

CONVENTIONALITY IN SPEECH ACTS

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The question of the relative importance and precise delineation of conventional and non-conventional elements in speech acts was regarded as central in their analysis by Austin himself, and has continued to exercise subsequent writers on the subject.¹ Most attention has focused on the Austinian claim concerning the essential conventionality of illocutionary acts, as contrasted with perlocutionary acts, which are, by and large, conceded to be non-conventional. The topic is a large one, and the present discussion is a relatively minor skirmish in what is a much larger argument about the nature of speech acts and, in the view of those who think these important in a theory of meaning, of meaning itself.

Austin saw the notion of a speech act, and that of an illocutionary act in particular, as central to any attempt to get clear on what is involved in an adequate theory of meaning. And, of course, his reason for singling out the illocutionary act for special attention was, in part at least, *just* its alleged essential conventionality.

Most later writers on these topics have departed, in one way or another, from this Austinian position. They have either not distinguished as sharply between illocutions and perlocutions as Austin wanted to do and talked about speech acts in general as if they *all* included some conventional and some non-conventional elements, or they have explicitly rejected the Austinian thesis about the conventionality of illocutions.²

There are, further, theories of meaning which take something very like perlocutions as their central explanatory notion, and attempt to explain the more conventional aspects of language and its use—the aspects Austin thought were illuminated by the idea of an essentially conventional illocution—in terms of such apparently non-conventional matters as some perlocutionary effect aimed at, or achieved by, the user of the language.³

There has been an interesting attempt recently by T. Cohen to recast some of these issues, by arguing the need for a better theory of the relation of illocutions to perlocutions, one where they are seen as being more organically connected than has been the case in the usual treatments.⁴ Such a theory may have the effect of short-circuiting the disagreements alluded to above, on whether illocutions are entirely conventional or not, as well as about whether illocutions or perlocutions are more fundamental in the analysis of meaning, since it would make it clear that these notions are not as independent of each other as we have thought and as they appeared to be in the original Austinian theory. We would then see that the illocution-perlocution dichotomy is not adequate as a

vehicle for becoming clear concerning the relation of intentions and conventions in speech acts, or, more generally, of the conventional and non-conventional components in a theory of meaning, for we must consider both matters of convention and matters of intention (and belief, knowledge, etc.) in relation to both illocutions and perlocutions. Cohen's strategy is to show that "some perlocutions are related to illocutions intimately enough to warrant as much philosophical attention as the related illocutions," attention which until now has not been forthcoming. While I have no quarrel in general with this suggestion and agree with a good part of what Cohen says about perlocutions, I think that some of his remarks about their relationship to illocutions open the door to some rather serious misunderstandings both of Austin's positions on these matters and of the rôle properly belonging to perlocutions in a theory of speech acts. In this paper I wish to show why this is so.

Cohen sees the importance of paying more attention to perlocutions manifested in the need, for which he argues convincingly, to identify kinds of illocutions at least in part by way of what he calls their "associated perlocutions" (the perlocution typically performed, or intended, in performances of a certain type of illocutionary act, as with *warning/alerting*, *arguing/persuading*, *threatening/intimidating* and so on). Such perlocutions can be seen as the "rationale for the illocution," as "giving the illocutionary act, considered as an act of a kind, a point." Moreover, in any given utterance, "it must be possible, or at least appear to those concerned to be possible, that the associated perlocution transpire," if we are to say that in that situation a certain illocutionary act has been, or can be, (happily) performed. (The perlocution in question must not, for example, be *überhaupt* impossible—as it is presumably in "I promise to love you forever," taken literally—or be already accomplished, or pre-empted in some other way by the features of the particular situation—as in "Watch out for the bull," said to someone obviously fleeing one.) For Cohen, one of the things that follow from this is that "(Austin's) idea that the illocution is conventional but the perlocution is not has been shaken" and he seems to think that it has been shaken in two different ways. First, "within a total speech act, the perlocution has some claim to be counted as a conventional constituent." Second, the allegedly conventional illocutionary act must, at least in part, be understood by reference to its associated perlocution(s) which is (are), however, only partially conventional. Thus, the conventionality of illocutions infects perlocutions and, conversely, the non-conventional element in the latter compromises the pure conventionality of the former. This double relation between illocutions and perlocutions "... is manifest... in terms of what the participants mutually take to be the possibility of the occurrence of the

