

TRANSFORMATIONS OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

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IN *Speech Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), John Searle discusses what he calls 'the speech act fallacy' (pp. 136, ff), namely the fallacy of inferring from the fact that

- (1) in simple indicative sentences, the word W is used to perform some speech-act A (*e.g.* 'good' is used to commend, 'true' is used to endorse or concede, *etc.*)

the conclusion that

- (2) a complete philosophical explication of the concept W is given when we say 'W is used to perform A'.

He argues that as far as the words 'good', 'true', 'know' and 'probably' are concerned, the conclusion is false because the speech-act analysis fails to explain how the words can occur with the same meaning in various grammatically different contexts, such as interrogatives ('Is it good?'), conditionals ('If it is good it will last long'), imperatives ('Make it good'), negations, disjunctions, *etc.* I shall try to show that even if conclusion (2) is false, Searle's argument against it is inadequate because he does not consider all the possible ways in which a speech-act analysis might account for non-indicative occurrences.

He considers only two possibilities (p. 138), the first of which he calls 'the crude way', though both are really crude.

- (A) On the first type of analysis, the occurrence of W in *any* context simply indicates that speech-act A is being performed.
- (B) On the second type of analysis, occurrence of the word W indicates predication of the speech-act A of the speaker, (so that 'Is it good?' means 'Do I commend it?', 'If it is good it will last long' means 'If I commend it it will last long', 'Make it good' means 'Make me commend it', *etc.*)

The first type is easily refuted by pointing out that one does not commend in saying either 'Is it good?' or 'If it is good it will last long'. The second type is also easily rejected, since everyone will agree that the translations are inaccurate accounts of what they mean, though Searle allows that the translation works for performative verbs such as 'promise' (p. 138). As far as 'good', 'true', 'know' and 'probably' are concerned he claims that neither method A nor method B gives an accurate translation, and therefore that no speech act analysis can give the *meanings* of these words.

However Searle has himself pointed to a third type of analysis earlier in the book. He claims, on p. 32, that a distinction can be made

between 'illocutionary negation', which changes the nature of the illocutionary act performed while (presumably) leaving its propositional content unchanged, and 'propositional negation' which leaves the character of the illocutionary act unchanged but alters the propositional content. If F is the speech act performed with propositional content p, then illocutionary and propositional negation can be represented as ' $\sim F(p)$ ' and ' $F(\sim p)$ ' respectively. This difference is illustrated by 'I do not promise to come' and 'I promise not to come'. To explain this Searle writes '... an utterance of "I do not promise to come" is not a promise but a refusal to make a promise. An utterance of "I am not asking you to do it" is a denial that a request is being made' (p. 32). Although his second example is ambiguous, it is evident that he is not claiming that sentences of the form ' $\sim F(p)$ ' are negations of *reports* of acts of type F. He does not translate 'I do not promise to come' as 'It is not the case that I am now promising to come': rather, he says it is a *refusal* to make a promise. (He apparently does not notice that this is *prima facie* inconsistent with the claim on page 138 that method (B) works for explicit performative verbs.) Thus, on page 33 he says it is a mistake 'to think that the negation of an illocutionary force indicating device leaves us with a negative assertion about the speaker . . . a statement of an autobiographical kind to the effect that one did not as a matter of empirical fact perform such an act.' It follows that illocutionary negation transforms speech acts in a manner not accounted for either by analyses of type (A) or analyses of type (B). Can this be generalised to other operators besides negation?

It would help if we were given a clear idea of what illocutionary negation really is: so far we have only been told what it is not. For instance, does it presuppose that speech acts come in opposite pairs, so that negating the sign for one always produces a sign for its opposite? In that case double negation would leave us with something equivalent to the original speech act indicator, as with propositional negation. But what act could be the opposite of promising? Searle's candidate seems to be *refusing to promise*, though it is not clear why refusing to promise to do X should be a stronger candidate than *refraining from promising* to do X or perhaps *refusing to do X*. In any case it seems that 'I do not promise to come', if it means anything, is something *weaker* than 'I promise to come': it seems to be closer to something like 'My promise is so far withheld, but I am not (yet) committing myself either way'. Equally, Searle's translation, 'I refuse to refuse to promise to come' seems weaker than 'I promise to come': it rather expresses a refusal to commit oneself to not coming, or a refusal to commit oneself either way. But perhaps Searle does not require illocutionary negation to be structurally analogous to propositional negation. In fact, the effect of 'not', or 'I refuse to' on an illocutionary act indicator seems to be simply to

