INTENTIONALITY AND MEANING
A reaction to Leilich's "intentionality, speech acts and communicative action"

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0. Introduction

In his paper *Intentionality, speech acts and communicative action* (in this issue of *Pragmatics*), Joachim Leilich intends to give an overview of the discussion between Searle and the Frankfurt pragmatists Apel and Habermas. As he puts it, the main point of discussion is Searle's idea that Intentional states are logically prior to speech acts, an idea that Leilich, following Apel, calls Searle's "anti-linguistic" turn. With Apel and Habermas, Leilich criticizes this fundamental revolution in Searle's philosophy in *Intentionality*.

In this reply, I will defend Searle's idea and show that Leilich's - and thus Habermas' and Apel's - arguments are based on partial interpretations of Searle's conceptions about meaning and speech acts. In the first part, I will reconsider Searle's analysis of meaning and show, mainly, that it allows for a conception where intentions are prior to conventional meaning. In the second part, I will defend the idea that Searle has a conception of speech acts and illocutionary force that is fully compatible with his theory of Intentionality. In the final section, I will raise the question as to whether critical theory can find a scientific basis in speech act theory.

1. The anti-linguistic turn

Leilich holds that Searle (1983) develops his theory of meaning as an argument for the thesis "that intentional states are more fundamental than speech acts and that there is a logical dependency in the sense that there can be intentional states without speech acts, but no speech acts without Intentional states" (p.157). There can be no doubt that Searle holds such a thesis. Moreover, there is textual evidence to support the idea that chapter 6 of *Intentionality*, the chapter on meaning, argues that "language is derived from Intentionality and not conversely" (Searle 1983: 5). Nevertheless, it seems to me that this is not the main function of chapter 6; its main function is, rather, to develop a conception of meaning in the framework developed in the earlier parts of *Intentionality* (Searle 1983: 27 and 163). The possibility of developing such a conception of meaning is taken to constitute in itself an argument for the thesis that intentions are prior to conventional meaning.

As Searle repeatedly states, for him the problem of meaning is "how do we get from the physics to the semantics", or, in other terms, "how do we get (for
example) from the sounds that come out of my mouth to the illocutionary act?" (Searle 1983: 27). His answer goes as sketched by Leilich: a physical action becomes Intentional because the speaker intentionally superimposes the conditions of satisfaction of an Intentional state on the physical action. In Searle's example, the speaker intentionally superimposes the conditions of satisfaction of the belief that the enemy has retreated on the action of raising an arm. However, as Apel (1991: 33) remarks, in the relevant passage of *Intentionality*, the structure of meaning intentions is described for people who already have a language, since Searle (1983: 167) presupposes "that you and I have arranged in advance that if I raise my arm that act is to count as a signal that such and such is the case". So Apel's criticism that the basic question of the constitution of linguistic meaning through the Intentionality of the mind is not explained seems well taken, since agreement as to the meaning of the signal indeed already presupposes the existence of meaning conventions.\(^1\) If this criticism is justified, it is indeed no longer possible to hold that Intentional states are prior to linguistic meaning.

But Searle does not hold the position Apel attributes to him: although he admits that his example of raising the arm only gives the structure of meaning Intentions for people who already have a language, he also stresses that "the problem of meaning would arise even for people who were to communicate with each other without using a common language" (Searle 1983: 162). And intuitively, it seems that the problem of meaning as Searle describes it, that is, as the problem of how a physical act gets endowed with a meaning, applies most readily to this case, where there is a physical action, but not yet a common language. In a sense then, Leilich is right to hold that the passage from the prelinguistic to the linguistic should carry the burden of Searle's thesis. And Searle's answer to it in *Intentionality* indeed seems very sketchy, since it reduces to an enumeration of three steps that would lead from prelinguistic Intentional states to conventionally realized illocutionary acts:

"(...) first, the deliberate expression of Intentional states for the purpose of letting others know that one has them; second, the performance of these acts for the achievement of the extra-linguistic aims which illocutionary acts standardly serve; and third, the introduction of conventional procedures which conventionalize the illocutionary points that correspond to the various perlocutionary aims." (Searle 1983: 179)

Is there a way for Searle to give more substance to this admittedly sketchy picture? I think there is, if one accepts the idea that Searle defends in chapter 5 of *Intentionality*, that Intentional states only have the conditions of satisfaction they do against a Background of pre-Intentional stances and abilities. One such Background stance that human beings are endowed with would be, according to Searle (1989a: 15), the capacity to represent, which we share with animals (who don't have a language) and with little children (who do not yet have a language). It allows organisms to engage in causal relations with their environment through perception and action, which are the primary forms of Intentionality (Searle 1983: 105).

