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SPEECH ACTS, MIND, AND SOCIAL REALITY

I want to thank the *Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung (ZiF)* for hosting a colloquium in my honor in Bielefeld in June 1999. This colloquium was organized by Günther Grewendorf and Georg Meggle under the title *Speech Acts, Mind, and Social Reality*. I want to thank Günther and Georg for the excellent job they have done. Interesting papers were given on each subject, I responded to each paper as it was delivered, and an hour long lively discussion followed. I am grateful both to the organizers and to the participants for all of the work and intellectual effort that went into the conference. I enjoyed immensely the intellectual stimulation provided by the high quality of the discussion, and I relished the opportunity to clarify, expound, defend, and in some cases modify my views.

In order to set the stage for the papers which follow in this volume, I am going to explain some features of my views on each of the three main topics of the conference. Since the order of the topics parallels the order of my own intellectual development, I will do this in something of an autobiographical fashion.

1. SPEECH ACTS

I first became interested in the philosophy of language when I was an undergraduate in Oxford beginning in 1952. I then thought that the most exciting subject in the philosophy of language was the theory of reference, and I was convinced by the general approach taken by my teacher and friend Peter Strawson. According to Strawson, we should think of referring as an action that speakers perform with language. We should think of reference not as something that words do on their own, but as something that speakers do in the intentional act of referring in the utterance of words. Though I did not realize it in those days, this approach only makes sense within the context of a much more general theory of speech acts. As a second year undergraduate I attended some lectures by J.L. Austin on the topic of speech acts, but did not find them very interesting, and stopped going after a few sessions. Little did I know that these lectures would prove influential for several years of my subsequent intellectual development. After I had received my B.A. I resumed attending Austin's lectures, engaged in long and fruitful discussions with him, and along with Strawson he became the teacher and friend with the greatest intellectual influence on me.

I wrote my D.Phil thesis in Oxford on the subject of sense and reference, and I worked out the implications of this approach in the course of that thesis. My first

article on the subject was a paper I wrote for Peter Strawson in late 1955, "Proper Names", published in *Mind* 1958, and this later became a chapter in my thesis.

Already in my thesis I was beginning to develop the idea that such speech acts as referring and predicating can only exist within the context of a complete illocutionary act. However, it was not until after I left Oxford and went to Berkeley in 1959 that I began to develop a general theory of speech acts. I stated the outlines of my position in the article "What is a Speech Act?", which came out in 1965. This article expounded in a preliminary way the framework for the complete structure I presented in my first book, *Speech Acts*, published in 1969.

One way to see the approach that I adopted is as a synthesis and development of ideas from Austin and Grice. Austin had a theory of illocutionary acts, but it was still in a very preliminary and tentative form at the time of his death. Grice had a theory of meaning based on the idea that, in the making of a meaningful utterance, the speaker means something if and only if he intends to produce a certain effect on the hearer by getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect. I objected to various details of both Austin's and Grice's accounts, but the overall approach, namely studying speech acts in a way that treated the speaker's meaning as a matter of the intentions of the speaker in performing an illocutionary act, seemed to me entirely correct. My book took Gricean intentionalist accounts of meaning and Austinian illocutionary acts and combined them with a theory of constitutive rules and institutional facts. On this basis I tried to develop a general theory in the philosophy of language, according to which, speaking in a language is a matter of performing illocutionary acts with certain intentions, according to constitutive rules. These constitutive rules typically have the form "X counts as Y", or "X counts as Y in C". Thus, for example, such and such an utterance under certain conditions, counts as the making of a promise.

Years later, when I wrote *Intentionality* I came to see that there was a much simpler and, I believe, more accurate approach than the one Grice had used. It seems to me Grice confuses meaning with communication. By analyzing meaning in terms of the intention to produce an effect on a hearer, Grice treats as identical two distinct features of the speech act: the content and force of the speech act (the meaning of the utterance) on the one hand, and the communication of that content and force to the hearer (the production of the effect), on the other. By giving an account of meaning in terms of intentionality, and distinguishing meaning from communication, I believe I got a much simpler and more powerful theory of speech acts. I will say more about this later.

