

Chapter V
Some Recent Developments
in
Speech Act Theory

In the foregoing chapters we have detailed the word-world relationship between speech and performance and the world, and have tried to see the problem from the phenomenological viewpoint. However, the problem is no longer a reserve of philosophers. It has assumed importance outside the precincts of philosophy. New disciplines dealing with language, its use and problem of communication have fallen back on the insights of Austin, Searle, or Grice in developing new concepts and principles. Naturally, the theme of the present investigation has wide ramification for researches in linguistics, communication theory, cognitive science and in areas where the relation of signs to their users is pertinent. In what follows we shall discuss some of these developments in recent years.

I

This section is devoted to linguistics. Linguistics is a scientific study of human natural languages. It is a growing and exciting area of study, with an important contact with fields as diverse as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, among others. Fundamentally, linguistics is concerned with the nature of language and linguistic communication. These are apparently the fields of linguistics which as a whole remain focused on those components which are relevant for our present purpose. So far as the structural property of human

language is concerned there are three broad subdivisions of linguistics—syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Syntax is the study of the sentence structure. It is about the formal relationship of linguistic signs to one another and their principles of combination. Semantics is about the relationship of language to the world that is, the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable. It assumes sense or the meaning of an expression to be the core notion and it issues forth in theories of meaning, reference, truth etc. which are the principle issues in philosophy of language. According to its earliest formulation pragmatic studies are “the relations of signs to interpreters”¹. Pragmatics is the study of language use and communication. It is the study of linguistic acts and the context in which they are performed. The major problem to be solved within pragmatics is to define interesting types of speech acts and speech products. The analysis of illocutionary acts is an example of this problem. Broadly speaking, thus, the ultimate aim of linguistics is to understand how language itself is structured and how it functions.

Of the three components of linguistics each has been influenced by the philosophical theories on the word-world relationship, sometimes to a lesser and sometimes to a greater extent. Of these, the influence of speech act theory on pragmatics is the most pronounced. We have seen before how the theory of communication that was latent in Austin’s theory of speech acts was later developed into a full-fledged theory of communication by Searle. Grice, in his own way, also contributed in the development.

In linguistic encoding, a thought is converted into a linguistic form that is communicated to the hearer. Linguistic decoding is the decoding of the linguistic form which is communicated to the hearer by

the speaker. As such Austin's speech act theory has been developed not only by J. Katz²; Bach and Harnish have also developed an indirect analysis of constative utterances.³ F. Recanati⁴ has developed declarational analysis of speech acts which is an extension of Seale's work on performatives as declarations.⁵ A number of linguists and linguistically oriented philosophers have provided an analysis of many central speech act verbs. Mention may be made of J. Verschueren⁶ and A. Wierzbicka⁷. An interesting work has been done on performative verbs by Roy Harnish.⁸ A major finding of his survey of English verbs is that their non-performative use is parasitical upon their performative uses.⁹ A survey of recent publications in pragmatics reveals how Austin and Searle's accounts of speech acts assume an ongoing, regulative role in relation to pragmatics.

Though these studies have taken diverse directions, their main thrusts are human linguistic communication. The centrality of the phenomenon of communication in pragmatics is recognised when it is observed that the term *pragmatics* covers the study of language use and in particular the study of linguistic communication in relation to language structure and context of utterance.¹⁰ It will not be irrelevant to state some theories of communication in this connection.

For the last fifty years the most common and popular conception of human linguistic communication has been what we will term the Message Model. Though it has a modern ring, it goes back over three centuries to the philosopher John Locke whose theory of meaning we have already sketched in chapter I. There are, moreover, many contemporary statements of essentially the same idea. It was put forward

by J. Katz in his early writings as an instance of successful communication.

Linguistic encoding is one of the recent developments in the field of communication. Linguistic encoding is the encoding of the semantic meaning of a sentence as well as the encoding of the mental representation of the speaker of a sentence according to the intention of the speaker on a particular occasion.

In the message model the speaker acts as a transmitter, the hearer acts as a “receiver”. The speaker encodes the message he wants to communicate to a hearer in some linguistic expression. The hearer decodes the message using her knowledge of language. Linguistic encoding is the encoding of the semantic meaning of a sentence as well as the mental representation of the speaker of the sentence according to the intentions of the speaker in a particular occasion. In linguistic encoding a thought is converted into a linguistic form. Linguistic decoding is the decoding of the linguistic form which is communicated to the hearer by the speaker.