Soon there arises the need to solve coordination problems, the need to

\(^1\) But note that in Searle's example, there is no question of a transfer of conditions of satisfaction from one symbol to another, as Leilich says (p. 159); the transfer is from an Intentional state to a gesture.
perform collective actions. Such actions suppose a form of Intentionality that cannot be reduced to a total sum of individual actions, they have a structure which is roughly of the form "I do X as part of our doing Y" (Searle 1983: 71; 1990). Moreover, such collective Intentions are only possible against a Background stance, where we sense the other as a candidate for cooperative agency (Searle 1990: 414) and take other organisms like ourselves as sharing the same Background capacities (Searle 1989a: 16).

The need to communicate thus arises from the need to solve coordination problems and must consequently be thought of as the obtaining of perlocutionary effects, as the endeavor to get others to do and to believe certain things. This means then that one starts expressing one’s Intentional states with the purpose of letting others know that one has them and with the idea to achieve extra-linguistic aims. It is here that Leilich’s worry becomes relevant: how can others get to know my Intentional states, if there is no common language? However, Searle does not really have to elaborate this point: since he resumes the intentional definition of meaning (Searle 1983: 161; 1991: 84), he can safely resume Grice’s analysis of conventional meaning as a conventionalization of intentional (speaker’s) meaning.

Grice (1957) holds that to say that a speaker S meant something by X is to say that S intended the utterance of X to produce some effect in a hearer H by means of the recognition of this intention. Thus for Grice meaning just is the speaker’s intention, which does not necessarily have to be recognized via conventional linguistic meaning. Indeed, as Bange (1992: 140) explains, when someone throws one dollar on the counter to get some cigarettes, the shopkeeper does not have to know some code giving the meaning of “throwing one dollar on the counter”. On the contrary, the shopkeeper can infer the meaning of the other’s act when he realises that he and the other are in stereotypic roles in a scheme of commercial transaction, that the act of the other can only be the act of a client starting a transaction, and (for instance) that only those cigarettes cost one dollar and/or that this kind of cigarettes is so trendy that everyone wants it, etc. This way Grice (1968), just like Searle, defines conventional meaning as the conventionalization, habitualization of intentional meaning.2

I hope to have shown that a more detailed answer to Leilich’s query about the transition from the prelinguistic Intentional states to conventional meaning can be given. It should be clear why Searle does not need to go into details: it is sufficient for him to show that an analysis of meaning in terms of his theory of Intentionality is possible, because, if that is the case, then he can "resume", as he puts it (Searle 1983: 161), analyses of meaning in terms of speaker’s intentions and endorse inferentially based accounts of non-conventional meaning like Grice’s. This implies, of course, a change with respect to his criticisms of Grice’s definition in Speech Acts, where he criticises Grice’s definition, i.a., precisely for not taking into account "the extent to which meaning can be a matter of rules or conventions" (Searle 1969: 43). In a way then, Searle’s "anti-linguistic turn" can be seen as a return to Grice’s position in this respect.

It must be noted, however, that the priority of the Intentional over the

2 Note, by the way, that Grice (1968) also illustrates his opinions by gestual examples, asking himself for instance how a gesture can have the meaning "I know the way".
linguistic does not imply that it is possible to completely analyse all illocutionary acts in non-linguistic forms of Intentionality. What is claimed is that the illocutionary acts are erected on the fundamental basis of prelinguistic forms of Intentionality:

"The picture I have is this: a human child begins with prelinguistic forms of Intentionality. By a kind of bootstrapping effect the child acquires primitive linguistic expressions of that Intentionality. But a little language goes a long way; and the child develops a richer Intentionality which it could not have developed without linguistic forms. This richer Intentionality enables a further richer linguistic development which in turn enables richer Intentionality. All the way up to the developed adult, there is a complex series of developmental and logical interactions between Intentionality and language. Most forms of adult Intentionality are essentially linguistic. But the whole edifice rests on biological primitive forms of prelinguistic Intentionality."