In the course of writing *Speech Acts* I published some controversial articles. Perhaps the most controversial was "How to derive 'Ought' from 'Is'" (*Philosophical Review*, 1964). In this article I attacked Hume's claim that no set of factual statements about how things are could ever entail a statement about what one ought to do, and I especially attacked it in its contemporary version, that no set of descriptive statements could ever entail an evaluative statement. The basic idea behind the article is that one can create reasons for oneself to perform an action by way of making promises. This is so, because promising is by definition the creation of an obligation. These obligations then exist objectively as reasons for an action by the speaker because they have been intentionally created by the speaker. Because

sentences of the form “x ought to do y” express reasons for action, it is possible to derive statements of this form from statements of fact about the speaker’s performance of the act of promising and other such facts. Of course any such obligation can be overridden by conflicting obligations or competing reasons for action, and for that reason the claim that “x ought to do y” is always defeasible by other considerations.

There were a large number of criticisms of and attacks on this argument. I have at various times answered these criticisms. However, it seems to me that a large number of the critics simply missed the point, and indeed it seems to me that to this day they miss the point. Most critics suppose that somehow or other the argument only works if one endorses, accepts, or somehow approves of the institution of promising. That seems to me quite irrelevant to the central issue. One can have any attitude one likes to the institution of promising. The obligation to keep a promise does not derive from the institution; it derives rather from the fact that a speaker in making a promise has created a desire-independent reason for an action. The institution of promising provides the vehicle by which the speaker can undertake an obligation in making a promise. But the institution of promising is not the source of the obligation. Rather the institution of promising, and other such institutions, make it possible for rational agents acting freely to publicly bind their will in the future by acts performed in the present. To repeat, the institution is the device that the agent uses, but is not the source of the obligation. This point is still not properly understood by many philosophers, and I discuss it in much more detail in my forthcoming book, *Rationality in Action*, MIT Press (forthcoming).

After the publication of *Speech Acts* there were a number of questions about speech act theory that seemed to me to be still unanswered. Perhaps the most important concerned the classification of speech acts. How many fundamental types of illocutionary acts are there? I claim specifically that there are five, and only five, basic primitive forms of illocutionary act, or as I say using my technical terminology, five basic illocutionary points. These are, first, the assertive. In an assertive speech act, the speaker commits himself in varying degrees to the truth of the expressed proposition. Examples are statements, explanations, and assertions. The second are directives. In directives the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something. Examples are orders, requests, and commands. The third are commissives. In the commissive speech act the speaker commits himself to doing something, to some future course of action. The most famous example, of course, is promising, but other commissives are vows, threats, pledges, contracts, and guarantees. The fourth class are expressives. In an expressive speech act, the speaker expresses his feelings and attitudes about some state of affairs specified by the propositional content. Examples are apologies, thanks, and congratulations. Fifth and finally, there are declarations. In the declaration the speaker brings about changes in the world through his utterances, so the world changes to match the propositional content, solely in virtue of the successful performance of the utterance. Examples are declaring war, pronouncing somebody man and wife, and adjourning a meeting.

The taxonomy makes a strong claim about the nature and possibilities of human languages. The claim is that there are not, as Wittgenstein said, an indefinitely large

number of different uses of language, but rather in the illocutionary line of business, there are five, and only five, basic types of things one can do with language. One can tell people how things are (assertives); one can try to get them to do things (directives); one can commit oneself to doing things (commissives); one can express one's feelings and attitudes (expressives); and one can bring about changes in the world through one's utterances (declarations). Such a strong claim about the nature of language can only be fully justified by way of an analysis of meaning. I struggled with this issue for several years in a number of different articles, and I finally got an account that I am — more or less — satisfied with, which I published in *Intentionality* in 1983.

Even before I was able to give a full justification of the taxonomy, it proved immensely useful in various ways. Daniel Vanderveken and I used the taxonomy as the basis for developing a logic of speech acts, and we published our results in *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*, 1985. Vanderveken has then gone on to publish other books along the same lines.