The message model which has been the simplest and the most popular model of communication has problems. The most crucial defect is that many expressions are linguistically ambiguous, vague, fuzzy, and vitiated by indirection — performing one communicative act by means of performing another communicative act. For example, decoding is dependent upon the hearer’s knowledge of the meanings of words to obtain the semantic meaning of the linguistic form. But it may happen that this semantic meaning is not the meaning that the speaker intends to communicate through the linguistic utterance. There are some other factors too which are inferential in nature, required in order to get the

intended meaning of the speaker's utterance. One such factor is the principle of cooperation.

A successful communication is dependent upon the principle of cooperation. While a speaker utters something the speaker has an intention to communicate on a given context to the hearer to recognise his communicative intentions. From the hearer's point of view the problem is to successfully recognise the speaker's communicative intention on the basis of the words which the speaker has chosen and the context of utterance. As such there is an inferential aspect on the part of the hearer in case of a linguistic communication. The simplest and most straightforward sort of speech act and thereby communication is performed or made literally and directly. Being literal and direct the speaker means what he utters. Another characteristic of literal and direct utterance is the contextual appropriateness of the utterance of the speaker. But there is a non-literal or indirect sort of speech act and communication which is not the literal or direct utterance. It may happen that sometimes when the speaker utters something he means something other than what his words mean. That is to say the meaning of the utterance is not literally compatible with the utterance, e.g., the utterance 'No one understands me' is a non-literal utterance or communication. Contextual inappropriateness of the utterance of the speaker is the characteristic of indirect speech act or communication. By hearing the utterance of the speaker the hearer recognises that it would be contextually inappropriate for the speaker to be speaking this literally. Therefore, the speaker is speaking non-literally or indirectly.

In the communicative context it may so happen that the speaker utters something but the utterance is encoded in such a way that the

intended meaning of the speaker is not dependent upon the semantic meaning of the utterance; it is dependent upon some inferential factors on the side of the receiver or the hearer which are the concern of pragmatics. Inference is the process by which an addressee in conversation is able to derive implicatures from a speaker's utterance in combination with features of context. This may be regarded as the indirect meaning of the speaker's utterance. For example, in case of the utterance of the speaker to an addressee, "There are frequent power cuts", the addressee infers indirect request to carry a torch or keep the emergency light ready at hand, as opposed to a simple statement of fact. Here the hearer has the capacity to infer the indirect request of the speaker, to assess that it is a request on the part of the speaker and not a statement of fact. Here, the context is not 'given' but 'created' as it is inferred. According to the speech act theory of Austin, a speaker's purpose in speaking is not simply to produce sentences that have a certain sense and reference. Rather, it is to produce such sentences with a view to interactional move to communication. And the illocutionary forces are the specifications of the interactional acts. And the successful performance of the perlocutionary acts are the signs that the speaker's communicative intention is achieved by the hearer. Hence successful communication is made.

L. Cummings¹¹ has mentioned some social / pragmatic theories of meaning besides the speech act to explicate some social/ pragmatic concepts such as deixis and presupposition. Deixis is the phenomenon through which the relationship between language and context is reflected in the very structures of language. It includes a study of demonstratives, pronouns specific time and place adverbs like 'now', 'here' and a variety of grammatical features which are anchored in the discourse location of

the current utterance. So instead of being about individual speech acts, deictic analysis is basically focussed on social discourse. Cummings discusses discourse analysis and conversational analysis which are some of the important development of speech act theory of meaning. According to him, no study of language use would be complete in the absence of the most common form of language use, conversation. This brings us to an important offshoot of the speech act theory, conversational analysis.

II

Traditional speech act theory is largely confined to single speech act. But, as we all know, in real life, speech acts are often not like that at all. In real life, speech characteristically consists of longer sequences of speech acts, either on the part of one speaker, in a continuous discourse, or it consists, more interestingly, of sequences of exchange speech acts in conversation, either between the speaker and hearer or among interlocutors in a group.

Cummings says that deictic terms like 'I', 'here', 'today', etc. are meaningful only on the assumption of the presence of conversational participants other than the speaker of the utterance. "It is difficult to see what sense can be made of the utterance 'I'm going to stay here today' if the presence of conversational participants other than the speaker could not be assured. In a similar manner, the presuppositions of an utterance reveal something of the knowledge and assumptions that are shared by participants in conversation."¹² According to Cummings, conversational participants such as the speaker and the hearer must be present in the conversational context in order for speech acts to be performed

felicitously. He also speaks in the manner of Austin about the uptake of a speech act and the dependence of the performance of the speech act on that uptake. Moreover, he speaks about some conversational implicatures which are necessary for the assumptions about conversational context and thus performing the speech act.

