

Odds & Ends (loose/deep/dead)

KENT BACH

A smattering of old issues in speech act theory needing further attention, newer ones needing serious consideration, and some related philosophical issues that have received more than enough.

Loose Ends

Puzzles about Austin on convention and Grice on Austin

Austin recognized that although one *can* perform an illocutionary act by using an explicit performative, like 'I predict', 'I promise', 'You are invited, and 'It is requested', one can do so without using such a locution. Indeed, this is why his general theory of speech acts superseded his theory of performatives. So why did he claim that the use of a sentence with a certain illocutionary force is "conventional in the sense that at least it could be made explicit by the performative formula" (1962: 103)? Indeed, what could he have meant by that? Moreover, even if it is a matter of convention that using a performative formula counts as performing an illocutionary act with a certain force, why should performing an illocutionary act with the same force but without using the performative formula also be conventional, rather than, as Strawson (1964) argued, a matter of communicative intention? It is also puzzling why Austin used acts like appointing, marrying, sentencing, christening, and adjourning as paradigms of illocutionary acts. These are obviously performable only in special institutional contexts, generally by officials with designated powers using specific forms of words, and are not typical of most of the things we do with words.

Strawson (1964), Searle (1969), and others criticized Grice for how he characterized the "intended effect" on (or "response" by) the hearer in his various accounts of speaker's meaning. In his accounts of speaker's meaning, why did Grice implicitly characterize the intended effect on, or "response" by, the hearer (such as a belief or an intention) in essentially perlocutionary terms? Why didn't he utilize Austin's illocutionary/perlocutionary distinction? Even if he didn't buy into Austin's conventionalist account of illocutionary acts, as evidently he didn't, he could still have adopted an intention-based distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary aspects of the total speech act. So why didn't he? For that matter, why, as in his conception of saying (as opposed to "making as if to say"), on which saying something entails meaning something, did he ignore Austin's distinction between the locutionary and the illocutionary levels?

Locutionary/illocutionary/perlocutionary

I wouldn't characterize this distinction in quite the way Austin did, but I definitely think we need it. Unfortunately, it is commonly ignored or at least underplayed. Austin cleverly distinguished saying something, what one does in saying it, and what one does by saying it. The distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts is not a distinction between three different kinds of utterances. Rather, these acts are, as Austin put it, "abstractions from the total speech act." Since a single utterance is typically the performance of acts of all three kinds, this distinction amounts to a distinction between three different kinds of intention behind a single utterance. These intentions are linked, as are the conditions of their fulfillment, i.e., locutionary, illocutionary, and ultimately perlocutionary success. Locutionary success requires the audience to identify the semantic content of the sentence as used by the speaker. That is necessary, whether or not the speaker is being literal, for recognizing the speaker's communicative intention in uttering the sentence. This recognition comprises illocutionary success (except for the case of conventional illocutionary acts, such as sentencing, christening, adjourning, for which conformity to convention is required). And, in general a speaker intends not merely to communicate something but to elicit some response on part of the audience, and perlocutionary success requires that the audience respond as intended.

The locutionary/illocutionary is commonly neglected. Instead, people discuss "truth-conditional contents of utterances" and engage in an interminable and largely terminological debate on "what is said." Why so little attention to the difference between the contents of locutionary acts ("what is said" in the strict sense, as opposed what to what is stated, asserted, or otherwise "illocuted"), which

are not constituted by the speaker's communicative intention, and the contents of illocutionary acts, which are? For example, it is supposed that implicatures are not "truth-conditionally relevant," as if what is implicated has no bearing on whether the utterance is true or false. But implicatures can be true or false, and there's a perfectly good sense in which an implicature is a content of an utterance. The same goes for what I call (Bach 1994) implicatures, i.e. enrichments of locutionary contents.

