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SPEECH ACTS AND TRANSLATION

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0. INTRODUCTION

J.L. Austin's work (especially *How to Do Things with Words*, 1962) on various kinds of speech acts has played an important role in the subsequent development of linguistic theory, particularly with regard to semantics. His notion of performatives, for example, has already become a well-worn item in the linguist's stock. At the same time, his distinctions among the acts we perform when we speak have provided the basis of much recent discussion of some major philosophical problems of long standing.

Of the many articles and longer works that have appeared in the last decade applying Austin's insights to problems in the philosophy of language, I wish in this article to consider only one, one that has proven to be especially influential in discussion of these problems by linguists: J.R. Searle's book, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* published in 1969. More particularly, I attempt here to apply to problems in translation theory Searle's four types of speech acts as outlined in his second chapter, especially in section 2.1. The question I want to raise, and begin to answer, is, "What kinds of speech acts should we attempt to preserve in translation?"

1. FOUR KINDS OF SPEECH ACTS

Searle, developing Austin's original suggestions, distinguishes four kinds of speech acts performed when a speaker utters a sentence:

a. In uttering particular words, morphemes, phones, etc., one is performing UTTERANCE ACTS.

b. In referring to things and predicating things about them, one is performing PROPOSITIONAL ACTS.

c. In "stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc." (24), for example, one is performing ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS. (Numbers in parentheses, as (24), refer to page numbers in Searle, 1969.)

d. In persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, edifying, and inspiring one's hearer(s), for example, one is performing PERLOCUTIONARY ACTS.

The notion of utterance act is the only one of these that most linguistic field workers of my acquaintance find it easy to grasp. To describe someone's utterance in terms of utterance acts is to describe it in terms of the phones, phonemes, intonational contours, morphemes, grammatical classes, clause types, or whatever other phonological or grammatical units one chooses to recognize in the utterance. (Searle himself points out (25) that utterance acts could, if one wished, be divided into phonetic, phonemic, morphemic, etc. acts.)

The notion of propositional act is a bit more difficult. Propositional acts include acts of referring (e.g. I refer to Sam when I say "Sam is tall.") and acts of predicating (e.g. in "Sam is tall." I predicate of Sam that he is tall, or, as philosophers also put it sometimes, I predicate tallness of Sam). But even so exemplified, the notion of predicating is not obvious, and is often confused with the notion of asserting. As a matter of fact, Searle points out (26) that the traditional use of "predication" in philosophy is more closely tied to assertion than the way he uses the term. So for our purposes here I think it is best not to trouble ourselves over referring and predicating, but rather to try to grasp the global notion of which they are parts, namely, propositional acts.

And to understand the idea of propositional acts, the best approach is by example—in the following set of sentences of Searle's (22), the same propositional acts are performed:

(1) Sam smokes habitually.

(2) Does Sam smoke habitually?

(3) Sam, smoke habitually!

(4) Would that Sam smoked habitually.

Note first of all that the propositional acts are the same in (1) - (4) even though an assertion is made (normally) only in uttering (1). As Searle puts it (29):

> *A proposition is to be sharply distinguished from an assertion or statement of it*...Stating and asserting are acts, but propositions are not acts. A proposition is what is asserted in the act of asserting, what is stated in the act of stating.

(We could continue the list: a proposition is what is questioned in the act of questioning, what is commanded in the act of commanding, etc.) But let Searle continue:

> The same point in a different way: an assertion is a (very special kind of) commitment to the truth of a proposition. The expression of a proposition is a propositional act...

Note secondly that one cannot perform the propositional act of expressing a proposition without at the same time doing something else like stating, questioning, etc.—in other words, without performing an illocutionary act. I suspect that this fact accounts for the difficulty some have in keeping distinct the two notions of propositional act and illocutionary act.

As for illocutionary acts, Searle has not defined them for us, but merely exemplified them (see c. above). (Perhaps in some of his other writings to which I do not have access he does provide a definition.) Besides the examples already given, he mentions as illocutionary acts arguing, warning, requesting, informing (25); apologizing (30); greeting (49); thanking (for), advising, congratulating (67). (See Austin, 1962 for a more extensive list.)

Since the notion of "illocutionary force" is closely related to that of illocutionary act, the following discussion of the former should give us some further understanding of the latter (30):

> In the syntactical structure of the sentence...the illocutionary force indicator shows how the proposition is to be taken, or to put it another way, what illocutionary force the utterance is to have; that is, what illocutionary act the speaker is performing in the utterance of that sentence. Illocutionary force indicating devices in English include at least: word order, stress, intonation contour, punctuation, the mood of the verb, and the so-called performative verbs. I may indicate the kind of illocutionary act I am performing by beginning the sentence with "I apologize", "I warn", "I state", etc.

The notion of illocutionary act is explained in another way, with some additional examples, in Searle, 1975 (Section 2.) and in Fraser, 1973 (p. 287).

We are a bit better off with the notion of perlocutionary acts, although again Searle exemplifies rather than defines. (It is probably for this reason that it is not always clear which acts Searle would consider to be illocutionary, and which perlocutionary.) But he does provide the following explanation (25):

> Correlated with the notion of illocutionary acts is the notion of the consequences or *effects* such acts have on the actions, thoughts, or beliefs, etc. of hearers. For example, by arguing I may *persuade* or *convince* someone, by warning him I may *scare* or *alarm* him, by making a request I may *get him to do something*, by informing him I may *convince him (enlighten, edify, inspire him, get him to realize)*. The italicized expressions above denote perlocutionary acts.

To bring about an effect on one's hearer by virtue of performing an illocutionary act, then, is to perform a perlocutionary act.