Cummings distinguishes between discourse analysis and conversation analysis.¹³ According to him, discourse analysts develop rules that govern the structure of texts. Discourse analysis despite of its modern form of examining language in the wider context of human knowledge of the world and society, still strongly reflects the influence of its formal, linguistic origins. “The origins of conversation analysis, on the other hand, are not linguistic, but sociological in nature. Conversation analysis originates in an American Sociological Movement of the 1970s called ethnomethodology defined as the study of ‘ethnic’, that is, participants’ own methods of production and interpretation of social interaction.¹⁴

Searle is critical of the conversational analysis of speech acts.¹⁵ His main objection is that we do not have constitutive rules for conversations in a way as we have for speech acts. Hence, we cannot get an account of conversations parallel to our account of speech acts. It is the constitutive rules which give speech acts their inner structure and a particular point or purpose. Thus, the illocutionary point of a promise is to undertake an obligation, the illocutionary point of a statement is to represent how things are in the world. Conversations do not, in this way, have an internal point simply for being conversations. They are often pointless, dragging, ‘idle talk’, shop talk, talk about whether and so on. But that does not mean that we cannot give theoretical accounts of conversation.

Searle who has criticised the conversational analysis recognizes that one virtue of conversations is that "...they involve shared intentionality". Conversations are a paradigm of collective behaviour. The shared intentionality should not be confused with a summation of individual intentional states about the other person's intentional states. Searle is not only attacking the conversationalists, he has in mind Grice's approach with his maxims of communication when he criticises the traditional analytic devices that treat all intentionality as having strictly Grice in mind. What is this collective intentionality? Collective intentionality is shared intentionality. Individual intentionality, according to Searle, derives from collective intentionality. Two persons beginning a conversation are beginning a joint activity and not two separate activities. He says, "This phenomenon of shared collective behaviour is a genuine social phenomenon and underlies much social behaviour."¹⁶

A second point which is needed for successful communication is, what Searle terms as "the background". This is needed not only for understanding conversation, but for understanding language in general.¹⁷ Consider the sentences "President Obama is the President of USA" and "President Obama has stopped outsourcing". The background knowledge of these two sentences do not coincide. To understand the first we have to have background knowledge of what is meant by 'President', what is the electoral form of government, what is a federation; in case of the latter the relevant background information is, what is meant by outsourcing, what are its economic constraints, why will it be stopped, etc. Searle calls this "networking" because it supposes that whenever there is conversation the background knowledge, belief,

opinion, doubt, or presupposition form a web or network. Let us quote his words:

...all meaning and understanding goes on against a background which is not itself meant and understood, but which forms the background conditions on meaning and understanding, whether in conversations or in isolated utterances¹⁸

Searle concludes by saying that in some conversations, e.g., British T.V. Broadcast,

“ ... the richness of the shared background enables a very minimal explicit semantic content to be informative and even satisfying to the participants and audience. On the other hand some of the most frustrating and unsatisfying conversations occur between people of radically different backgrounds, who can speak in great length and achieve only mutual incomprehension.”¹⁹

III

One of the recent developments in the area of speech act theory is Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action set forth in Vol. I & II of his book *The Theory of Communicative Action*.²⁰ He classifies actions into communicative and strategic. While the former is a case of “reciprocity” influencing one another by actions and achieving success by acting in a purposive rational manner, the latter is geared to reaching an

understanding through a rational argumentation, among the members of a life world.

Habermas defines understanding in simple terms as "... reaching understanding (*verständigung*) considered to be a process of reaching agreement (*Einigung*) among speaking and acting subjects".²¹ As competent speakers we cannot leave out the possibility of reaching agreement through coercion or intimidation being aware of the many ways in which linguistic exchanges can express relation of power, authority, coercion and condensation. Habermas was not interested in reaching an agreement as a matter of strategy but arriving at an understanding. Understanding is not likemindedness of a group. It is an agreement reached after rational discourse among the participants. Habermas says: "Processes of reaching understanding aim at an agreement that meets the conditions of rationally motivated assent (*ustimmung*) to the content of an utterance."²² Habermas is convinced that agreement rests on common conviction. And he emphatically asserts, "Reaching understanding is the telos of human speech."²³ To elucidate the interactive capacity of language to establish interpersonal relations between speakers and not to coerce them into agreement, Habermas falls back on Austin's concept of illocutionary act, and like Austin, he dismisses the illocutionary from the perlocutionary acts in the following manner.

1 In illocutionary speech acts meaning of the utterance echoes the intention of the speaker, and the speaker does not intend more than what he means in the utterance. In perlocutionary speech-acts the speaker's intention need not coincide with the meaning of the speaker. To take an example.