associated perlocution." The general moral to be drawn is that, contrary to the prevailing view and indeed in line with Austin's own suspicion, "... it is the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions which seems likeliest to give trouble" and that the conventional/non-conventional distinction will not serve to explicate or sustain the illocutionary/perlocutionary distinction. Even more generally, this shows that "such apparently non-grammatical matters as who believes what, and what it is reasonable to believe and expect, must be accounted for in any adequate treatment of the use of language."

Now while this last moral cannot be objected to it taken in a broad, general way, it becomes more problematic if it is offered, or comes to be seen, as a counter in any argument about assigning and locating the respective rôles of conventional and non-conventional elements in speech acts, and, insofar as these play a part in a theory of meaning, in the analysis of meaning itself.⁵ In particular, we must ask whether anything Cohen says about associated perlocutions requires that we reject Austin's claims concerning the essential conventionality of illocutionary acts.

I shall not discuss the first of Cohen's contentions noted above, that associated perlocutions themselves have a conventional rôle in the total speech act. I am inclined to agree with this, but in any case this would not, by itself, render *illocutions* less conventional than Austin takes them to be. Further, even if there *are* non-conventional elements in speech acts, and even if one must make reference to these in describing a particular speech act, it does not follow that some other element of that act is not conventional. Finally, it would have to be shown separately that the conventional element is not the one primarily or indeed, perhaps exclusively relevant to the meaning of an utterance.

The objection I wish to bring has to do with the second contention, that concerning the rôle of perlocutions—with their non-conventional features—in identifying illocutions. Granted that the illocutionary act of, say, *warning*, has its sense only in terms of the associated perlocutionary act of *alerting*, does it follow that in a given case no warning can occur unless an alerting occurs? Of course it does not, but then neither does it follow that the speaker must *intend* that an alerting occur and, finally, that he must *believe* that an alerting can occur. Nothing in the rôle of associated perlocutions as outlined by Cohen tends to show that for a speaker to utter a warning he must believe that his addressee can be alerted or has not already been alerted (with the addressee being required to hold some corresponding beliefs), though, of course, he (and the addressee) may well, and probably typically do, hold just such beliefs. There may even be good arguments for requiring that they hold such beliefs, but these

cannot rest on the general relationship noted by Cohen. Even if the analysis of *kinds of* illocutions involves reference to *kinds of* perlocutions, it may still be the case that identifying a *particular* utterance as an illocution of a certain kind is independent of what if any, perlocution is intended, believed to be possible or actually performed by its utterer. Thus in uttering "There are bears in that thicket," I may well intend to *elate* my companions and may succeed in *alarming* (some of) them, or *vice versa* (though of course I *may* intend to do and succeed in doing the same thing). Yet I would claim that whether my utterance is *in a given case* a warning or a promise or whatever⁶ depends on none of these things but rather on a complex of facts about who these companions are—say, a party of hunters or a group of lost children—and on what has occurred and been said prior to the utterance in question. I have made this point in terms of intentions, but surely it holds equally for the beliefs and expectations Cohen talks about. There is no reason to suppose that the speaker may not even think that it is possible to elate the children or that it is possible to alarm the hunters, much less that whether he thinks so or not, things may not be so. No general reasons of the kind which, according to Cohen, render "I promise to love you forever" strange apply, and we only need to fill in the situation in certain ways to see how it might even be plausible for him to think in such ways. (Suppose the children on a nature hike, or the hunters inexperienced city types out on their first duck hunt.) The point is, however, that what renders the utterance the illocution that it is is the way such facts *are*, not the way the speaker *thinks* another, special kind of, fact about the hearer's mind to be. If this is right, there is no reason to accept Cohen's conclusion that beliefs, expectations and intentions being essentially non-conventional matters, their relevance to what illocutionary act a speaker performs renders that act in some measure non-conventional. And if this is so, Austin can still be held to be right in insisting on the essential conventionality of the illocutionary act; for that in such and such circumstances, given such and such facts—which do not include any having to do with the speaker's or the hearer's beliefs—a particular utterance has a particular illocutionary force may plausibly be said to be a conventional matter.