In the light of this (evolutionary) conception of the primacy of the Intentional over the linguistic, the alleged inconsistency in Searle's answers to Alston (1991) and Apel (1991), that Leilich signals at the end of his article, disappears.

2. The anti-pragmatic turn

To say that Searle resumes Grice's analysis of meaning is not completely adequate, however, since, as is justly stressed by Leilich, Searle (1986) rejects Grice's definition of meaning in as far as it defines meaning in terms of effects on the hearer. Already in *Speech Acts*, Searle criticised Grice because the effects in the hearer in the examples he used were perlocutionary and stated clearly that "the 'effect' on the hearer is not a belief or response, it consists simply in the hearer understanding the utterance of the speaker" (Searle 1983: 47).

In *Meaning, communication and representation*, he goes even further: in a "logical" analysis of Intentional states, representation is prior to communication, since one can represent without communicating, but not communicate without representing (Searle 1986: 213). Therefore, the definition of meaning should be given in purely representational terms, not in communicational ones, such as "effects on the hearer", even if those effects have been reduced to the mere understanding by the hearer of the words of the speaker. In fact, Searle only retains from Grice's definition the idea that meaning has to be defined in terms of intentions.

If that is the case, the question posed by Habermas and Apel seems plainly justified: if the notion of meaning is purified from all communicative connotations, how can one still give an account of illocutionary force? Surprisingly, neither Habermas nor Apel nor Leilich look for an answer to this question to Searle's *How performatives work*. This is most surprising in Leilich's case, since he discusses

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3 For the meaning of *logical* here, see Searle (1983: 14-15).

4 At least if one interprets *representation* as Searle (1983: 12) does: "to say that a belief is a representation is simply to say that it has a propositional content and a psychological mode, that its propositional content determines a set of conditions of satisfaction under certain aspects, that its psychological mode determines a direction of fit of its propositional content, in a way that all of these notions - propositional content, direction of fit, etc. - are explained by the theory of speech acts."
Searle’s answer to this problem as he gives it in his reply to Habermas in John Searle and his critics, but does not take into account Searle’s own references there (p.95 and p.101 note 4) to How performatives work. This is regrettable, since it is the theory of performatives developed in this article that gives an answer to Apel’s and Habermas’ question, not the theory of Speech Acts.

In fact, in How performatives work, Searle gives a theory for performatives, the utterances Austin called "explicit performatives". Thus, his aim is not to give a theory of all speech acts. Nevertheless, the theory of performatives has a particular relevance in the discussion with Habermas, since Habermas (1976: 217) himself only analyzes speech acts in this "standard form". It is interesting to learn that the background for this option is Searle’s (1969: 68) principle of expressibility according to which "whatever can be meant can be said". In Habermas’ (1976: 222) case, the idea is that each speech act is univocally determined by a complex sentence, if one accepts that the speaker expresses his intention rightly, explicitly and literally. For Habermas, this also means that there is an adequate performative expression for each interpersonal relation between a speaker and another member of his language community.

In fact, it is the structure of explicit performatives that leads to Habermas’ criticisms of Searle’s "anti-pragmatic turn". For, as Leilich explains, in explicit performatives there is an introductory verb that is taken to make explicit the speech act performed (e.g. I order you to, I promise to, etc.) and there is a following propositional part. Habermas concludes that speech acts have a illocutionary-propositional double structure corresponding respectively to the level of intersubjectivity and the level of propositional content.

It is surprising, however, that Habermas seems not to take into account the criticisms that have been levelled against the idea that for every speech act, it is possible to find an adequate explicit expression, especially since Searle (1989b) can be read as a reaction to them. In general, it has been remarked that in the explicit performatives, the illocutionary force marking device is a declarative verb in the first person and that the illocutionary force expressed in such utterances is in the first place a statement (Bach and Harnish 1979) or a declaration (Récanati 1981). Thus, most newer analyses have proposed to derive the illocutionary force of explicit performatives from the primary assertive force of the utterance by Gricean implicatures. Searle argues that this is not adequate, since such an analysis is incapable of explaining the self-guaranteeing property of performatives, that is, the fact that in saying I promise you to P, I cannot deny that my utterance has the force of a promise - though, of course this promise as such can be insincere:

"(...) the intention to assert self-referentially of an utterance that it is an illocutionary act of a certain type, say a promise, is simply not sufficient to guarantee the existence of an intention in that utterance to make a promise. Such an assertion does indeed commit the speaker to the existence of the intention, but the commitment to having an intention doesn’t guarantee the actual presence of the intention. And that was what we needed to show." (Searle 1989b: 546)

To remedy this shortcoming of analyses of performatives as assertions plus

\footnote{See, a.o., Bouwersse (1971: 375), Bach and Harnish (1979), Récanati (1981: 203-214) and references therein.}
implicatures, Searle proposes to consider performatives as declaratives, which have a double direction of fit, since when I say for instance "I hereby declare you man and wife", I bring it about that \( p \) by way of representing it as being the case that \( p \) (Searle 1983: 171). But this is also not sufficient in itself to guarantee the actual presence of the intention. What is needed to understand why performatives are self-guaranteeing is to see that illocutionary verbs contain the notion of intention as part of their meaning: when a person says e.g. that he promises it, that implies that he did it intentionally - one can't promise unintentionally, an utterance is a promise only if I intend it to be a promise. Moreover, the intention with which performative utterances are uttered is executive, that is, "the intention is that the utterance should constitute the act named by the verb" (Searle 1989b: 552). Briefly, to guarantee that an utterance of *I order you to \( P \)* is an order, it is not sufficient to intend to assert it: one has to intend that the utterance make it the case that it is an order (Searle 1989b: 553).

My aim is not to debate the adequacy of this analysis of performatives⁶; it is sufficient, for my purpose, to show that Searle really offers an analysis of illocutionary force in purely representational terms. Another important point is that Searle no longer analyzes explicit performatives as composed of an explicit illocutionary force indicating verb ("I promise you that \( P \)") and a propositional part ("I promise you that \( P \)’); on the contrary, it is recognized that the performative verb itself has a representational content and that the illocutionary force of the performative verb has to be analysed in terms of a representation intention, using the apparatus of directions of fit, conditions of satisfaction, etc. Consequently, it is not justified to hold that he cannot offer an analysis of illocutionary force in purely representational terms.

### 3. Speech acts and critical theory

The priority of representation in the "logical" analysis of meaning and speech acts does not imply that the analysis of speech acts in *Speech Acts* no longer has any value: as Searle (1991: 90-91) stresses, the fact that the fundamental structure of meaning can be analysed in terms of the apparatus developed in *Intentionality, is not incompatible with the idea that societies elaborate conventions attached to the expressions of particular sorts of speech acts. The analyses in *Intentionality* and *How performatives work* only give the underlying Intentional structures that make the elaboration of conventions and rules possible. Moreover, it allows Searle’s analysis of performatives to be in conformity with the simple observation that a performative utterance is first of all an assertion (or a declaration).⁷

Thus, it is not surprising that Searle does not reject Habermas’ validity claims, since these are but a generalisation of Searle’s own constitutive rules in

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⁷ This does not necessarily mean that their performative meaning is necessarily not their literal meaning, as is stressed both by Searle (1989b: 551) and by Récanati (1981: 210-214). Literal meaning always is only literal meaning against a Background and a Network, as Searle already showed in *Literal meaning.*
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*Speech Acts*. But it is certainly wrong to claim, as Leilich (p.166) does, that Searle is confused in thinking "that validity claims are something which should come into the debate later, after speech acts are constituted by sets of constitutive rules", for what is constitutive for speech acts according to Searle (1983; 1989b; 1991) is their Intentional structure, not the constitutive rules. On the contrary, constitutive rules, just as validity claims, only appear later on in the analysis, as structures that are erected on the Intentional structures.

In fact, even if one rejects Searle's analysis of performatives, one cannot reject the observation that performative utterances do not neatly correspond to the structure *Illocutionary force indicating verb + proposition*, or F(p). Thus they do not really exhibit the performative-propositional double structure that would correspond respectively to the communicative function of the illocutionary force and the representational function. Even opponents of Searle's analysis of performatives like Bach and Harnish (1992: 98) hold that performative utterances express statements and must thus agree that the performative verbs are also included in the representational part. So, in the logical analysis of speech acts at least, the representational is indeed prior to the communicational and communication cannot be constitutive of representation in the way Habermas and Apel want it to be, as a rational consensus over validity claims.