1. Shut the door.
2. I can't.
3. Well, I will see how to make you do that.

When we make an utterance our intention is that the speaker will understand its meaning. But sometimes the meaning and intention fall apart.

2. In the case of illocutionary acts the process and the effects can be brought under certain semantical conditions. The perlocutionary, etc., go beyond the meaning of what the speaker said and the results are not necessarily direct but strategic. Habermas says that the description of perlocutionary effects must, therefore, refer to a context of teleological action that goes beyond the speech act.
3. Habermas refers to Strawson's criterion of demarcation. The stark contrast between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary verbs is that illocutions are expressed openly; perlocutions may not be "admitted" as such —the speaker's illocutionary aim is given by his illocutionary acts. This does not hold good of perlocutionary acts. Perlocutionary acts are carried out by means of speech acts under the conditions that the speaker does not declare or admit his aim as such.

According to Austin, that the illocutionary act is a means to perlocutionary mode of language is a necessary condition of its perlocutionary uses. However, this does not exist, and this explains why the communicative use of language is the basic or primitive mode. This latter thesis demands in addition that concepts of "reaching understanding", "content-oriented attitude", and "communicative action"

can be explained by illocutionary acts alone. This is plausible, according to, Habermas because the illocutionary acts have a *rational force*. The speaker, in performing a speech act is able to motivate the hearer “to exceed to a *rationally binding or bonding force*”.

To understand a speech act is to know the conditions of its acceptability. And to explain these conditions of acceptability is to explain the rational force of an illocutionary act. In the standard case, the speaker’s utterance amounts to a claim to the validity of what is said, and at the same time it effects the guarantee that he can convince any sceptical hearer of its validity.

The rational force of an illocutionary act, according to Habermas, is the making and vindication of four validity claims.

1. Comprehensibility,
2. Truth
3. Rightness and
4. Truthfulness.

The comprehensibility claim is common to all linguistic communication, strategic as well as consensual. Apart from the comprehensibility claims the speaker makes three validity claims when performing any speech act. These three validity claims are made explicit in three different modes. The truth-claim is thematized in constative speech acts (e.g., I state that it will rain). The rightness claim is thematized in regulative-speech acts (e.g., I order you to do x) and the truthfulness claim is thematized in expressive speech acts (e.g., I admit you to x).

What Habermas said is very relevant for our purpose. He claims that in performing a speech act the speaker relates himself to three worlds: (1) The objective, i.e., the totality of entities about which we can make true or false statements; (2) the social world, i.e., the world of legitimately regulated interpersonal relation; and (3) the subjective world of the speaker's intentional experiences to which he has privileged access. The three modes of acceptability are related to three worlds.

What makes it possible for the speaker to relate himself to all *three* worlds when performing *one* speech act? Habermas' argument is as follows:

Every speech act has three components—the propositional, the illocutionary and the expressive. Habermas' thesis now is that the propositional content of a speech act is correlated to the objective world and the truth claim. The illocutionary component is correlated to the social world and to the rightness claim, and the expressive component is correlated to the subjective world and the truthfulness claim. This is how the speaker of *one* speech act can relate himself to *three* different modes and *three* worlds.

Habermas is less concerned with the discursive concept of truth than with possibility of conceiving truth, purified of all connotations of correspondence as a special case of validity whereas the general concept of validity can be explained in terms of the discursive redemption of validity claim. In this way we open up a conceptual space where the concept of validity is situated.

The social world which is important for our present interests in speech act is the totality of legitimately ordered interpersonal relations. At

first, accessible from the participant's perspective it is intrinsically historical, and hence, has an ontological constitution different from that which can be described from the observer's perspective.²⁴ The social world is inextricably interwoven with the practices and languages of its members. That holds in a similar way for *descriptions* of the objective world but not for this world itself hence, the discursive redemption of truth claims has a meaning different than that of rightness validity claims. In the former cases the discursively achieved agreement *signifies* that the truth conditions of an assertoric proposition interpreted in terms of assertibility conditions are fulfilled. In the latter case, the discursively achieved agreement *justifies* the fact that a norm is worthy of recognition, and thereby itself contributes to the fulfilment of its conditions of validity. Instead of an objective world presupposed to exist independently of us, what is not in our power to accept or reject, here is the interpersonal point of view. In communicative action, it is not the social world as such that is not at our disposal but the structure and procedure of a process of argumentation which facilitates both the production and discovery of the norms of a properly regulated social existence. Because language, through the mechanism of illocutionary acts, has the ability to achieve mutual understanding and coordinative actions in a cooperative or consensual way that the social world gains objectivity, thus moving not only beyond the ontological presupposition of an objective world, but also beyond a world where relationships are forced and manipulated.

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