to have required the end of investigations against Flynn), puts the event at a geographical and informational distance. It is made clear that we are being given a German perspective on a distant country, the USA, whose politics however are not unfamiliar to German readers; the definite article before “Ermittlungen”, the lack of any further title before “Trump” and “Flynn” show that these are entities are well-known to readers of *Die Zeit Online*.

6.5 *Historical Context*

If we look at the historical context, we can see that the timing of the two articles is different for the two readerships: the American article was published at a time of increasing turmoil in the White House and growing impatience with a President who appeared to be intent on destroying the very democratic institutions that had brought him to power; the German article appeared at a time when Europeans were worried about the rise of populism in Europe, and were engulfed in the Brexit controversy following the UK’s decision in March 2017 to withdraw from the European Union. While readers of the American article framed what they read as: “Is Trump impeachable?”, the readers of the German article framed it as: “How are we Germans to understand what is going on in the U.S.?” The very idea of Russian interference in the 2016

is “unfit for the Presidency”. The reference made by the *New York Times* to “Mr. Trump” and “Mr. Comey” is an institutional convention; it does not indicate a lack of consideration for their institutional status.

American elections evokes quite different things in the American and German consciousness – for many Americans, “Russian interference” might now evoke the meddling of a foreign power in a sacred democratic electoral process that dates back to the origins of the Republic, whereas for many Germans it evokes personal memories of Soviet imperialism and the Cold War. The perlocutionary effects of Trump’s speech act ripple across multiple timescales and across multiple spatial boundaries. In the same way that readers respond to one another as well as responding to the original article, the effects produced bounce off one another in non-conventional, non-linear ways.

7 Conclusion

Considering the indeterminacy of cross-cultural exchanges and the complexities of communication online (its ease of citationality, its intertextualities, metapragmatic frames and propensity for digression), one could be justified in asking: What purchase does the notion of perlocutionary effect gain us in contrastive pragmatics research?

7.1 *Rethinking Perlocutionary Effects from a Complexity Theoretical Perspective*

From the multifarious responses to the original incident and its reporting in the English and German press it becomes clear that, although we can establish a certain correlation between the rhetorical style of the articles and the responses elicited, we cannot say that the former caused the latter. However, we can say that it contributed to the building of a context in which certain perlocutionary effects were made possible. For example, the English responses, given the current polarisation of American politics, are implicitly read by other respondents as being either pro-Trump or anti-Trump (see E3, E7). The German responses, by contrast, regard the whole situation as a senseless mud fight in which various discourses intersect depending on the age and gender of the respondents and their degree of familiarity with the American media. Where G6 uses military vocabulary (*in die Offensive gehen, verdonnern, Kaliber, Schlamm Schlacht, Wahlkampf*), G8 sees a cacophony of voices (*viel Lärm um nichts*) and repeats the two parties’ highly marked voices indiscriminately, depending on whether they belong to Democrats (*Trump muss weg, egal wie. Eine Annäherung mit Russland muss unbedingt verhindert werden*) or Republicans (*die Hexenjagd geht weiter*).

The entangled picture that emerges precludes any attempt to see causes and effects in a linear, predictable relationship in verbal communication. It

problematizes the notion that a perlocutionary effect is the result or the consequence of a speaker's intention and restores the centrality of context in any pragmatic analysis; indeed it aligns contrastive pragmatics with the complexity theoretical or post-structuralist approach proposed in recent years in applied linguistics (e.g., Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; McNamara, 2012).

One valuable implication of such an approach is that it enables us to revisit the notion of causality in pragmatic theory. We have already seen that the reason for Trump's speech act was to be found two months later in his firing of Comey. Such a perlocutionary effect served to reinterpret Comey's memo writing that some, like G4, might have wrongly attributed to the action of a disgruntled employee. The effect was not already hidden in the cause/intention of the speaker, but had its reason in a larger ecology of relational effects in which the past was retrofitted in line with the present.

Thus, from an ecological perspective, the reason behind some effects lies in the future as well as in the past. In his discussion of the "backward causality" of ecological events, Bruno Latour shows how we should think of causality as being reversed. For example, he argues that the cause of climate change is not in any original evil intention, but in the complex relationship between effects on different but simultaneous timescales. "Causality follows the events and does not precede them" (Latour, 1999: 152). The recent poststructuralist trends mentioned earlier in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics should enable us to revisit the study of perlocution from a complexity perspective. What Jan Blommaert wrote about sociolinguistics should also pertain to pragmatics:

We can now begin to address a broader category of perlocutionary effects, extended so as to cover unintended and far more complex effects, as non-linear and therefore unstable and unscriptable indexical effects, heavily mediated by the system of communication and not explicable in terms of input condition ... but emerging ... out of a complex dialectic of participants, contexts and sociocultural ideologies of semiosis noticeable in the process ... A sociolinguistics of effect might become a cool project in which much remains to be discovered ...

BLOMMAERT, 2015: 25³

3 See Bourdieu's *Pascalian Meditations* (1997: Ch.6) on the "reason of effects", Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) on complex dynamic effects and Blommaert (2015: 25) on the 'coolness' of non-linear perlocutionary effects. One of these effects is of course the online medium itself with its relative anonymity, its participation structure and its unique form of intimacy.

7.2 *Educational Value of Contrastive Pragmatics Analysis*

A comparison between the American and German online responses to the same incident reported in the two languages has revealed that there are not only differences in the linguistic and discourse structures of these languages, but also in the historical and political contexts in which the two news media operate, the political leanings of the readers and ways of reasoning, and therefore different reasons for the effects. How can perlocutionary effects be taken into account in communicatively oriented language education?

At the same time as research in applied linguistics has moved away from structuralist approaches to language learning and language use, many language instructors, under pressure to assess the competence of their students according to quantifiable measures of success, have had to teach learners how to realise speech acts according to idealised *norms* and *conventions* that are stereotypically less and less reliable in a global, multilingual and multicultural world. But recent trends in foreign language (FL) education show that these educators are eager to break the exclusive focus on the illocutionary, by moving from a monologic speaker-centered to a more translingual and transcultural approach (Levine and Phipps, 2012), from a linear reading of texts to a non-linear understanding of discourse relations within texts (Kramersch and Zhang, 2018), and from a cultural and intercultural view of language learning to a more reflexive pedagogy (Byrd Clark and Dervin, 2014). These trends are evidence of a move away from narrowly conceived communicative language teaching to the development of a more interpretive symbolic competence (Kramersch, 2006; 2011). Together with this renewed attention being paid to interpretation, focusing on the perlocutionary raises questions of ethics and politics that are at the heart of language education (Beacco et al., 2013; Macedo, 2019; Kramersch, in press; Chun, in press). An applied linguistics of effects does not do away with the progressive, step by step, acquisition of a language, but embeds it within a broader process of answerability for one's use of language that is derived from an equally growing historical and political consciousness.

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