

Looking for Searle’s Black Swan

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Any categorical statement is false if there is at least one exception. If, for example, one states that all swans are white, it only takes the sighting of one black swan to disprove the statement. Searle (1969) assumes that illocutionary speech acts are preceded by intentions and intentional behavior (Searle, pp. 16-17). In this paper, I will show that there is at least one possible exception to his assumption.

For Searle, the basic unit of linguistic communication is the speech act described by Austin as the “illocutionary act.” This speech act is a form of communication that conveys implied intentions for action. Searle explains that “When I take a noise or a mark on a piece of paper to be an instance of linguistic communication . . . I must assume that the noise or mark was produced by a being more or less like myself and produced with certain kinds of intentions” (Searle, p. 17). He differentiates between utterance acts, “which consist simply in uttering strings of words” (Searle, p. 24) and illocutionary acts, which “consist characteristically in uttering words in sentences in certain contexts . . . with certain intentions . . .” (Searle, p. 25). In Searle’s revision of the Gricean analysis of meaning, the S (speaker) always intends (i-I) to produce an illocutionary effect (IE) by recognition or awareness of the intent by the hearer (H) (Searle, pp. 49-50). Thus, in Searle’s world, there exists no acknowledgement of unintended speech acts. For Searle, what is said in an illocutionary speech act is always preceded by the intent to say it. I would suggest that there are several categories of illocutionary speech acts that are not addressed by Searle and where there is no intent, or a different intent, preceding the act.

Searle’s illocutionary speech act is characterized by: 1) prior intent, 2) a conscious decision by the speaker, 3) specificity, and 4) adherence to linguistic rules (Searle, pp. 16 -21). The relationship of intent to a specific utterance is illustrated in Table 1 below, where “X” represents a specific utterance and “~X” represents something other than the specific utterance. Searle’s speech acts reside in quadrant 1, where there is both intent to speak and actual uttered speech.

Table 1 Relationship of intent to speak to utterance

| | | Actual Speech Act | |
|-----------------|-----|-------------------|-----------------|
| Intent to Speak | Yes | ¹ X | ² ~X |
| | No | ³ X | ⁴ ~X |

However, Searle made a categorical statement saying that he assumed an illocutionary speech act was produced as a result of intentional behavior. Since a categorical statement must either be all true or it is not true, it is interesting to look at quadrants 2, 3, and 4 to see how they fit into Searle’s theory. In quadrant 2, there is prior intent to say X, but something other than X is said. In quadrant 3, there is no prior intent, but X is said. In quadrant 4, there is no prior intent and something other than X is said. Thus, once what is actually said is unbundled from what is intended to be said, as is done in Table 1, it becomes clear that whatever utterances fall into quadrants 2 and 3 may be exceptions to Searle’s theory. Quadrant 4 allows for too many ambiguities and will not be

addressed in this paper. What types of speech acts might fall into quadrant 2, where a person intends to speak, but doesn't say what he intends to say; and into quadrant 3, where a person speaks but doesn't intend to?

All slips of the tongue and Freudian slips belong in quadrant 2. While arguments can be made for the role of intent in Freudian slips, many run-of-the-mill slips of the tongue, called "spoonerisms," are caused by an unintentional exchange of sounds, usually from the beginnings of two words. Spoonerisms are defined as "unintentional, non-habitual deviations from a speech plan" (Dell, 1986, p. 284). A person intends to speak, but what he says is not what he intended to utter. In the case of slips of the tongue, having intent and then speaking does not always produce the desired speech act, although the sentence is grammatical and there is successful communication. The speaker will produce an entirely different effect on his audience when he says "You have hissed all my mystery lectures" rather than "You have missed all my history lectures" (Erard, 2007, p. 15). Thus, we have a situation where there was intent to speak, but no intent to say what was actually said. The speech act was grammatical and the purpose of the utterance was to produce some effect on the hearer; however, while there was an effect on the hearer, it was different from the intended effect. Was this spoonerism an illocutionary speech act?

Certain spontaneous and unconscious utterances spoken without prior intent belong in quadrant 3. This category includes somniloquy (sleep-talking) where there is the "utterance of speech or sounds during sleep without awareness of the event" ("Sleep Talking," 1999, para. 1). "Lack of awareness," by definition, implies no intent. However, the sleep-speaker can successfully carry on a conversation. My husband reports that I once said, while napping in the afternoon, "I'm going to mop the floor." Of course, I had no intention of mopping the floor, but I did convey my message to him. However, I stated, or promised, to mop the floor in correct rule-governed grammatical form and my husband understood the communication. Since he didn't know if I was really awake or still napping, he had no way to evaluate my intentions. Was this promise an unintended illocutionary speech act?

While the above examples of somniloquy and slips of the tongue raise questions as to the necessity of intent in illocutionary speech acts, it is in the area of interjections and exclamations in quadrant 3 that Searle is most vulnerable. The argument can be made that there is a class of interjections and exclamations that are not premeditated, but have the same effect on the hearer as intended speech. For example, if I burn my finger on the stove and spontaneously exclaim "Ouch!" my husband will hear the screamed word and run into the kitchen. Did I intend for him to come into the kitchen? No. I was responding to sudden pain. My husband, however, interpreted my cry and understood I was in trouble. Thus, it appears that I unintentionally committed an illocutionary act. In addition, because my husband ran into the kitchen, there was also an unintentional perlocutionary act - the consequential actions of an illocutionary act. While perhaps some spontaneous utterances such as "Help!," "Run!," and "Fire!" do have intent which leads to certain consequences, my speech act produced an effect on my husband, but it was not intentional.

In summary, according to Searle, intent is an integral part of the illocutionary speech act; to perform the successful speech act, rule-governed speech must be produced with the intent to elicit a specific effect on the hearer. I have presented three cases- slips of the tongue, somniloquy, and spontaneous interjections- where it is questionable whether the intent criterion was met. While all three examples raise questions, the category of spontaneous cries of pain is the blackest swan in Searle's theory -- although there is no intent involved in the sudden outburst, I believe these cries do perform a successful illocutionary speech act.

References

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