

JOHN R. SEARLE

**EXPRESSION
AND MEANING**

**STUDIES IN THE THEORY OF
SPEECH ACTS**



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
London New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1979

First published 1979

Reprinted 1981

Printed in the United States of America

Printed and bound by Vail-Ballou Press, Inc., Binghamton, New York

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Searle, John R.

Expression and meaning.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Speech acts (Linguistics) I. Title.

P95.55.S4 401 79-12271

ISBN 0 521 22901 4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and to the University of California, Berkeley, Humanities Institute for grants which enabled me to work on these essays and other related topics. I have benefited enormously from discussions of these questions with students, colleagues and friends, and I am especially grateful to Hubert Dreyfus. Thanks are also due to Susan Eason for work on the index and Savannah Ross for organizing the typing. Most of all I wish to thank my wife, Dagmar Searle, for her constant help and advice.

INTRODUCTION

These essays represent a continuation of a line of research begun in *Speech Acts* (Searle, 1969). Most of them were originally projected as chapters of a larger work in which discussions of some of the outstanding problems of speech act theory – for example, metaphor, fiction, indirect speech acts, and a classification of types of speech acts – were to have been embedded in a general theory of meaning, in which I hoped to show in what ways the philosophy of language was based on the philosophy of mind, and in particular how certain features of speech acts were based on the Intentionality of the mind. The original chapter on Intentionality however has now grown into a book length manuscript of its own, and when the Intentionalistic tail outgrew the linguistic dog it seemed a better idea to publish these studies as a separate volume. This book then is not intended as a collection of unrelated essays, and my main aim in this introduction is to say something about how they are related.

One of the most obvious questions in any philosophy of language is: how many ways of using language are there? Wittgenstein thought the question unanswerable by any finite list of categories. “But how many kinds of sentence are there? . . . There are *countless* [unzählige] kinds” (1953, para. 23). But this rather skeptical conclusion ought to arouse our suspicions. No one I suppose would say that there are countless kinds of economic systems or marital arrangements or sorts of political parties; why should language be more taxonomically recalcitrant than any other aspect of human social life? I argue in the first essay that if we take the illocutionary act (that is, the full blown illocutionary act with its illocutionary force and propositional content) as the unit

Introduction

of analysis, as I believe we should for quite independent reasons (see Searle, 1969, Ch. 1), then we find there are five general ways of using language, five general categories of illocutionary acts. We tell people how things are (Assertives),¹ we try to get them to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations).

The method I use in this essay is in a sense empirical. I simply look at uses of language and find these five types of illocutionary point, and when I examine actual discourse I find, or at least claim, that utterances can be classified under these headings. But any philosopher is bound to feel that where there are categories there ought to be a transcendental deduction of the categories, that is, there ought to be some theoretical explanation as to why language provides us with these and with only these.² The justification of these categories in terms of the nature of the mind has to wait for the next book. But one problem which immediately arises for this book is that one and the same utterance will often fit into more than one category. Suppose I say to you, for example, "Sir, you are standing on my foot." Now in most contexts when I make a statement of that sort I am making not only an Assertive, but I am also indirectly requesting and perhaps even ordering you to get off my foot. Thus the Assertive utterance is also an indirect Directive. How does such an utterance work, that is, how do both speaker and hearer go so effortlessly from the literal Assertive sentence meaning to the implied indirect Directive utterance meaning? The second essay, "Indirect speech acts", opens what is perhaps the main theme of this collection: the relations between literal sentence meaning and speaker's utterance meaning, where

¹ In the original publication I used the term "Representative", but I now prefer "Assertive" since any speech act with a propositional content is in some sense a representation.

² I do not of course claim that every one of the world's two thousand or so natural languages has the syntactical devices for expressing all five types. For all I know there may be languages that have not evolved syntactical devices for, e.g., Commissives.

Introduction

utterance meaning differs from the literal meaning of the expression uttered. In the special case of indirect speech acts, the speaker means what he says but he also means something more, and the aim of chapter 2 is to articulate the principles on which this sort of implied communication is possible.

