

Illocutionary Speech Acts

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My aim in this paper is to examine closely the concept and institution of promising as it is used in ordinary language and speech act philosophy. This will be accomplished by 1) discussing the major tenets of speech act philosophy as developed by J. L. Austin J.R. Searle, 2) analyzing Derrida's critique, and 3) applying this critique specifically to Searle's account of the act of promising.

In Speech Acts, John Searle gives an Austinian account of language in which speaking a language is "engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior" (pg. 22). Speech act philosophy, then, is the analysis of these acts and the rules that govern them. For Searle the speech act is the basic unit of linguistic communication. It is not the symbol or token itself that is basic, but the production or issuance of that symbol or token. At the heart of the speech act, then, is the utterance, the performance of the act itself. One specific type of speech act is what Austin calls the performative utterance. What is historically important about Austin's account of performatives is that they deviated from the positivistic paradigm that treated only those statements that were verifiably true or false as having sense. A performative is neither true nor false yet we would certainly not conclude that they are nonsense. As its name indicates an utterance of this type can be used to perform certain acts such as promising and commanding. In this sense they not only say something, they do something. Austin makes a distinction between locutionary acts and illocutionary acts. For example if I say, "The ice is cracked" I am performing the locutionary act of uttering a sentence in English and the illocutionary act of, in this case, warning someone that they had better not walk on the ice. In this respect the illocutionary act carries with it a certain amount of what we will call illocutionary force. In this sense a performative utterance when performed is an illocutionary act. For our purposes "performative utterance" and illocutionary act will be used interchangeably.

Besides having no truth value, performatives differ from statements of fact in that there is a degree of "intention" that couples the utterance. This is not to say that when one utters a statement of fact such as, "The dog is on the table", one does not "intend" to say it because presumably, under normal conditions,

one certainly does intend to say it. What differentiates statements of fact from performative utterances, on one level, is the fact that they (the latter) are saturated with intention. In other words, intention is necessary for a speech act to be truly performative. This intention seems to follow from the fact that a performance of an act is involved. Performatives are inherently a statement of intention whereas a statement of fact is a statement of fact, the structure of which is devoid of any inherent intention, save the intention of the speaker to utter the statement. Illocutionary acts, as we have said, carry some degree of "illocutionary force". Referring to this, Norris (1982) states that "performatives involve an intention and a commitment, on the speaker's part, to stand by his words and acknowledge all the obligations they entail" (pg 109). This statement must not be taken to hold for all performatives in the sense that not all performatives are acts of explicit obligation. For example, "Now I pronounce you man and wife" while certainly a performative utterance entails no explicit obligation on the part of the speaker. Illocutionary force, among other things, has to do with the present intention and good faith of the speaker.

What happens if the speaker does not mean what he says, and fails to acknowledge any and all obligations entailed? Or, if there is no obligation entailed, what if there is no intention on the part of the speaker (i.e. in a play). For example, what if I made a promise but then said I was just kidding? For Austin the speech act is not "felicitous". A true or serious speech act is subject to conditions. One is that whoever utters it must be in "good faith" or sincere. Others include a "correctness of form and propriety of context" (Norris, 109). If these conditions are not more than the act loses performative status and, for example, a promise would not be completed. The illocutionary act must embody the presence of intention in a certain context.

This is unproblematic for the Austinian because in ideal ordinary language the gap between intention and expression is not that large. This suits the speech act philosophers well. For, curiously, they are not concerned with the deviant cases of the speech act.

In short, I am only going to deal with a simple and idealized case. This method, one of constructing idealized models, is analogous to the sort of theory construction that goes on in most sciences, e.g., the construction of economic models, or accounts of the solar system which treat planets as points. Without abstraction and idealization there is no systematization. (Searle, 1969).

It is at this point that we come to the problems of speech act philosophy, especially as it concerns illocutionary acts. For this we must refer to Jacques Derrida.

