EXPRESSION AND MEANING

Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts
FOR THOMAS AND MARK
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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 sceptical 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
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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.
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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-
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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-
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...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...
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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 hy postulating 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”.


“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.