Some other unanswered questions in the theory of speech acts had to do with the distinction between speaker meaning and sentence meaning. Often, indeed perhaps typically, in actual speech there is a gulf between what the sentence literally means as an element of the natural language, and what the speaker means by the utterance of the sentence in that particular context. Famous examples of this distinction are metaphor, indirect speech acts, irony, hyperbole, and other phenomena discussed in classical theories of rhetoric. Furthermore any general theory of language should be able to account for the use of sentences in fictional discourse, where the sentence keeps its meaning, but the the normal commitments that are carried by the utterance of the sentence are not present. Such topics occupied a number of articles I wrote in the seventies and these were assembled in my second book on the philosophy of language, *Expression and Meaning*, 1979.

I believe the key to understanding metaphor is to see that metaphorical utterance meaning differs from literal sentence meaning. It is important to emphasize this point, because many of the standard theories of metaphor in the literature claim that somehow or other words change their meaning in a metaphorical utterance. But that is exactly wrong. Precisely to the extent that the word changes its word meaning, the utterance ceases to be a metaphor. An utterance is only a metaphorical utterance in cases where the speaker's utterance meaning differs from the literal sentence meaning.

Also in the course of working on these extensions of speech act theory I began to develop an idea that I have continued to work on since, the idea of the Background. The fundamental claim I make is that any sentence only serves to determine truth conditions or other sorts of conditions of satisfaction relative to a set of background presuppositions, dispositions, tendencies, habits, and capacities generally, that are not part of the semantic content of the sentence. I will say more about this later.

2. MIND

Perhaps the biggest lacuna in my theory of speech acts was that I used a number of fundamental notions, such as belief, desire, and intention, that were simply

unexplained. I just took these notions for granted in explaining the nature of language. But that was like borrowing money from the bank. Eventually I knew I would have to write a book explaining the intentionality of beliefs, desires, intentions, etc., and I undertook this project in the mid 70's, but it did not reach publication until 1983. The most difficult and for me the most exhausting philosophical analysis I have ever undertaken was the book *Intentionality*, in which I try to advance a general theory of intentionality and show how it relates to language.

As a student in Oxford I was brought up on the Ryle-Wittgenstein view that we ought really to think of these mental verbs — “believe”, “desire”, etc. — not as standing for mental states or processes, but as having some other sort of function in the language. After much reflection, I simply could not make this approach work. There is no question that sentences about intentional states such as belief and desire, if true, correspond to certain sorts of mental facts. But what sort? After much banging of my head against the wall to try to get an account of intentionality, it suddenly occurred to me that I already had a theory of intentionality in my theory of speech acts. Paradoxically, the great breakthrough came when I realized that the fundamental notions in the theory of speech acts, specifically the distinction between illocutionary point and propositional content, the notions of direction of fit and conditions of satisfaction, carry over exactly to the theory of the mind. It should not seem at all surprising to us that the structure of linguistic acts and the structure of mental states should be similar, because one of the chief functions of language is to express our thoughts and feelings, and even when we are performing speech acts whose primary function is not to express our thoughts and feelings, such as assertions and promises, we nonetheless express an intentional state in the form of a sincerity condition. Language and mind go hand in hand.

The parallelism between the structure of speech acts and the structure of intentional states proved to be quite striking. So, for example, just as a typical illocutionary act divides into the illocutionary force plus the propositional content, so characteristic intentional states divide into the type of state plus the propositional content. Thus, just as I can assert that you will leave the room, or request that you will leave the room, or predict that you will leave the room (three types of speech acts), so I can believe that you will leave the room, desire that you will leave the room, and hope that you will leave the room (three types of intentional states). Furthermore, just as speech acts have a propositional content that determines their conditions of satisfaction, truth conditions in the case of belief, obedience conditions in the case of the command, fulfillment conditions in the case of a promise, so, intentional states also have conditions of satisfaction: truth conditions in the case of belief, fulfillment conditions in the case of a desire, etc. Furthermore, the notion of different directions of fit applies both to speech acts and to intentional states. Just as the assertion has the word-to-world direction of fit, and the request has the world-to-word direction of fit, so, in a parallel fashion, the belief has the mind-to-world direction of fit, and a desire has the world-to-mind direction of fit.

The methodology that I had used for analyzing speech acts was to analyze the necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful and non-defective performance of the act. But to carry that methodology over to intentional states revealed an interesting asymmetry. Precisely because intentional states are states and not acts,