For Derrida it is just this method of analyzing speech acts that is in itself misleading. This stems from an analysis of the presence of intention. To quote Wittgenstein, "What is the natural expression of an intention? —Look at a cat when it stalks a bird; or a beast when it wants to escape" (PI. 647). What Wittgenstein is reminding us is that the intention is best understood apart from some mental function or entity.

Where Derrida finds fault with Austin and Searle is in the condition of a felicitous speech act that requires the speaker to "mean what he says in the sense of being presently involved with his utterance and faithfully intending its import" (Norris, 1982). Derrida's point here is subtle and requires some discussion. The concept of presence is very important for him in general. It is a property of writing, says Derrida, that the reader is absent from the written sign when it is being written and that what is written is communicated in the absence of the writer. In this sense the written sign is subject to repeatability in the absence of the writer. Due to this repeatability the written sign may be subject to a certain drift or stretch in essentiality, context, and meaning. This is what Derrida refers to as the "iterability" of the sign. As this holds for writing so too does it hold for speech. In both cases it is on account of the boundlessness of context. For Derrida meaning is dependent on context but context, to an extent, is independent. While no meaning can be determined out of context, context itself cannot be saturated with meaning. Context itself is always open to further interpretations and misinterpretation, to further discussions as to what would and would not be relevant. This is not to say that any interpretation at any time would be allowed. Derrida argues that the structure of context and of the concept of iterability is such that any repetition, drift, or iteration will always carry with it a trace of meaning in previous context. Thus iterability can be permissive but not without bound.

Derrida wants to argue that the grounding of the performative utterance in the present is too limiting. He holds that the acts get their force from institutions that have existed before the speaker employs the speech act. Thus, the institution or concept itself has the property of "iterability", or "its repeatability in principle in a series of tokens that, as distinct spatiotemporal things, to some extent differ from each other" (Staten, 1984). Thus, to Derrida,

difference is just as important as identity. What Derrida argues is that Austin's criteria for felicitous speech acts are inconsistent simply because of their iterability. The iterability of illocutionary speech acts allows them to work when the "force of intention" is no longer present. This is evidenced by the fact that there is nothing inherent in or about an utterance that would allow us to determine whether the original intention is there or not. As Wittgenstein points out "... the most explicit expression of intention is by itself insufficient evidence of intention" (PI 641). The product of the iterability of the illocutionary speech act is the detachability of the "sign" from the intention itself. It is important to keep in mind throughout that Derrida does not for a moment deny the fact that speech acts can function the way Austin and Searle want them to, it is just that their glossing over of the "parasitic" cases is in itself a telling matter.

This is an area of great disagreement between Searle and Derrida: Searle holds that in Derrida's criticism of himself and Austin he has severely misunderstood Austin's position on the exclusion of the marginal uses of any certain speech act. The brunt of Searle's argument is that Austin has brushed aside these parasitic cases simply for methodological purposes, not as some sort of "metaphysical" exclusion. Some sort of metaphysical exclusion does not bother Derrida at this point. It is Austin's method of assuming and beginning with some ideal or pure speech act that is misguided. Such an idealizing is in itself defective to the extent that it is the possibility of borderline cases that is necessary and cannot be ignored. Derrida wants to point out that these marginal cases are just as essential as the "serious cases". In this sense Derrida has found the flaw that tarnishes the idealist method that Searle originally outlined. We can now consider our illustrative illocutionary act, promising, and flush out from the margins that which Searle has chosen to ignore.

In Speech Acts Searle outlines the conditions for a promise in good faith. Without great detail it can be summarized as follows, where S is a person, H is a person, P is a proposition, T is the utterance, and A is an action.

1. Normal input and output conditions obtain
2. S expresses the proposition that P in the utterance of T.
3. In expressing that P, S predicts a future act A of S.
4. H would prefer S's doing A to his not doing A, and S believes H would prefer his doing A to his not doing A.
5. It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.

