THE SPEECH ACT THEORY BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: *Of all the issues in the general theory of language usage, speech act theory has probably aroused the widest interest. Psychologists, for example, have suggested that the acquisition of the concepts underlying speech acts may be a prerequisite for the acquisition of language in general, literary critics have looked to speech act theory for an illumination of textual subtleties or for an understanding of the nature of literary genres, anthropologists have hoped to find in the theory some account of the nature of magical incantations, philosophers have seen potential applications to, amongst other things, the status of ethical statements, while linguists have seen the notions of speech act theory as variously applicable to problems in syntax, semantics, second language learning, and elsewhere.*

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1. Prefatory View

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notions of speech act theory as variously applicable to problems in syntax, semantics, second language learning, and elsewhere. Meanwhile in linguistic pragmatics, speech acts remain, along with **presupposition** [1] and **implicature**[2] in particular, one of the central phenomena that any general pragmatic theory must account for.

Given the widespread interest, there is an enormous literature on the subject, and this paper is not meant to examine all the work within linguistics, let alone a small fraction of the technical literature within language philosophy.

2. J.L. Austin's Brand New Ideas – A Huge Step ahead Logical Positivism. From Austin to Searle

To start with the very beginning, one might notice that issues of truth and falsity have always been of central interest throughout much of the literature focussed on **deixis**[3], **presupposition** and **implicature**. Indeed those issues derive

[1] The term points out what a speaker or writer assumes that the receiver of the linguistic message already knows.
For example:
speaker A: *What about inviting Simon tonight*?
speaker B: *What a good idea; then he can give Monica a lift.*
Here, the presuppositions are, amongst others, that speaker A and B know who Simon and Monica are, that Simon has a vehicle, most probably a car, and that Monica has no vehicle at the moment. Children often presuppose too much. The may say:
...and he said "let's go" and we went there.
even if the hearers do not know who *he* is and where *there* is.

[2] This linguistic concept is connected to conversational maxims i.e. those unwritten rules about conversation which people know and which influence the form of conversational exchanges. For example in the following exchange:
A: *Let's go to the movies.*
B: *I have an examination in the morning*.
B's reply might appear not to be connected to A's remark. However, since A has made an invitation and since a reply to an invitation is usually either an acceptance or a refusal, B's reply is here understood as an excuse for not accepting the invitation (i.e. a refusal). B has used the "maxim" that speakers normally gives replies which are relevant to the question that has been asked. The linguist and philosopher Grice has suggested that there are four conversational maxims: a). the maxim of quantity: give as much information as needed; b). the maxim of quality: speak truthfully; c). the maxim of relevance: say things that are relevant; d). the maxim of manner: say things clearly and briefly. The use of conversational maxims to imply meaning during conversation is called ***conversational implicature***, and the "co – operation" between speakers in using the maxims is sometimes called the ***co – operative principle***.

[3] The concept of ***deixis*** points out those words or phrases – called ***deictic*** – which directly relate an utterance to a time, place or person.
Examples of deictic words in English are:
here and ***there***, which refer to a place in relation to the speaker:
The letter is <u>here</u>. (near the speaker)
The letter is <u>over there</u>. (farther away from the speaker)

much of their interest from the way in which they remind us of the strict limitations to what can be captured in a truth – conditional analysis of sentence meaning. Nevertheless in the 1930s there flourished what can now be safely treated as a linguistic and philosophical excess, namely the doctrine of **logical positivism**, a central tenet of which was that unless a sentence can, at least in principle, be *verified* (i.e. tested for its truth and falsity), it was strictly speaking *meaningless.* Of course it followed that most ethical, aesthetic and literary discourses, not to mention everyday utterances, were simply meaningless. But rather than being seen as a *reductio ad absurdum*, such a conclusion was reviewed by proponents of logical positivism as a positively delightful result **(**see the marvelously prescriptive work by Ayer (1936)**)**[1], and the doctrine was pervasive in philosophical circles of the time. It was this movement **(**which Wittgenstein had partly stimulated in his *Tractus – Logico – Philosophicus* (1921)**)** that the later Wittgenstein was actively attacking in *Philosophical Investigations* with the well known slogan "meaning in use", and the insistence that utterances are only explicable in relations to the activities, or **language – games**, in which they play a role.