Perhaps the chief methodological conclusion to be derived from this essay as far as contemporary linguistics is concerned is that we do not need to postulate either alternative deep structures or an extra set of conversational postulates to account for these cases, and discussion of these methodological morals is resumed more explicitly in the last essay. Another more general methodological lesson from the first two essays is that we must not confuse an analysis of illocutionary verbs with an analysis of illocutionary acts. There are many illocutionary verbs that are not restricted as to illocutionary point, that is, they can take a large range of illocutionary points, and thus they do not genuinely name an illocutionary force. "Announce", "hint", and "insinuate", for example, do not name types of illocutionary acts, but rather the style or manner in which a rather large range of types can be performed. I believe the single most common mistake in speech act theory is the confusion between features of illocutionary verbs and illocutionary acts. Several taxonomies I have seen, including Austin's (1962), confuse a taxonomy of illocutionary acts with one of illocutionary verbs; and more recently some philosophers (e.g. Holdcroft, 1978) erroneously conclude from the fact that some verbs such as "hint" name a deliberately inexplicit manner of performing a speech act that some types of meaning are therefore inherently inexpressible; and thus they erroneously conclude that they have refuted the principle of expressibility, the principle that whatever can be meant can be said. But, for example, hinting is not part of meaning in the sense that hinting is neither part of illocutionary force nor propositional content. Illocutionary acts are, so to speak, natural conceptual kinds, and we should no more suppose that our ordinary language verbs carve the conceptual field of illocutions at its semantic joints than we would suppose that our ordinary language expressions for naming and describ-

Introduction

ing plants and animals correspond exactly to the natural biological kinds.

Chapter 2, Indirect speech acts, opens the discussions of the relation between literal sentence meaning and intended speaker's utterance meaning; and these relations are further explored in chapters 3 and 4 on fiction and metaphor. In the sense in which the first essay lists types of speech acts, neither fiction nor metaphor is a separate type of speech act; these categories cut the linguistic pie from an altogether different direction. From the point of view of the philosophy of language the problem of fiction is: how can the speaker utter a sentence with a certain meaning (whether literal or not) and yet not be committed to the truth conditions carried by that meaning? How for example does fictional discourse differ from lies? And from the same point of view the chief problem of metaphor is how can the speaker systematically mean and communicate something quite different from what the expressions he utters mean? How do we get from literal expression meaning to metaphorical utterance meaning? In both chapters I try to give a systematic account of the principles according to which these types of language use really work, but the results are quite different in the two cases. Fiction I think is a rather easy problem (at least by the usual standards of philosophical intractability), but metaphor is hard, and though I feel confident that my misgivings about both the "comparison" theories of metaphor and their "interactionist" rivals are justified, I am equally confident that my own account is at best incomplete because I have in all likelihood not stated all of the principles involved in the production and comprehension of metaphor; and perhaps the most interesting of my principles, number 4, is not so much a "principle" as simply a statement that there are sets of associations, many of them psychologically grounded, which enable certain types of metaphors to work, even though they are not underlain by any literal similarities or other principles of association.

The first four chapters take the notion of the literal meaning of expressions, whether words or sentences, for granted; but the assumptions behind the current philosophi-

Introduction

cal and linguistic employment of this notion are scrutinized in chapter 5, "Literal meaning". I argue against the theory that the literal meaning of a sentence can be construed as the meaning that it has apart from any context whatever, the meaning that it has in the so called "null context". Against this view I contend that the notion of literal meaning only has application against a background of assumptions and practices which are not themselves represented as part of literal meaning. I further argue that this conclusion does not in any way weaken the system of distinctions that revolve around the distinction between speaker meaning and literal sentence meaning – the distinctions between literal and metaphorical utterances, between fiction and nonfiction, and between direct and indirect speech acts. Given the background of practices and assumptions which makes communication possible at all, each of these distinctions is necessary to an accurate account of the functioning of language. And though, of course, for each distinction there are many borderline cases, the principles of the distinction, principles which it is one of the chief aims of this book to articulate, can be made reasonably clear.

Since Frege, reference has been regarded as the central problem in the philosophy of language; and by reference I mean not predication, or truth, or extension but *reference*, the relation between such expressions as definite descriptions and proper names on the one hand, and the things they are used to refer to on the other. I now think it was a mistake to take this as the central problem in the philosophy of language, because we will not get an adequate theory of linguistic reference until we can show how such a theory is part of a general theory of Intentionality, a theory of how the mind is related to objects in the world in general. But in the hope that some fairly well defined problems within the theory of reference can be attacked with tools available at present, I turn to some of the problems surrounding definite descriptions in chapter 6, "Referential and attributive". According to a currently influential view there is a fundamental linguistic distinction between the referential and the attributive use of definite descriptions, a difference so

Introduction

fundamental that it gives different truth conditions for utterances depending on which use is in question. I argue that this distinction is misconceived, and in fact the linguistic data are instances of the general distinction used throughout this book between the meaning of the expressions that a speaker utters and his intended meaning, where, as in this case, his intended meaning may include the literal meaning of the expressions he utters but is not exhausted by that literal meaning.

In the final essay, "Speech acts and recent 'linguistics'", I try to make fully explicit some of the methodological implications of the earlier essays for contemporary linguistics. I argue that both the practice of postulating additional syntactic deep structures to account for speech act phenomena, as exemplified most prominently by Ross's (1970) performative deletion analysis of all sentences of a natural language such as English, and the practice of postulating extra rules or conversational postulates, as exemplified by Gordon and Lakoff's (1971) conversational postulate analysis of indirect speech acts, are mistaken; and both, in spite of their apparently quite different formal mechanisms, make the same mistake of hypostatizing an extra and unnecessary apparatus when we already have independently motivated analytic principles that are adequate and sufficient to account for the data.