Linguistic meaning, speaker meaning, and communication

Obviously we need a distinction between linguistic meaning and speaker meaning, but 'speaker meaning' can mean different things. One is what the speaker intends to be the operative linguistic meaning of the sentence being uttered, but I prefer to use 'speaker meaning' to mean what the speaker intends to communicate in uttering a sentence. Communicative success consists in the intended audience recognizing the speaker's communicative intention, i.e. what the speaker intends to communicate (along with a certain attitude – see below). The successful performance of a communicative illocutionary act consists in the "securing of uptake" (Austin 1962: 116), or understanding. Indeed, as Searle observed, "we succeed in doing what we are trying to do by getting our audience to recognize what we are trying to do" (1969: 47). Or, as I like to put it, the fulfillment of a communicative intention consists in its recognition.

The relation between the semantic content of the uttered sentence as used by the speaker and the content of the illocutionary act performed by the speaker determines whether the illocutionary act is literal and direct or nonliteral and/or indirect (Bach and Harnish 1979, ch. 4). The widespread phenomenon of conversational implicature complicates the story.

Communicative intentions, communicative rationality, and communicative success

Understanding an utterance consists in two things, identifying the semantic content of the sentence as used by the speaker and recognizing the speaker's communicative intention in uttering it. The pragmatics literature, both philosophical and linguistic, focuses much more on understanding utterances than on producing them (except in the specialized field of "speech production"). It's taken as given that a speaker has uttered something in a certain conversational context, and the question is what is involved in understanding that utterance. But what about the speaker? The speaker doesn't decide to utter something and then form some intention, preferably a recognizable one, with which to utter it. Rather (and considerably oversimplifying), the speaker forms a communicative intention and tries to come up with something to utter that in the context makes this intention evident to his audience. Communicative rationality consists in doing this such that one can reasonably expect the audience to recognize that intention, partly on the (Gricean) supposition that they are intended to. Communicative rationality on the part of the audience requires relying on the speaker's rationality, together with the presumption that the speaker has a communicative intention to recognize, in order to identify that intention, partly on the supposition that one is intended to do so. In this respect, communication is like the game of charades, in which one makes faces and gestures in order to enable the audience to figure out what you have in mind.

Communication is essentially a game of coordination, in which the speaker, by uttering something in a given context, tries to make his intention evident to the audience, and the audience, using the evidence provided by that act, together with mutually salient facts about the context, to identify his communicative intention (partly on the basis of being intended to). Had Grice realized that communicative intentions and their recognition come into play prior to intentions to elicit responses and the responses thus elicited, he would have seen that communicative cooperation is much more specific than general conversational cooperation, and he would have recast his Cooperative Principle as a communicative presumption, that the speaker is uttering something with an identifiable communicative intention.

Acts and attitudes

We can think of uttering something with a communicative intention as expressing an attitude (in a certain special sense). To express an attitude is to utter something and reflexively intend (in something like Grice's sense) one's audience to take one's utterance as reason to think one has that attitude. By thinking of (communicative) illocutionary acts as expressions of attitudes and expressing as uttering something with a communicative intention, we can make sense of what communication

is and what it takes for its success. The act of (verbally) expressing an attitude is an act of just the sort that can succeed simply in virtue of the person(s) to whom it is directed recognizing the intention with which it is performed. For the addressee to understand what is uttered, even in the way it is (linguistically) intended, is merely locutionary success, and for them to be affected and/or to respond in a certain intended way comprises perlocutionary success. But recognizing the communicative intention with which the utterance is made suffices for illocutionary success.

Expressing an attitude is one thing, being sincere and actually possessing that attitude is another. If, in understanding an utterance, you take the speaker to actually possess the attitude he is expressing, in effect you are taking him to be sincere about what he is communicating. But there is no question about the speaker being sincere in the communicative intention itself. Sincerity consists in actually having the attitude one is expressing, but the communicative intention must be identified before the question of the speaker's sincerity can even arise.

Different types of (communicative) illocutionary acts, or "illocutionary forces", can be classified in Austinian nomenclature, mostly using nominalized forms of performative verbs, such as assertives, predictives, directives, requestives, commissives (for details see Bach and Harnish 1979: ch. 3). But their primary distinguishing features ultimately come down to the different attitudes they are expressions of. Of course, there is more to them than that, since utterances are also performances of perlocutionary acts.