It was in the same period, when concern with verifiability and distrust of the inaccuracies and vacuities of ordinary language were paramount, that J.L. Austin launched his theory of speech acts. There are strong parallels between the latter Wittgenstein's emphasis on language usage and language games and Austin's insistence that "the total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating."[2] Nevertheless, Austin appears to be largely unaware of, and probably quite uninfluenced by, Wittgenstein's later work, and we may treat Austin's theory as autonomous.

In the set of lectures that were posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin set about demolishing, in his mild and urbane way, the view of language that would place truth conditions as central to language understanding. His method was this:

First, he noted that some ordinary language declarative sentences, contrary to logical positivist assumptions, are not apparently used with any intention of making true or false statements. These seem to form a special class, and are illustrated below:

[1] Ayer, A.J., *Language, Truth and Logic*, Victor Gollancz. London, 1936
[2] Austin, J.L., *How to Do Things with Words*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962

(1) I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow
I hereby christen this ship the H.M.S. Flounder
I declare war on Zanzibar
I apologize
I dub thee Sir Walter
I object
I sentence you to ten years of hard lobour
I bequeath you my Sansovino
I give my word
I warn you that trespassers will be prosecuted

The peculiar thing about these sentences, according to Austin, is that they are not used to say things, i.e. describe states of affairs, but rather actively to *do* things. After you've declared war on Zanzibar, or dubbed Sir Walter, or raised an objection, the world has changed in substantial ways. Further, you cannot assess such utterances are true or false – as illustrated by the bizarre nature of the following exchange:

(2) A: *I second the motion.*
B: *That's false.*
(3)A: *I dub thee Sir Walter.*
B: *Too true.*

Austin termed these peculiar and special sentences ***performatives***, and contrasted them to statements, assertions and utterances like them, which he called ***constatatives***.

He then went on to suggest that although, unlike constatatives, performatives cannot be true or false (given their special nature, the question of truth and falsity simply does not arise), yet they can go wrong. He then set himself the task of cataloguing all the ways in which they can go wrong, or be ***infelicitous*** as he put it. For instance, suppose I say *I christened this ship the H.M.S. Flounder*, I may not succeed in so christening the vessel if, for instance, it is already named otherwise, or I am not an appointed namer, or there are no witnesses, slipways, bottles of champagne, etc. Successfully naming a ship requires certain institutional arrangements, without which the action that the utterance attempts to perform is simply null and void. On the basis of such different ways in which a performative can fail to come off, Austin produced a typology of conditions which performatives must meet if they are to succeed or be ***felicitous***. He called these conditions ***felicity conditions***, and he distinguished three main categories:

(4) A. (i) There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect;

(ii) The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure.

B. The procedure must be executed (i) correctly and (ii) completely
C. Often, (i) the persons must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure, and (ii) if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must do so

As evidence of the existence of such conditions, consider what happens when some of them are not fulfilled. For example, suppose, a British citizen says to his wife:

(5) *I hereby divorce you*

He will not thereby achieve a divorce, because there simply is no such procedure (as in A (i)) whereby merely by uttering (5) divorce can be achieved. In contrast in Muslim cultures there is such a procedure, whereby the uttering of a sentence with the import of (5) three times consecutively does thereby and *ipso facto* constitute a divorce. As an illustration of a failure of condition A (ii), consider a clergymen baptizing the wrong baby, or the right baby with the wrong name, or consider the case of one head of state welcoming another, but addressing the attendant bodyguard in error. As for condition B, the words must be conventionally correct and complete. Finally, the violations of the C conditions are insincerities: to advise someone to do something when you really think it would be advantageous for you but not for him, or for a juror to find a defendant guilty when he knows him to be innocent, would be to violate condition C (i). And to promise to do something which one has no intention whatsoever of doing would be a straightforward violation of C (ii).

Austin notes that these violations are not of equal stature. Violations of A and B conditions give rise to **misfires** as he puts it – i.e. the intended actions simply fail to come off. Violations of C conditions on the other hand are **abuses**, not so easily detected at the time of the utterance in question, with the consequence that the action is performed, but infelicitously or insincerely.

