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TO HELL WITH SPEECH ACT THEORY

0. During the last few years semantics, too, has had its own paradigm clash. Whereas according to all theories belonging to the old, and still best developed tradition of realistic, objectivist, or correlational semantics, *meanings* are to be considered as certain *entities*, there is now a relatively new approach, which invites us to look at the meanings of signs as consisting of nothing else but their *use*. The locus classicus of this other, essentially pragmatically oriented paradigm is clearly Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations*. Now, in order to have but the tiniest chance of being able, some day, to compare the alleged merits of this new paradigm with the established benefits of the old one, we are, as at least nowadays most of us would agree, in strong need of something which goes far beyond the Wittgensteinian hints as to what a workable account of meaning-as-use might look like. Is this need fulfilled by the so-called theory of speech acts? Have the speech act theoreticians really helped us a reasonable step forward — as many adherents of the new paradigm had hoped, and some of the leading speech act theoreticians themselves had at least thought they would? Contrary to what I take to be the majority opinion in present-day philosophy, I think that, in fact, they have not.

Note that, on this topic, I shall be speaking from the perspective of a disappointed former lover; and so you should be forewarned that some of my remarks will possibly turn out to be a bit exaggerated. But as most people in this state of mind, I do not care too much.

1. As a start, let us look at a very primitive language game which you will recognize as a slightly modified version of the game described in §2 of the *Philosophical investigations*. It will contain only two expressions without any structure — let us dub them *x* and *y*:

A builder A and his assistant B are building a house with only blocks and beams. When A utters one of the expressions *x* or *y*, B has to pass one of the blocks or one of the beams, respectively. But sometimes the communication is reversed. In order to let A know what kind of material will be brought to him next, B utters *x* or *y* before he starts to fetch one of the blocks or the beams. And these are the only ways the two expressions are used.

In this game, there are exactly two possible communicative functions — or, as speech act theoreticians would like to put it, two possible illocutionary forces —, *viz.*, 'to order' and 'to inform'. Any utterance of these expressions will have either one of these functions in the game. And we can tell precisely what it depends on in the game whether a particular utterance is an order or an informative act. So we already possess full knowledge of what should be regarded as at least one aspect of the meaning of the two expressions in question. But, of course, this knowledge does not suffice to fully understand the game, i.e. to know the full meaning of the two expressions used. For this, we also need to know what the so-called descriptive meanings of the two expressions *x* and *y* are. Unfortunately, the description of my primitive case has not been clear enough to settle this question. We don't know yet what state of affairs A orders to be realized when he utters, let's say, the expression *x*; neither do we know yet what state of affairs B announces as being realized, when he utters *x*. We only know that in the game, there are two alternatives: the state of affairs we might describe as 'A is given a block by B' on the one hand, and the state of affairs 'A is given a beam by B' on the other. In

fact, not only did my story not decide the question of whether x , when uttered by A, has the same descriptive meaning as when uttered by B; by itself the story does not exclude the possibility either, that when ordering or announcing the realization of either state of affairs, A and B utter either one of the two expressions in question. Suppose, for example, that the only relevant fact was whether either expression is being uttered twice or once; in this case, referring to descriptive meanings as correlated with each of our expressions separately would of course be totally out of place.

I don't want you to have to speculate any further on this. Rather, let me report the results of some fictitious field work that I undertook last week, when, in preparing this talk, I decided to have a closer look at the builder and his assistant. When x was uttered by A, every time he was given a block by B; and so I conclude that the state of affairs described by 'A is given a block by B' is the one whose realization is being ordered when x is uttered by A. And every time B uttered x , it was a block, too, that A was given by B next; and so I conclude likewise that the state of affairs being announced in the game by B, when uttering x is: 'A is given a block by B'. Thus I dare conclude that the expression x always has the same descriptive meaning in the game, irrespective of whether it is uttered by A or by B. The same holds for our other expression, y . In the game, y is, as I am now entitled to put it in realistic terms, correlated with the state of affairs 'A is given a beam by B'.