Habermas (1982) responds to objections of this kind by Thompson (1982) that his aim is not to find the exact representation of performatives in the grammatical deep structure, but that he only uses the standard form of performatives, the structure F(p), because it calls attention to the features "that are essential for the rational binding effect of using symbolic expressions with an orientation to reaching understanding" (Habermas 1982: 270). In other terms, he only uses Searle's theory in *Speech Acts* as an illustration of what is essential for two members of a society to reach agreement (*Einarverständnis*), this agreement serving as a basis for the constitution of social realities.

The analysis of speech acts is in Habermas' theory subservient to the central objective of showing that a critical theory of society is possible. His endeavor is to show that in language, one can find, as a potential, the idea of a rational form of communication, where subjects reach agreement over rules of behaviour on the basis of rational argumentation. It is thus no accident that the analysis of speech acts in universal pragmatics grounds their illocutionary force in their communicative function and in a rational agreement of subjects about the validity claims that are made in them.

My purpose here is not to argue that Habermas' neglect of recent developments in speech act theory means that he cannot reach his objective of founding critical theory. Nevertheless, if speech act theory is to provide a scientific basis for critical theory, Habermas should reconsider his ideas taking into account Searle (1989b) and other recent developments, because they question the role of the standard form that is his starting point. Such a reconsideration is required anyway.

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8 As Habermas (1976: 182) himself wants them to be.

since his analysis is not even fully in agreement with the theory of *Speech Acts*. Indeed, Habermas' analysis of speech acts bases their illocutionary force on an agreement between speaker and hearer about the validity claims raised in the speech acts. For Searle, however, such an agreement can only be a perlocutionary effect of a speech act, since in *Speech Acts* (p.47), the illocutionary effects are limited to the hearer understanding the speaker. Even with respect to Searle's analyses in *Speech Acts* then, Habermas makes the hearer far too "active".

One could still try to defend Habermas' analyses on the grounds that if one wants to explain the existence of social realities such as conventions, one must take the point of view that they can only arise from the communicative action he describes, that is from an agreement based on rational argumentation. Briefly, society must be based on communication and this is why Habermas (1981) calls for a reconstruction of the occidental philosophical tradition and of speech act theory in so far as it is part of it, since it is too much centered on a solitary subject constituting the world and the others in its consciousness to explain social realities. Such a way out is not possible, however, since Searle (1990) shows how the constitution of social realities can be explained in the framework of *Intentionality*. Moreover, it appears there that what enables us to erect social realities is not communication, but a Background sense of the other as a candidate for interaction. And this means that society is not founded on communication; on the contrary, communication is only possible if one believes that the other is a candidate for interaction, which means that communication is founded on society.

4. Conclusions

In this article, I have established three things.

- First, that Searle's analysis of meaning in *Intentionality* does not already presuppose linguistic conventions, as Apel claims. I have sketched how his resuming of the inferential theory of meaning allows for a derivation of linguistic meaning from prelinguistic Intentional states and can as such be inserted in a tradition that starts with Grice.
- Second, that Searle can offer an analysis of performatives in terms of representational intentions and thus explain illocutionary force without communicational notions, despite Habermas' and Apel's contentions to the contrary.
- Third, that Searle is in line with recent advances in speech act theory which pose severe problems for Habermas' endeavor to use speech act theory as a scientific

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10 This point is repeated in Searle (1991:99): "Now, if the speech act is successful the speaker will not only mean something but the hearer will understand what he means. I was concerned to analyze meaning; but now, in addition to meaning and understanding, there are various perlocutionary effects that the speaker may wish to produce in the hearer, such as getting the hearer to agree."

11 According to Habermas, such a theory will, i.a., defend the thesis that action and perception are the primary forms of Intentionality, which is exactly the point of view of Searle (1983: 105).
foundation for critical theory.

Let me conclude by saying that I do not claim that there are no problems with Searle's theories as such; it just seems to me that an adequate criticism of them should take into account the points mentioned above.

References