Mike Harnish and I developed a detailed taxonomy of communicative speech acts mainly in terms of expressing different attitudes (Bach and Harnish 1979, ch. 3; see also Wierzbicka 1987). For example (and to simplify our characterizations), predicting expresses a belief about the future, apologizing expresses regret for something one did to the addressee, and requesting expresses a desire for the addressee to perform a certain action. In each case, expressing the attitude is offering one's utterance to the addressee as a reason to think one has the attitude. This reason need not be conclusive, but if in the context the reason is overridden, then the hearer will, in order to identify the attitude being expressed, search for an alternative and perhaps non-literal interpretation of the utterance (see Bach and Harnish 1979, pp. 57-59 and 289-291).

Lying vs. misleading

This distinction is often understood as the difference between, in meaning something, trying to deceive explicitly and merely inexplicitly or indirectly. But that overlooks the fact that almost all the utterances we count as lies are at least partly inexplicit and that there is no difference in kind between the communicative intentions associated with fully explicit utterances and those associated with less explicit ones. Whether or not the speaker is being completely explicit, what the speaker means is a matter of his communicative intention, something the audience has to identify in any case. Trusting the speaker is another matter.

The preceding denial that there is any difference in kind between lying and misleading applies only to cases of speaker meaning. In fact, misleading can occur not only by deceptively meaning something but also via misdirection or omission. The speaker's intention for the audience not to notice something, even though he means something else, is not itself a meaning-intention.

Canceling and retracting

Cancelability is Grice's best-known test for "the presence of a conversational implicature," but it is problematic, given that an implicature is something a speaker means, and not merely appears to mean or might mean. Grice distinguished two ways of canceling an (apparent) implicature: explicitly and contextually. To cancel one explicitly is, in effect, to deny that what one means includes the apparent implicature. Contextual cancellation is mainly associated with generalized conversational implicatures, and occurs when in an exceptional context the use of a sentence that would normally implicate something fails to do so. Nothing actually or even apparently implicated is cancelled. Strictly speaking, then, an actual implicature, being something meant, is not cancelable, explicitly or contextually. It can't be unmeant.

Retraction is something else. (Retraction has become an issue in recent debates between contextualists and relativists.) When you retract a prior statement, you aren't denying that you made it or that you meant it. The most obvious reasons for retracting a statement are that you now think

you were wrong or that you had insufficient basis for making it. Whatever the reason, you are now indicating that you're no longer willing to make the statement and no longer intend your audience to accept it. You're not making it the case that you didn't make the statement in the first place.

John MacFarlane (2011) has argued that the phenomenon of retraction undermines the belief expression view of assertion. All his argument shows, however, that there is more to assertion than expressing a belief, even if that's definitive of assertion qua illocutionary act. Obviously a speaker can't undo the fact that he expressed a belief, but he can undo something else. When retracting a prior statement, the speaker intends the audience no longer to accept it or rely on it. His perlocutionary intention in retracting his prior statement is to undo its perlocutionary effects. This is perfectly compatible with the belief expression view of assertion qua illocutionary act, since assertions are not merely illocutionary.

Deep Ends

Polysemy

Numerous words have multiple uses that are closely related. Typical examples are 'high', 'light', 'on', 'fast', 'book', and 'conscious'. One question for writers of dictionaries is how many senses an entry should include (separate entries are needed for cases of homonymy). Dictionaries dramatically disagree on how many. Lexical semanticists are interested in how these senses/uses are related, whether they form a network (or something of the sort), and how this network is structured. Presumably the different senses a polysemous word are connected, not just historically but semantically, such that one is a tighter or looser use of another or is related in a more complicated way to another use, and such that understanding some uses requires understanding other, more "central" uses. Polysemy raises several questions indirectly relevant to speech act theory:

- Should polysemy be treated as just another case of ambiguity?
- Does the co-occurrence of a polysemous word with another word determine the sense that is operative? (Compare 'on TV' and 'on the TV', 'fast car' and 'fast race', and 'conscious creature' and 'conscious state'.)
- Should some of the standard uses of a polysemous word not be counted as literal even if they are fairly common?