produce a non-committal utterance. And repetition of 'not' or 'refuse to' instead of *cancelling* the effect either makes no sense or seems to make the utterance even more non-committal, though in a different way: new and different putative commitments are rejected. To summarise: if F is a sign indicating performance of a certain speech act, then the effect of 'not' on that sign is to produce a new sign which indicates (but does not state) that the original speech act is under consideration but the speaker is not yet prepared to accept the commitments involved in performing it.

This illustrates that there are other things we can do with speech acts besides performing them and predicating their performance, *e.g.* besides promising and expressing the proposition that one is promising. Can we generalise this to other transformations of speech acts?

Thus, could there not be a use of 'if' which qualifies a speech act by making it provisional? For instance, someone saying 'If it rains it will get colder' is *provisionally asserting* that it will get colder, on this analysis. More generally, if F and G are speech acts, and p and q propositional contents or other suitable objects, then, on this analysis, utterances of the structure 'If F(p) then G(q)' express provisional commitment to performing G on q, *pending* the performance of F on p. Utterances of the form 'F(p) or G(q)' would express a commitment to performing (eventually) one or other or both of the two acts though neither is performed as yet. The question mark, in utterances of the form 'F(p)?' instead of expressing some new and completely unrelated kind of speech act, would merely express indecision concerning whether to perform F on p together with an attempt to get advice or help in resolving the indecision. The imperative form 'Bring it about that . . .' followed by a suitable grammatical transformation of F(p) would express the act of trying to get (not cause) the hearer to bring about that particular state of affairs in which the speaker would perform the act F on p (which is not the same as simply bringing it about that the speaker performs the act).

I am not trying to argue that 'not', 'if', *etc.*, always are actually used in accordance with the above analyses. I merely claim that this is a type of analysis which (a) allows a word which in simple indicative sentences expresses a speech act to contribute in a uniform way to the meanings of other types of sentences and (b) allows signs like 'not', 'if', the question construction, and the imperative construction to have a uniform effect on signs for speech acts. This type of analysis differs from the two considered and rejected by Searle. Further, if one puts either *assertion* or *commendation* or *endorsement* in place of the speech acts F and G in the above schemata, then the results seem to correspond moderately well with some (though not all) actual uses of the words and constructions in question. With other speech acts, the result does not seem to correspond to anything in ordinary usage: for instance, there is nothing in ordinary

English which corresponds to applying the imperative construction to the speech act of questioning, or even commanding, even though if this were done in accordance with the above schematic rules the result would in theory be intelligible. It may be of some interest to enquire why ordinary language does not permit all such theoretical possibilities.

I hold no general brief for speech act analyses of words like 'good' or 'true' or 'probably' (and in fact have offered alternative analyses of 'good', 'better', 'ought' and 'true' elsewhere), but it does seem that Searle's arguments against the possibility of such analyses are inadequate, since I have shown that there could be words whose sole function was to express speech acts and which could nevertheless occur in complex contexts where those speech acts were not actually performed, not because the words changed their meaning in those contexts, but because of the effect of operators which transform speech acts. Is it not conceivable that there is a dialect in which the sole meaning of 'good' is to commend in simple indicative sentences and to express appropriate transformations of commendation in other more complex contexts? Similarly, is it not conceivable that there is a dialect in which the sole meaning of 'probably' is to indicate qualified assertion, or appropriate transformations thereof? If so, is it not equally conceivable that in ordinary English these words each have several meanings or uses of which one is accurately described by the above sort of speech-act analysis?

Crucial to the above analysis is the assumption that there is a distinction between *stating* that one is not performing speech act F and performing another speech act in which the commitments normally associated with F are rejected (at least for the time being); a distinction between *stating* that one will perform a speech act F if certain conditions are realised and provisionally performing F *pending* realisation of those conditions; *etc.* I have some doubts about this sort of distinction, but have not raised them here since the object of the exercise was to see what could be achieved if the distinction is legitimate.

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