On the basis of these observations Austin declares that (a) some sentences, performatives, are special: uttering them *does* things, and does not merly say things (report states of affairs); and (b) these performative sentences achieve their corresponding actions because there are specific *conventions* linking the words to

institutional procedures. Performatives are, if one likes, just rather special sorts of ceremony. And unlike constatatives, which are assessed in terms of truth and falsity, performatives can only be assessed as felicitous or infelicitous, according to whether their felicity conditions are met or not.

But Austin is playing cunning: given this much, he has his wedge into the theory of language and he systematically taps it home. Readers of *How to Do Things with Words* should be warned that there is an internal evolution to the argument, so that what is proposed at the beginning is rejected by the end. Indeed what starts off a theory about some special and peculiar utterances – performatives – ends up as a general theory that pertains to all kinds of utterances. Consequently there are two crucial sliding definitions or concepts: firstly, there is a shift from the view that performatives are a special class of sentences with peculiar syntactic and pragmatic properties, to the view that there is a general class of performative utterances that includes both **explicit performatives** (the old familiar class) and **implicit performatives**, the latter including lots of other kinds of utterances if not all. Secondly, there is a shift from the dichotomy performative / constatative to a general theory of **illocutionary acts** of which the various performatives and constatatives are just special sub – cases. Let us take these two shifts in order, and review Austin's arguments for the theoretical 'sea – change', as he puts it.

If the dichotomy between performatives and constatatives is to bear the important load that Austin indicates, namely the distinction between truth – conditionally assessed utterances and those assessed in terms of felicity, than it had better be possible to tell the difference – i.e. to characterize performatives in independent terms. Austin therefore teases us with an attempt to characterize performatives in linguistic terms. He notes that the paradigm cases, as in (1) above, seem to have the following properties: they are first person indicative active sentences in the simple present tense. This is hardly surprising, since, if in uttering a performative the speaker is concurrently performing an action, we should expect just those properties. Thus we get the contrast between the following sentences: only the first can be uttered performatively.

(6) a. I bet you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.
b. I am betting you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.
c. I did bet you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.
d. He bets you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.

The progressive aspect in (6b) renders that (most probably) a reminder, as does the third person in (6d), while the past tense in (6c) indicates a report; none of these constatatives seems, then, to be capable of doing betting, unlike the performative (6a).

Austin's work is, however, not easy to summarize as it is rich with suggestions that are not followed up, and avoids dogmatic statements of position. Of the large amount of philosophical work that it has given rise to, one development in particular is worth singling out, i.e. the very influential doctrine of J.R. Searle.

In general, Searle's theory of speech acts is just Austin's systematized, in part rigidified, with sallies into the general theory of meaning, and connections to other philosophical issues. Austin thought that one could come to an interesting classification through taxonomy of performative verbs, but Searle seeks some more abstract scheme based on felicity conditions. In fact, he proposes that there are just five basic kinds of action that one can perform in speaking, by means of the following five types of utterance:

1. **representatives**, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (paradigm cases: asserting, concluding, etc.)

2. **directives**, which are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (paradigm cases: requesting, questioning)

3. **commissives**, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (paradigm cases: promising, threatening, offering)

4. **expressives**, which express a psychological state (paradigm cases: thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating)

5. **declarations**, which effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra – linguistic institutions (paradigm cases: excommunicating, declaring war, christening, firing from employment)

To Searle, as with Austin, the illocutionary act is directly achieved by the conventional force associated with the issuance of a certain kind of utterance in accord with a conventional procedure. In contrast, a **perlocutionary act** is specific to circumstances of issuance, and is therefore not conventionally achieved just by uttering that particular utterance, and includes all those effects, intended or unintended, often indeterminate, that some particular utterance in some particular situation may cause.

3. A Last Annotation. Instead of Final Judgment

To squeeze all that goes under the label of **speech act theory** within the confines of a linguistic paper like this one would be not only impossible – as the numerous volumes dedicated to this topic could not cover its plenitude of

significance – but also undesirable. Consequently, this paper is quite conservative in scope and approach, and verges upon only what is of an utmost importance in speech act theory.

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