So, by now, you possess a complete knowledge of what I have called above the 'full meaning' of the two expressions (of which the *descriptive* meaning is only a part). And, in giving you all the information needed, I hope to have also given you at least a first, dim impression of how we have to proceed when trying to explicate, in pragmatic terms, the so-called descriptive part of the meanings of our two expressions. True, in my report I relied heavily upon the concept of a state of affairs, which is known to be one of the central concepts of the rival (*viz.*, the realistic) paradigm in semantics. But I won't take this as a reasonable objection. For having to avoid this concept would amount to abandoning all hopes of arriving at a pragmatic semantics, i.e. a semantics developed in pragmatic terms. The reason is that, in constructing a workable theory of actions, one must make use of the concept of a state of affairs in any case, whether or not one also wants to incorporate a pragmatically based semantics in such a theory. The point is not whether we are bound to talk of a state of affairs, but whether or not we may simply identify the meanings of our (whole utterance type) expressions with some kind of state of affairs (as we are accustomed to do in at least the more developed forms of the realistic paradigm, such as intensional semantics). It is precisely this identification which we are not allowed to make in pragmatic semantics — at least not initially. Of course, in the end it may turn out that this realistic *façon de parler*, too, may be pragmatically justified.

2. What, then, about speech act theory? The main reason for introducing my primitive language game was the following: If the theory of speech acts fails to cope with even such a primitive case, we had better forget about it when looking for a pragmatic semantics that is sufficiently sophisticated to account for more complicated cases, as, for example, when we are looking for a pragmatic semantics which is broad enough to cover a fair-sized portion of our natural languages. As to the question whether speech act theoretical semantics does cope with my primitive case, I will try to show (as the title of my talk implies) that it does not.

In order to do this, I actually have to discuss at least two questions, to make a long story short: First, the question of how, in speech act theoretical semantics, the meanings of our two game expressions x and y have to be defined in terms of the particular speech acts produced in uttering them. And second, the question of how, in the framework of this theory, the very

starting point of all its further endeavors towards a pragmatically based semantics is, or can be explicated itself. Clearly, this second question is the more fundamental one; therefore, I shall restrict myself to it in the following.

Accepting the approach sketched above, in reporting on my last week's exercise in applied primitive-language-game-linguistics, we should be able to tell exactly which aspects of the particular speech acts in our game would be basic in constructing a semantics for expressions (in case we actually were trying to). Obviously, we would have to start with asking ourselves both what were the illocutionary forces of the respective speech acts and what was the state of affairs whose realization was being ordered or announced, respectively. And I assume it to be precisely this second aspect of the speech acts which will get us into trouble, when, in constructing a pragmatic semantics, we really want to follow Austin and Searle. From now on, I will restrict the application of the term *descriptive meaning* to expressions only; as far as speech acts are concerned, I shall be talking of their descriptive *content* instead. Speech act theory will now be confronted with the following question (one that is no less primitive than our language game itself, *viz.*): How do we have to determine the respective content of the speech acts in our game?

Now, although Austin in his pioneering work (1962) did not deal with this question explicitly, he gives an implicit answer in his lectures. It is not very hard to see what he means, in particular when we take into consideration his general approach, and combine this with his specific views on the functioning of the so-called locutionary aspects of speech acts. If asked for an explicit answer, Austin would probably point to two factors, one being the linguistic meaning of the expressions used, the other being the special sense of an expression on the particular occasion of its use. The first reference clearly makes the whole project of a pragmatic semantics circular: it would stop before it ever could get started. The same holds for the second reference, if it is to be taken as implying that the expression used has several descriptive meanings one of which we have to single out in order to understand what the content of the particular speech act in question really is. But, if Austin's second reference indeed alludes to what the speaker meant by his words, then there is no solution either. For to ask for speaker's meaning would be — in this context at least — nothing but asking what is the respective content of his produced speech act. Of course, there is nothing astonishing about this result. To give us a general semantics, constructed throughout in pragmatical terms, was certainly not one of Austin's intentions.