What I am emphasizing, and what Cohen's discussion obscures, is the distinction between relations connecting *particular* locutions, illocutions and perlocutions (*Ls*, *Is* and *Ps*, to adopt Cohen's symbols) and those connecting *kinds of* *L*, *I* and *P*. Austin was, of course, quite properly concerned with the latter, since that is of what is of interest in a theory of language, he outlined a schema for such relations in which the criteria governing those of kinds of *I* to both kinds of *L* and kinds of *P* were

conventional. This is quite compatible with Cohen's insistence on the important role *Ps* play in the description of *Is*.

Nothing, however, follows from this concerning the components which must go into specifying the *I* which occurs on the occasion of a particular utterance. That this is so is indeed fortunate, for if it were not, and if it were the case, as Cohen suggests, that beliefs, expectations and intentions concerning associated perlocutions entered essentially into the determination of what *I* occurs on particular occasions, we would find understanding what is said much more difficult than we do. For both believing a perlocution possible and intending to produce it, on the one hand, and producing it actually, on the other, depend on possibly idiosyncratic and certainly not easily ascertained psychological facts about speaker and hearer, respectively. We are spared the necessity of trying to discover in every case what these facts are, before we can understand another or know that we have made ourselves intelligible, because we do not assume that an act's *being* a certain kind of act either depends on, or is equivalent to, its *being intended to be* a certain kind of act. Cohen's arguments tend to show that an act's being a certain kind of act has to do with its being an act *normally* intended to be an act of that kind. What he *claims* is that they show that for an act to be a certain *I*, it must *in fact* be intended (and, perhaps, understood as intended) to be that act. But there is a great difference between these two positions. Even if we admit the former, we need not admit the latter; but admitting the former is quite compatible with the Austinian position on conventionality.

Thus, for example, an act by a foreign government may be an act of war, and be so regarded by us, if it has features normally associated with belligerent intentions, without the question of ascertaining the *actual* intentions of that government even arising. For how would we go about this, in any case? The "court of last resort" usually proposed by those advancing an intentional analysis—asking the party presumably having privileged access to such putative intention, namely the speaker or, more generally, the agent—will hardly help here: aggressors do not usually own up to their aggressive intent. What we do in such cases, of course, is to assume the presence of the relevant intention on the basis of other features of the act in question. And we are quite entitled to proceed in this way, as no doubt we are right in the vast majority of cases. The point is that it is the act's being a certain kind that is evidence for the presence of the relevant intention, not the other way around.

Thus while we can agree that one indeed needs to know what *Ps* are associated with what *Is*, in order to know what *I* or range of *Is* may be performed in the performance of a particular *L*, one does not need to