In the past decade, since the publication of *Speech Acts*, I have been confronted with three sets of problems in the philosophy of language. First there are specific problems that arise within the existing paradigm. Second there is the problem of grounding the whole theory in the philosophy of mind, and third there is the challenge of trying to provide an adequate formalization of the theory using the resources of modern logic, particularly set theory. This book is entirely addressed to the first of these problems. I intend to publish an account of the second in *Intentionality* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), and I am working with Daniel Vanderveken on the third in an exploration of the foundations of illocutionary logic.

ORIGINS OF THE ESSAYS

Almost all of the material in this volume was first presented in lectures and seminars in Berkeley and in invited lectures and conferences at various other universities. "A taxonomy of illocutionary acts" was originally presented as a Forum Lecture to the Summer Linguistics Institute in Buffalo, NY in 1971 and was subsequently the topic of various lectures in Europe and the US. It first appeared in print in *Language, Mind, and Knowledge, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. VII, ed. Keith Gunderson, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1975, pp. 344-69. It also appeared in the same year in the journal *Language and Society*, under the title "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts".

"Indirect speech acts" first appeared in *Syntax and Semantics Vol. 3, Speech Acts*, Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan (eds.), Academic Press 1975. It was also the subject of a Summer Linguistics Institute Forum lecture, in Amherst, 1974.

"Literal meaning" was first presented in part at the Speech Act Working Group of the International Linguistics Congress in Vienna in Summer of 1977 and also at the Speech Acts Conference in Döbögökő, Hungary, immediately following the Congress in Vienna. It was first published in *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 13, No. 1, July 1978, pp. 207-24.

"The logical status of fictional discourse" was first published in *New Literary History* 1974-5, Vol. VI, pp. 319-32, having been the topic of lectures at various universities including Minnesota, Virginia and Louvain.

"Metaphor" was originally presented at a conference on that subject at the University of Illinois in 1977. It is forthcoming in the proceedings of the conference *Metaphor and thought*, Andrew Ortony (ed.), Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979.

Origins of the essays

“Referential and attributive” was originally written for a special issue of *The Monist* on the subject of Reference and Truth. Forthcoming, 1979.

“Speech acts and recent linguistics” was the keynote address at the New York Academy of Science Conference on Developmental Linguistics and Communication Disorders. It was published in the *Annals* of the Academy, 1975, Vol. 263, Doris Aaronson and Robert W. Rieber (eds.), pp. 27–38.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	page vi
Introduction	vii
Origins of the essays	xiii
1 A taxonomy of illocutionary acts	1
2 Indirect speech acts	30
3 The logical status of fictional discourse	58
4 Metaphor	76
5 Literal meaning	117
6 Referential and attributive	137
7 Speech acts and recent linguistics	162
Bibliography	181
Index	183

Chapter 1

A TAXONOMY OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this paper is to develop a reasoned classification of illocutionary acts into certain basic categories or types. It is to answer the question: How many kinds of illocutionary acts are there?

Since any such attempt to develop a taxonomy must take into account Austin's classification of illocutionary acts into his five basic categories of verdictive, expositive, exercitive, behabitive, and commissive, a second purpose of this paper is to assess Austin's classification to show in what respects it is adequate and in what respects inadequate. Furthermore, since basic semantic differences are likely to have syntactical consequences, a third purpose of this paper is to show how these different basic illocutionary types are realized in the syntax of a natural language such as English.

In what follows, I shall presuppose a familiarity with the general pattern of analysis of illocutionary acts offered in such works as *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1962), *Speech Acts* (Searle, 1969), and "Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts" (Searle, 1968). In particular, I shall presuppose a distinction between the illocutionary force of an utterance and its propositional content as symbolized

$$F(p)$$

The aim of this paper then is to classify the different types of *F*.

II. DIFFERENT TYPES OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIFFERENT TYPES OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

Any taxonomical effort of this sort presupposes criteria for distinguishing one (kind of) illocutionary act from another.

