

Phil/Ling 375: *Meaning and Mind*

[Handout #6]

John Searle: The Structure of Illocutionary Acts

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[Main Theses]

1. A theory of language must be a theory of communication, and language theory must analyze the communicative utterances in terms of their intentions.
2. These intentions can be inferred through a series of conventional rules.
3. In this sense, human communication is a rule-governed activity, but contra Wittgenstein, there is not an infinite or indefinite number of language games or uses of language.
4. Rather, there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language: our illocutionary speech acts.

§ The Importance of Speech Act:

___ It is not the token of the symbol or word or sentence, but the production of the token in the performance of the speech act that constitutes the basic unit of linguistic communication.

* The production of the sentence token under certain conditions is the illocutionary act, and the illocutionary act is the minimal unit of linguistic communication.

[Searle's argument]:

1. For something to be an instance of linguistic communication, it must have been produced by a being with a certain intention.
2. The production of a symbol with a certain intention is a speech act.
3. Therefore, to construe symbols under the category of linguistic communication necessarily involves construing their production as speech acts.

§ Searle's Speech Act Theory

It should be noted that speech acts take effect through mutual acknowledgment of the speaker and the hearer that a speech act has been made. So if one were to say something and it was not heard by anyone it would not in this case justify a speech act until someone were to actually hear it.

<i>Utterance acts</i>	Uttering words (morphemes, sentences)
<i>Propositional acts</i>	Referring and predicating
<i>Illocutionary acts</i>	Stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc.
<i>Perlocutionary acts</i>	Producing subjective effects on the hearer

§ Various Forms of Illocutionary Act

Illocutionary acts can be categorized according to their meaning or illocutionary point. There are five fundamental illocutionary points:

Assertive	Statements, predictions
Commissive	Promises, agreements
Directive	Orders, requests
Declarative	Stating a reality which affects the world by saying so
Expressive	Feelings and attitudes regarding a situation

(1) Assertive: Statements, predictions

___ The point is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition.

e.g.: “This new technology shall revolutionize the computer industry...”

(2) Commissive: Promises, agreements.

___ Deals with a further course of action from the speaker (the speaker is committed to...) or hearer depending on the circumstances of the conversation.

___ Commissives are those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker (again in varying degrees) to some future course of action.

e.g.: In response to the question “can you help me with this?” a reply of “probably” or “I guess” would be a commissive speech act. Facial gestures with the intention of similar meaning also qualify.

(3) Directive: Orders, requests.

___ The illocutionary point of these consists in the fact that they are attempts (of varying degrees) by the speaker to get the hearer to do something.

e.g.: “I’d like to buy that gray anorak, please.”

(4) Declaration: Stating a reality which affects the world by saying so.

___ Cases where one brings a state of affairs into existence by declaring it to exist, cases where “saying makes it so.”

e.g.: “I am wearing a blue colored shirt today.”

(5) Expressive: Feelings and attitudes regarding a situation

___ The illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content.

e.g.: “I apologize for the other day.”

§ Promise

Q: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the illocutionary act of promising?

= What is the set of rules for the use of the function indicating device for promising?

Qualifications:

___ I am confining my discussion to the center of the concept of promising and ignoring the fringe, borderline, and partially defective cases. I also confine my discussion to full-blown explicit promises and ignore promises made by elliptical turns of phrase, hints, metaphors, etc.

In the utterance of *T*, *S* sincerely (and nondefectively) promises that *p* to a hearer *H* if and only if:

(1) [normal input and output condition]: Normal input and output conditions obtain.

___ ‘Output’ covers the conditions for intelligible speaking and ‘input’ covers the conditions for understanding.

(2) [propositional content condition]: *S* expresses that *p* in the utterance of *T*.

(3) [future act condition]: In expressing that *p*, *S* predicates a future act *A* of *S*.

(4) [preferability condition]: *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*.

[Counterexample]: “I promise that I’ll give you a failing grade in the course”

___ Searle doesn’t think this is a promise. ‘I promise and I hereby promise are among the strongest function indicating devices for commitment provide by the English language. For that reason we often use these expressions in the performance of speech acts which are not strictly speaking promises but in which we wish to emphasize our commitment.’

[Counterexample]: “I promise you I didn’t steal the money”

___ Searle: ‘We can explain the occurrence of the function indicating device “I promise” as derivative from genuine promises and serving here as an expression adding emphasis to your denial.’

(5) [non-triviality condition]: It is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *S* will do *A* in the normal course of events.

___ The act must have a point. ‘It is out of order for me to promise to do something that it is obvious I am going to do anyhow. If I do seem to be among such a promise, the only way my audience can make sense of my utterance is to assume that I believe that it is not obvious that I am going to do the thing promised.’

(6) [sincerity condition] *S* intends to do *A* .

(7) [essential condition]: S intends that the utterance of *T* will place him under an obligation to do *A* .

___ 'I think this condition distinguishes promises from other kinds of speech acts. It is clear that having this intention is a necessary condition of making a promise; for if a speaker can demonstrate that he did not have this intention in a given utterance, he can prove that the utterance was not a promise.'

(8) [conventionality condition]: *S* intends that the utterance of *T* will produce in *H* a belief that conditions (6) and (7) obtain by means of the recognition of the intention to produce that belief, and he intends this recognition to be achieved by means of the recognition of the sentence as one conventionally used to produce such beliefs.

___ The speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and he also intends this recognition to be achieved in virtue of the fact that the lexical and syntactical character of the item he utters conventionally associates it with producing that effect.

(9) [semantics condition]: 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.

___ This condition is intended to make clear that the sentence uttered is one which by the semantical rules of the language is used to make a promise.

***** Insincerity:**

___ To allow for insincere promises we need only to revise our conditions to state that the speaker takes responsibility for having the beliefs and intentions rather than stating that he actually has them.

➔ **(6*) *S* intends that the utterance of *T* will make him responsible for intending to do *A***

§ Conclusion

1. There is not, as Wittgenstein... claimed, an infinite or indefinite number of language games or uses of language. Rather, the illusion of limitless uses of language is engendered by an enormous unclarity about what constitutes the criteria for delimiting one language game or use of language from another.
2. If we adopt illocutionary point as the basic notion on which to classify uses of language, then there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language: we tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes, and we bring about changes through our utterances.
3. Often, we do more than one of these in the same utterance.