know what, if any, *P* has been contemplated, intended or performed by the speaker performing that *L* in order to know what *I* has been performed. For example, Cohen is right in pointing out that one must know that utterances beginning "I promise. . ." have, as both their associated perlocutionary *object* and sequel,⁸ the addressee's acceptance of the promise; but he misrepresents the nature of this insight by immediately recasting it in terms of the alleged requirement that the speaker must aim at securing the acceptance of his promise in order to be promising. This may suggest that it is crucial in every case of promising that such acceptance be at least aimed at as a perlocutionary *object*, if not actually secured. Clearly, to require the latter would be a quite unreasonable constraint to place on the occurrence of illocutions such as promising, warning, arguing, etc. Your not being persuaded, whether on account of superior wisdom or sheer obtuseness, does not mean that I have not been arguing; your refusal to be intimidated, that I have not threatened you.⁹ Of course, Cohen sees this, hence his alternative condition that securing acceptance must appear *possible* to the promiser. But there are still not enough "possibles" here: what we need to say—and *all* we need to say—is that it must *be possible to appear possible* to the speaker that the perlocution transpire. This means that Cohen is right in suggesting that what is possible—and, perhaps, what is reasonable—to believe is a crucial determinant of the illocutions we produce, but wrong in suggesting that "who believes what" is equally relevant. One can agree with his claim that "... for illocutions which have associated perlocutions, the question whether the illocutions have occurred and even what the illocutions are, cannot be answered without information about the openness of the perlocutions" (p. 503). But one need not agree that such questions cannot be answered without information about whether the perlocutions *appear* open to the people involved in the speech situation. Whether something *is* open and whether it is *possible* for something to appear to someone to be open, though themselves different questions, are *both* questions of a radically different kind from the question whether something *appears* to someone to be open. Whatever facts are relevant to the former two need not include the kind of facts—facts about mental states—crucially involved in the latter. If this is right, then we are not committed to talking about anything which *obviously* cannot be given a conventional analysis (unlike people's actual beliefs, expectations and intentions, which perhaps cannot), and thus Austin's attempt at explicating the illocutionary/perlocutionary distinction in terms of the conventional/non-conventional distinction is not undermined.

It is unfortunate that while most of the time Austin was careful enough to guard against the kind of confusion which I have been discussing, he did

fall prey to it in his brief and mystifying remarks on "uptake."¹⁰ But for us to avoid similar confusion, it is important to see his inquiry as one concerning a relation schema for locutions, illocutions and perlocutions in general, rather than relations within particular LIP-configurations. As for the full analysis of the relation schema both Cohen and I seem to have in mind, that is another and quite complex matter. My purpose here has been merely the limited and negative one of insisting that that important task be separated from a misplaced concern with the alleged rôle of a particular perlocution (and thus of the mental states of speaker and/or hearer) in analyzing and identifying a particular illocution.

NOTES

1. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, 1962 (esp. Lectures VIII-X) and, for example, J. R. Searle, "What is a Speech Act?" in *Philosophy in America* (M. Black, ed.), Muirhead Library of Philosophy, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1965 (esp. p. 230); J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1969 (esp. Ch. 2); P. F. Strawson, "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 73, 1964, pp. 439-460; and W. P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language*, Prentice-Hall, 1964.
2. The first group includes many linguists who have made use of Austinian notions; some important examples of the second are Strawson and Searle, *op. cit.*, and in a somewhat different vein, Zeno Vendler, in *Res Cogitans* (Cornell University Press, 1972); see, for example, p. 62. See also G. H. Bird, "Intentions and Conventions" *Logique et Analyse*, Vol 17, 1974, esp pp. 505-6.
3. Such theories stem primarily from the work of H. P. Grice, beginning with his "Meaning," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXVI, 1957. Some criticisms of Grice may be found in Searle's paper cited above and in P. Ziff, "On H. P. Grice's Account of Meaning," *Analysis*, Vol. XXVIII, 1967, pp. 1-8.
4. T. Cohen, "Illocutions and Perlocutions," *Foundations of Language*, Vol. 9, 1973.
5. Some *loci classici* of such debate are Grice's paper on meaning mentioned in fn. 3, his "Utterer's Meaning, Sentence Meaning and Word-Meaning," *Foundations of Language*, Vol. 4, 1968 and "Utterer's Meaning and Intentions," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXXVIII, 1969 and the papers by Searle and Strawson cited in fn. 1.
6. Could it be a threat? This does not look plausible, but what if I say "There are lions in that pit" while interrogating a Christian in ancient Rome?
7. Intended to be an act of what kind, though? We seem to be trying to say both that kinds of acts are to be distinguished in terms of the differing intentions relating to them and that intentions are distinguished by the kind of act at which they aim. Something more and more subtle is needed here if we are to avoid either a circle or a regress of intentions.
8. For the perlocutionary object—perlocutionary sequel distinction, see Austin (*op. cit.*, p. 117).
9. And so with the pairs warning/alerting, arguing/persuading, etc., a fact not fully appreciated by Cohen, in spite of his earlier recognition of the "detachability" of perlocutions.
10. Austin, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-6.