A taxonomy of illocutionary acts

What are the criteria by which we can tell that of three actual utterances one is a report, one a prediction and one a promise? In order to develop higher order genera, we must first know how the species *promise*, *prediction*, *report*, etc., differ from one another. When one attempts to answer that question one discovers that there are several quite different principles of distinction; that is, there are different kinds of differences that enable us to say that the force of this utterance is different from the force of that utterance. For this reason the metaphor of force in the expression "illocutionary force" is misleading since it suggests that different illocutionary forces occupy different positions on a single continuum of force. What is actually the case is that there are several distinct criss-crossing continua. A related source of confusion is that we are inclined to confuse illocutionary verbs with types of illocutionary acts. We are inclined, for example, to think that where we have two nonsynonymous illocutionary verbs they must necessarily mark two different kinds of illocutionary acts. In what follows, I shall try to keep a clear distinction between illocutionary verbs and illocutionary acts. Illocutions are a part of language as opposed to particular languages. Illocutionary verbs are always part of a particular language: French, German, English, or whatnot. Differences in illocutionary verbs are a good guide but by no means a sure guide to differences in illocutionary acts.

It seems to me there are (at least) twelve significant dimensions of variation in which illocutionary acts differ one from another and I shall – all too briskly – list them:

1. *Differences in the point (or purpose) of the (type of) act.* The point or purpose of an order can be specified by saying that it is an attempt to get the hearer to do something. The point or purpose of a description is that it is a representation (true or false, accurate or inaccurate) of how something is. The point or purpose of a promise is that it is an undertaking of an obligation by the speaker to do something. These differences correspond to the essential conditions in my analysis of illocutionary acts in chapter 3 of *Speech Acts* (Searle, 1969). Ultimately, I believe, essential conditions form the best basis for a taxonomy, as I shall attempt to show. It is important to

A taxonomy of illocutionary acts

notice that the terminology of "point" or "purpose" is not meant to imply, nor is it based on the view, that every illocutionary act has a definitionally associated perlocutionary intent. For many, perhaps most, of the most important illocutionary acts, there is no essential perlocutionary intent associated by definition with the corresponding verb, e.g. statements and promises are not by definition attempts to produce perlocutionary effects in hearers.

The point or purpose of a type of illocution I shall call its *illocutionary point*. Illocutionary point is part of but not the same as illocutionary force. Thus, e.g., the illocutionary point of requests is the same as that of commands: both are attempts to get hearers to do something. But the illocutionary forces are clearly different. In general, one can say that the notion of illocutionary force is the resultant of several elements of which illocutionary point is only one, though, I believe, the most important one.

2. Differences in the direction of fit between words and the world.

Some illocutions have as part of their illocutionary point to get the words (more strictly, their propositional content) to match the world, others to get the world to match the words. Assertions are in the former category, promises and requests are in the latter. The best illustration of this distinction I know of is provided by Elizabeth Anscombe (1957). Suppose a man goes to the supermarket with a shopping list given him by his wife on which are written the words "beans, butter, bacon, and bread". Suppose as he goes around with his shopping cart selecting these items, he is followed by a detective who writes down everything he takes. As they emerge from the store both shopper and detective will have identical lists. But the function of the two lists will be quite different. In the case of the shopper's list, the purpose of the list is, so to speak, to get the world to match the words; the man is supposed to make his actions fit the list. In the case of the detective, the purpose of the list is to make the words match the world; the man is supposed to make the list fit the actions of the shopper. This can be further demonstrated by observing the role of "mistake" in the two cases. If the

detective gets home and suddenly realizes that the man bought pork chops instead of bacon, he can simply erase the word "bacon" and write "pork chops". But if the shopper gets home and his wife points out he has bought pork chops when he should have bought bacon he cannot correct the mistake by erasing "bacon" from the list and writing "pork chops".

In these examples the list provides the propositional content of the illocution and the illocutionary force determines how that content is supposed to relate to the world. I propose to call this difference a difference in *direction of fit*. The detective's list has the *word-to-world* direction of fit (as do statements, descriptions, assertions, and explanations); the shopper's list has the *world-to-word* direction of fit (as do requests, commands, vows, promises). I represent the word-to-world direction of fit with a downward arrow thus ↓ and the world-to-word direction of fit with an upward arrow thus ↑. Direction of fit is always a consequence of illocutionary point. It would be very elegant if we could build our taxonomy entirely around this distinction in direction of fit, but though it will figure largely in our taxonomy, I am unable to make it the entire basis of the distinctions.

3. *Differences in expressed psychological states.* A man who states, explains, asserts or claims that *p* expresses the belief that *p*; a man who promises, vows, threatens or pledges to do *a* expresses an intention to do *a*; a man who orders, commands, requests *H* to do *A* expresses a desire (*want, wish*) that *H* do *A*; a man who apologizes for doing *A* expresses regret at having done *A*; etc. In general, in the performance of any illocutionary act with a propositional content, the speaker expresses some attitude, state, etc., to that propositional content. Notice that this holds even if he is insincere, even if he does not have the belief, desire, intention, regret or pleasure which he expresses, he nonetheless expresses a belief, desire, intention, regret or pleasure in the performance of the speech act. This fact is marked linguistically by the fact that it is linguistically unacceptable (though not self-contradictory) to conjoin the explicit performative verb with the denial of the expressed