6. S intends that the utterance of T will make him responsible for the intending to do A.
7. S intends that the utterance of T will place him under an obligation to do A.
8. S intends to produce the knowledge of (7) in H.
9. The semantical rules of the dialect spoken by S and H are such that T is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions 1-8 obtain.

(Adapted from Speech Acts, J.R. Searle).

My contention is that Searle's formulation is (1) mistaken in many respects and (2) limited in application in its exclusion of marginal cases of promising. One must keep in mind that for the most part Searle seems to forget that "communication is not a closed circuit of exchange where intentions are never mistaken and messages always arrive on time at the appointed place" (Norris, 1987).

The iterability of the illocutionary act itself should serve to preclude any analytic formulation of its preconditions, except, of course, if those preconditions can accommodate iterability, which Searle's cannot. Let us see in what way many of Searle's conditions preclude the function of iteration. One of the most interesting is (6), which allows for insincere promises. It is not the case that one must intend to fulfill the promise, one must simply acknowledge the responsibility of intention. What exactly does this mean? Why does Searle include this instance and not an instance of a promise made on the stage? In this case it seems that the difference lies in the fact that one would be held responsible in the first case and not the last. The difference is ethical. But where can Searle locate the intention? Who is to decide? Certainly not in the explicitness of the language, for it is language's inexplicitness that masks intention. For example, what is the difference between the insincere promise and the promise on the stage. Does simply the repetition and absence of presence of the utterance preclude it from being a felicitous speech act? In the case of the actor on the stage are we to say that he is void of intention? What if the script called for him to actually fulfill the promise? In this case he would certainly intend to fulfill it and would acknowledge this intention. Otherwise he would ruin the play. This brings us to (5). It cannot be obvious that what is promised will take place. What if for instance what the actor promised to do did not take place even though the script said it would. In one sense it would be odd to reproach him by saying, "But you promised!". Yet in an obscure sense he did not do

what he promised. With regard to (3) he is certainly predicting some future act. I do not pretend that promising in a play and promising out of the context of a play are indistinguishable, because they are. What I want to point out is that Searle's conditions presuppose the validity of the present intent of the speaker.

Another interesting feature of these conditions is the fact that they do not necessitate the utterance of the word "promise". In other words the expression of the promise need not include the word "promise". This is evident in the fact that "I will take you to the store", and "I promise to take you to the store" may each fulfill Searle's conditions. Austin is sympathetic to this concern. Does one seem to have less intention than the other? Certainly not, one either intends or does not intend, one cannot "sort of intend". Wherein lies the difference? Consider the following, "I will take you to the store, I promise". Here "I promise" is added to the end of the sentence, it seems, as an emphasis. Emphasis of what, of intention? In both cases one, supposedly, intends to carry out whatever action. In both cases we have a prediction about the future in that I am predicating of myself that I will do a certain action at a certain time from present. The only thing that differs is the actual words themselves. A Fregian might want to say something to the effect that the sense of the propositions are different. But does this change the degree of responsibility and obligation entailed by each? Why should it and why would it? It seems in one sense one would want to use the word "promise" when he is very confident (not obvious) that whatever is predicted will come to be, and not use it when the converse is true. Yet this assumes a differing degree of responsibility, or for that matter "force" of intention. What I am getting at here is the fact that Searle's formulation in no way necessitates the use of the "illocutionary force indicating device," namely the sign "I promise". Where does this leave promising?

Searle envisions the illocutionary act as saturated with intent, ideally. Thus expressed, in our example, the utterance and the intention are indistinguishable. What I have tried to indicate specifically, and what Derrida has mentioned generally, is that when one distinguishes utterance from intention than it becomes clear that any attempt to formalize an utterance such as promising as grounded in intention is mislead and incomplete. The anomalies of a speech act themselves serve to undermine its very foundation as a speech act. Especially as in this case it is apparent that the self identity of the intention is distinct from the utterance itself. This is only possible when we, like Derrida, recognize the anomaly as a necessary possibility.

Works Cited

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