Answers to these questions bear on how the determinate are the contents of many locutionary acts and on whether certain illocutionary acts count as literal or not.

2nd-order speech acts and utterance modifiers

Utterance modifiers (aka speech act adverbials) are locutions, like 'frankly', 'in other words', 'by the way', and 'before I forget', that are used to comment on the main part of the utterance in which they occur. Typically they occur at the beginning of a sentence, but they can occur elsewhere, set off by commas or pauses. Because they are not semantically coordinate with the rest of the sentence, they do not contribute to what is said in utterances containing them. As vehicles for performing second-order speech acts, utterance modifiers characterize some aspect of the first-order speech act performed in uttering the rest of the sentence. To impose some order on them I've proposed a taxonomy, complete with Austinesque categories like "veracitives" ('to tell you the truth', 'believe it or not'), "formulationals" ('in other words', 'so to speak'), "additives" ('furthermore', 'not only that'), and "explanatories" ('in case you're interested', 'since you'll find out anyway'), among many others, distinguished by the sort of comment they make on the rest of the utterance (Bach 1999: §5). It's an open question how they should be handled semantically.

Information structure and speech acts

There are different ways in which the same propositional information can be linguistically expressed. Special forms and constructions, such as clefts, pseudo-clefts, and topicalization have the effect of structuring how the relevant information is expressed and, in particular, which aspects of the information are highlighted and which lurk in the background. But there are many other contributions that how a sentence is structured can make to the character of a speech act (see Lambrecht 1994).

Felicity and presupposition

There are various kinds of presuppositions, but from the standpoint of speech act theory a presupposition is a necessary condition for the successful and felicitous performance of a speech act. This raises the question of what sorts of presuppositions there are and, in particular, which sorts of presuppositions are linguistically marked. It also raises the question of which sorts of success and felicity are vitiated by which sorts of presupposition failure.

Expressive terms

Certain terms seem to be used to express (in the ordinary sense) some attitude or feeling rather than to contribute to the semantic content of sentences in which they occur. Even when such a term is embedded in an indirect quotation or an attitude report, the speaker uses it to express something rather than to contribute to what's being reported. It's an interesting question how the expressive dimension fits into semantics (see Potts 2007 and Kaplan on 'damn', 'oops', and 'ouch').

Cursing and slurring

Curse words comprise one category of expressive terms. One case of special interest is when such a word is used as an adjective. If you call someone a goddam idiot or a friggin' jerk, you're not delimiting the kind of idiot or jerk he is.

As for racial, ethnic, religious and other slurring words, it might seem that they have both a descriptive and an expressive dimension. According to this view, they differ from their neutral counterparts not in what properties they are used to ascribe but in also expressing contempt (or some such attitude) for people in the relevant category. However, it is arguable that these terms are actually used to ascribe an additional property, namely, being contemptible for being a so-and-so. This is an odd property for a term to encode, quite apart from whatever is objectionable about there being words for expressing certain contemptuous (and contemptible) attitudes, but this property seems to explain what's distinctive about slurring terms.

Framing, silencing, and other kinds of verbal manipulation

This covers a broad range of speech acts that exclude possibilities from being taken seriously or even from being considered at all. They include imposing false dichotomies and double binds, preventing people from being listened to ("heard") or depriving them of an audience, sneaking in slanted evaluations via euphemism, dysphemism (as in "demonizing the opposition"), or other tendentious labels, twisting words, dodging questions, changing the subject, interrupting, and filibustering. And the list goes on. In many such cases, what the speaker does falls outside the familiar categories of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts and into the class of what may be called "collateral" speech acts (Bach and Harnish 1979: 96-103).

Dead Ends

What is the norm of assertion?

