

## Speech-Acts and Communicative Failure in Thucydides

In this paper I propose to bring Speech Act Theory to bear on two central figures in Thucydides' *History*, Nicias and Alcibiades, in order to shed new light on their thematic importance and the fundamental ways in which they differ. These two men are set up as opposites in several ways, culminating in their famous debate in Book 6 over the Sicilian Expedition. This contrast is not just encapsulated in their competing political values, but also in their differing styles of speech (Tompkins 1972) and how they communicate with others (in public speech and in writing).

Yet verbal communication, far from being a side note, may be the most important differentiating factor between the two. In fact, their successes and failures seem to stem largely from whether or not they communicate effectively. While scholars have studied speeches in Thucydides in general or the rhetorical strategies of particular speeches, our understanding of interpersonal communication in Thucydides can be enhanced. By applying Speech-Act Theory to Nicias and Alcibiades, the difference between them in terms of communicative success becomes striking. This theoretical framework reveals a compelling new paradigm wherein Nicias' failures as a general and politician largely stem from increased reluctance to perform speech-acts explicitly and directly, whereas Alcibiades' successes derive from his adroit abuse of speech-acts in service of his political ambitions.

According to Austin (1962) a "performative" utterance involves the performing of a certain type of action through speech and cannot be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity like a statement. He further speaks of "illocutionary acts" (IA's) – actions performed *in saying* something (e.g. nomination, warning, or promising). IA's can be successful ("felicitous") if they meet certain conditions, but can fail for various reasons (Austin 1962). The effect they produce

on the hearer is called a “perlocutionary” effect (“PE”; e.g. intimidating someone is the PE of a threat). When we apply these general concepts to Thucydides’ leading men, we find that Nicias fails to properly perform his speech acts far more often than others – and in situations of great consequence.

Three episodes highlight Nicias’ progressive loss of control over speech-acts. In the Pylos Debate (4.28), Nicias reads the *dēmos*’ displeasure and grumbling at Cleon, and makes an explicit speech-act of resignation, succeeding in backing Cleon into a corner. A combination of key words (*existato*, *ekeleue(n)* twice, then calling the Athenians to witness his act) make the force of his utterance clear (Austin 51-64; pace Derrida 1988, 14-18).

Yet Nicias’ communicative success dissipates when he shies away from such explicitness. He “dissuades” and “warns” the *dēmos* against the Sicilian Expedition (6.9-14). Yet when he fails in these IA’s, he “advises” them with frighteningly high estimates of forces. *This* speech-act (“advising”) is “infelicitous” because he retreats into indirection, performing an “indirect” speech-act. This occurs when a speech-act intends a PE different from its normal one. Here Nicias “advises”, but his *intended* PE is not persuading the demos, but *dissuading/deterring* them: in effect, this is “warning” cloaked as “advising”. The *dēmos* is evidently the wrong audience for such *indirect* speech-acts.

Moreover, Nicias fails to learn from his mistake. When subsequently asked exactly what forces he needs (6.25.1-2), Nicias is still not explicit enough with his illocutionary force, and the *dēmos* becomes even more enthralled with the campaign. Similarly, when he writes to Athens from Sicily (7.8-15), instead of explicitly espousing a retreat (given bleak conditions), he offers them two choices: recall the fleet *or* send another force just as large. His failure to convey his illocutionary force “felicitously” thus turns a defeat into a tragedy (Zadorojnyi 1998, Lateiner

1985), and also demonstrates how the *dēmos*' irrational behavior could impair political communication and decision-making.

Alcibiades, by contrast, doesn't fail in his speech-acts though being indirect. He is an adept communicator who *abuses* speech-acts. From deceiving Spartan peace envoys (5.45) to playing the Athenians and Tissaphernes off each other with insincere promises, Thucydides shows that, whereas Nicias is largely a *victim* of the trend of decay in political behavior and language during the war, Alcibiades understands speech-acts better than anyone and exploits the fuzzy area between insincerity and falsehood which Speech-Act theorists debate even today (Austin; Berlin 1977, Loxley 2007). Thus, through Speech-Act Theory we appreciate even more the importance of communicative success and the results of its perversion in Thucydides' text.

#### Bibliography

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