Compared to Austin's limited approach, Searle's (1969) undoubtedly seems much more promising. And since the speech act *to promise* is Searle's declared favorite for purposes of investigation, let us see how our primitive test question is answered by Searle himself for this particular speech act. According to Searle, in order for a particular utterance of expression *T* uttered by speaker *S* to count as a promise to hearer *H* that *S* will perform action *A*, *S* has to intend for *H* to recognize that *S* intends that uttering *T* will place him under an obligation to do *A*. With this condition I have no quarrel at all. But in the next step of the analysis, we are told that *S* can have this whole second level intention only if he thinks that *H* already knows that an utterance of *T* is conventionally connected with *S*'s first level intention (which *H* is intended to recognize), in other (Searle's) words, only if "the speaker assumes that the semantic rules (which determine the meaning) of the expressions uttered, are such that the utterance counts as the undertaking of an obligation [to do *A*]" (1969:61). Thus, in Searle's analysis, an utterance of *T* will be a promise (with the content) that (or to) *p* only if the content of the respective utterance is — and is expected by *S* to be taken by *H* to be — a function of the meaning of the expression *T*. It is clear that we are driven back to

Austin's first factor; again, our whole pragmatic-semantical enterprise is doomed to an untimely end from its very start.

We conclude that neither Austin nor Searle have presented us with a framework suitable for developing pragmatic semantics. If we want to determine the content of a speech act by associating it with the meaning of an expression uttered, there is no use in starting from that speech act in order to get at the meanings of the words; such an approach will not even give us the descriptive meanings of our two primitive game expressions, above.

3. Clearly, to avoid this predicament, we shall have to look for a more general explication of the content of a speech act. And as we already are acquainted with the beginnings of the solution to the problem, let us forget about speech act theory for a moment and go back to where we started. When commenting on the primitive language game played by the builder A and his assistant B, I stated that the content of a particular order consists in the state of affairs that B was being ordered by A to bring about, and that the content of a particular announcement consists in the state of affairs whose realization was being announced by B to A. Now, what else should such a content be said to consist in? Given that it already has been stated what an act must be like to qualify as an order, or as an informative act, we can now proceed to explicate the meaning of the expressions of our game in the same way as sketched roughly in my fictitious report on how I dug out those meanings last week.

Of course, such a more general explication of the content of a speech act could only be arrived at by abstracting from what it is like to order something or to inform someone about something. Therefore, when we try to elucidate these more fundamental concepts themselves, the explication we have given turns out to be pointless. But there is another, non-circular procedure, *viz.*, one which follows, and improves on a Gricean analysis of speaker-meaning as proposed in Meggle (1981). It must suffice here to mention the first step, according to which the content of an act of ordering addressed by S to H is the state of affairs that S (primarily) intends H to bring about, just as the content of an act of informing is the state of affairs which S (primarily) intends H to believe to be a given fact. These first-step conditions on proper ordering and informing remain necessary, even though such things as reflexive intentions will have to be brought in, in order to make sure that sufficient conditions, too, are provided by our explication.

4. Having established, then, that the problem of explicating the content of our game's speech acts is open to an obvious solution (such as the one suggested here), it remains to be asked why speech act theoreticians, as a matter of principle, have refused to look at the problem from this angle. As I have shown elsewhere (Meggle 1986), my assumptions are broad enough to serve as the basis for a pragmatic semantics (and this includes our game *expressions*).

Concluding this paper, I must restrict myself to what I take to be the speech act theoreticians' main reason (among many) for refusing to share my point of departure, *viz.*, what Austin himself ironically called speech act theory's use of an "impressive and scientific looking terminology" (1962:149). More precisely, it is the famous illocutionary/perlocutionary distinction — the core of most other distinctions made up by speech act theoreticians — which is at stake here. More specifically still, it is the assumption made by most speech act theoreticians in connection with the above distinction, *viz.*, that whereas illocutionary forces are essentially connected with meanings, the perlocutionary aspects of our utterances are not. However, as I have tried to show, at least with respect to our primitive language game nothing could be farther from the truth than such an hypothesis.

While it is true that *not just any* intended perlocutionary effects of our game utterances are relevant for the content as well as for the illocutionary forces of our utterances, this is quite another thing than treating this aspect of the speech act as irrelevant altogether. Let me put it this way: It is true that, whereas the illocutionary force of an utterance *per se* is part of the meaning of the respective utterance in the game, a perlocutionary effect is not. But to claim that (intended) perlocutionary aspects are *not per se* meaning aspects, is a world away from claiming that they are *per se not*. It is exactly this illegal negation movement that I find at the very heart of 'speech act theoretical semantics'. And it is exactly for this reason that, in case you are looking for a really workable pragmatic semantics, I consider myself obliged to give you the following advice: You had better forget about the so-called theory of speech acts.

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