For some time now, and for no apparent reason, a debate has raged on the question of what is the (constitutive) norm on assertion: knowledge, truth, justified belief, or mere belief? But there's been little discussion of how the special case of assertion fits into theory of illocutionary acts in general. From that standpoint there's a quick and philosophically inconsequential way of arguing for a knowledge norm of assertion. Sincerity is a norm on the performance of any communicative illocutionary act. It consists in having the attitude one is expressing. So, in particular, belief is a norm of assertion. Moreover, it is plausible to hold that knowledge is in some sense a norm on belief. If so, we can derive the knowledge norm of assertion by combining the knowledge norm on belief with the belief norm of assertion. That may seem interesting, but it suggests that there is really nothing special about the knowledge norm on assertion.

What is the epistemological significance of testimony?

How can someone's telling you something give you any more reason to believe it than simply knowing, without the benefit of being told, that the person believes it? The null hypothesis is that being told can't give you any additional reason – it gives you evidence that they believe the proposition but, beyond that, no further reason for believing it yourself. The only thing special about being told something is that this is the primary way, at least in everyday life, in which we find out

what other people believe. Of course, there are many genuine issues about testimony, pertaining to trustworthiness, expertise, and disagreement.

Epistemological contextualism?

This linguistically implausible thesis, flimsily based on dubious diagnoses of seemingly shifty truth-conditions of knowledge attributing sentences, is a clever but ineffective way of combating skepticism. Even so, let's go along with the contextualist claims that knowledge is relative to epistemic standards (or relevant alternatives, if you prefer) and that which proposition a simple, unrelativized knowledge attributing sentence expresses in a given context is determined by the epistemic standard operative in that context. This does not mean that the other propositions that the sentence can express in other contexts somehow go away. These propositions can be expressed in *any* context by more explicit knowledge ascribing sentences, in which 'knows' is explicitly indexed or relativized to a standard (or a set of alternatives). The fact, if it is a fact, that in a given context a simple, unrelativized knowledge attributing sentence expresses one such proposition does not keep other more demanding knowledge attributions from also being expressed and considered, including the ones of interest to the skeptic.

Meta-ethical Expressivism?

Expressivism about ethical and evaluative terms mistakenly assumes that for an utterance to qualify as a statement or a psychological state to qualify as a belief, it, or its content, must be capable of being true or false. Now suppose that there is no such property as being obscene, holy, or haunted, and consider that some people appear to assert and to believe that certain gestures are obscene, that certain places are holy, or that certain houses are haunted. Surely we should not conclude that such people don't really make assertions or express beliefs. Meta-ethical expressivism goes from an anti-realist claim about moral properties and the contents of sentences in which expressions for them occur to counterintuitive claims about what speakers do when they appear to assertively utter such sentences and about what attitudes (rather than beliefs) they express in so doing. This commits a version of what Searle long ago called the "speech act fallacy" (1969: 136-141). A classic example is turning the observation that 'good' is used to express approval or some such positive attitude into an explication of the meaning of the word 'good'. Of course, there is also the well known Frege-Geach problem, based on the observation that such an account doesn't seem to work when a simple sentence like 'Giving is good' is embedded in a complex sentence or when 'good' occurs in an interrogative, imperative, negation, disjunction, etc. In these cases 'good' not used to express a positive attitude and yet, presumably, it means the same thing as when as it is so used.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962), *How to do things with Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bach, Kent (1994), "Conversational Implicature," *Mind & Language* 9: 124-162.
- _____ (1999), "The Myth of Conventional Implicature," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 22: 327-366.
- _____ and Robert M. Harnish (1979), *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kaplan, David (unpublished), "The Meaning of Ouch and Oops," <http://eecoppock.info/PragmaticsSoSe2012/kaplan.pdf>
- Lambrecht, Knud (1994), *Information Structure and Sentence Form*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- MacFarlane, John (2011), "What is Assertion?" in Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (eds), *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 79-96.
- Potts, Christopher (2007), *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, John (1969), *Speech Acts*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Strawson, P. F. (1964), "Intention and Conventional in Speech Acts," *Philosophical Review* 73: 439-460.
- Wierzbicka, Anna (1987), *English Speech Act Verbs*, New York: Academic Press.