Why is it necessary, or even likely to be useful, to complicate matters by distinguishing these four kinds of speech acts? This question can be answered much the same way as the question, "why complicate things by making such distinctions as phonology vs. grammar, or form vs. meaning?" Such distinctions are made because the things being distinguished *do not vary togeather*; a specified change in one does not always correspond to a constant specified change in the other. Put in slightly more esoteric terms, there is not a one-to-one mapping between the two; they are not "isomorphic."

So for speech acts, setting up four types of them constitutes a claim that any two of these types are at least partly independent. For example, in saying, "Sue loves Joe." and "Joe loves Sue." I may be performing the same phonetic acts (ignoring minor variations), but I am certainly not performing the same propositional acts. And as we have already seen in sentences (1) - (4), one can perform the same propositional acts without performing the same illocutionary acts.

But the partial mutual independence of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts is also important. One example should make this independence clear. I can utter the sentence "Mountain climbing is dangerous." and thereby perform the illocutionary act of asserting. But on one occasion the perlocutionary act I thereby perform may be to frighten my hearer, and on another occasion it may be to challenge, or simply inform, or induce contempt toward my unwillingness to incur risks. And I may even intend to frighten my hearer, yet only succeed in whetting his appetite for a climb.

In other words, even if we know what illocutionary act a speaker is performing in uttering something, and even if we know what effect he was trying to achieve (i.e. what perlocutionary act he was trying to perform), that is still not enough to tell us what perlocutionary act he did in fact perform. For that depends partly on the hearer.

2. TRANSLATING SPEECH ACTS

With this introduction to what Searle has in mind by his four types of speech acts, we can now ask, "Which types of speech acts should we attempt to preserve in translation?" The answer, of course, depends on our purposes in translating.

Should we preserve utterance acts in translation? I believe the only time anyone even comes close to preserving phonetic or phonemic acts is when he transliterates a stretch of speech from the source language to the receptor language. (For discussion of transliteration and other possible ways of preserving phonological and graphological acts in translation, see Catford, 1965:56-70.)

Utterance acts as producing particular morphemes and instances of particular grammatical units (e.g. animate noun, interrogative clause, conditional sentence)—i.e. Searle's morphemic acts and other grammatical acts—can be preserved in translation. The result is what Beekman and Callow (1974:21) call a "highly literal" translation, such as an interlinear translation, quite appropriate for some purposes. (See further Catford, 1965:71-72.) But for translation intended to communicate to an audience with no knowledge of the source language, we may safely conclude: "No, we should not strive to preserve utterance acts."

To introduce our discussion of the other three types of speech acts, I begin with some quotations from translation theorists:

(5) The expression, *transfers the meaning*, means that the translation conveys to the reader or hearer the information that the original conveyed to its readers or hearers. (Beekman and Callow, 1974:33)

(6) The translator...has basically two matters to resolve regarding each question:

(1) Is this a real or rhetorical question?

(2) What is the purpose served by this question?

(op. cit., p. 230)

(7) A translation which attempts to produce a dynamic rather than a formal equivalence is based upon "the principle of equivalent effect"...In such a translation one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message, but with the dynamic relationship..., that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message. (Nida, 1964:159)

(8) What one must determine is the response of the receptor to the translated message. This response must then be compared with the way in which the original receptors presumably reacted to the message when it was given in its original setting. (Nida and Taber, 1969:1)

As I understand (5), the emphasis seems to be on the preservation of propositional acts in translation (if by "information" they mean "propositional content"). In (6), interpreted in the light of the discussion on pages 230-238, the concern is with illocutionary acts. And in (7) and (8), the insistence on reproducing the same kind of response as the original message elicited in its audience is an insistence on preserving perlocutionary acts.

But if perlocutionary acts are determined in part by the audience, not wholly by the speaker/writer, how can we find out what perlocutionary acts the writer performed if our only information is what he wrote? For example, we simply do not know how Matthew's readers reacted to his Gospel. We therefore do not know what perlocutionary acts Matthew performed in writing it or any part of it. So how can we even attempt to preserve these unknown acts?

We turn then to the two remaining kinds of speech acts, propositional and illocutionary. Let us consider the following example from Matthew 3.13: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John." The propositional acts performed by Matthew in writing this sentence (more exactly, the Greek from which it is translated) include the following:

referring to Jesus, Galilee, the Jordan River and John the Baptist;

predicating of Jesus that he came from Galilee to John the Baptist at the Jordan River.

Besides these propositional acts, Matthew was also performing the illocutionary act of asserting the proposition that Jesus came from Galilee to John the Baptist at the Jordan River.

This analysis of a very simple example illustrates an important point: the dependence of propositional acts on illocutionary acts. As Searle puts it (29):

> propositional acts cannot occur alone. One cannot just express a proposition while doing nothing else and have thereby performed a complete speech act....When a proposition is expressed it is always expressed in the performance of an illocutionary act.

And later (123):

> Predication is...an abstraction, but it is not a separate act. It is a slice from the total illocutionary act....If we remember the senses in which predication (and hence the propositional act) is an abstraction from the total illocutionary act, there is no harm in referring to it as "the speech act of predication". What we are speaking of, though, is that portion of the illocutionary act which determines the content applied to the object referred to by the subject expression, leaving aside the illocutionary mode in which that content is applied.

Note further that while we have identified Matthew's illocutionary act as simply asserting, it is useful to ask why he made the assertion. Put another way, what was he trying to do to his readers by virtue of writing this sentence? What perlocutionary acts was he trying to perform (as opposed to what perlocutionary acts he did perform, about which we can at best speculate)? Since the illocutionary act of

asserting is normally used to inform or to remind, and since we have no information either from the entire Gospel of Matthew, our knowledge of Greek, or our knowledge of the culture of Matthew and his readers to indicate that Matthew's usage here is not normal, we can assume that he was intending to either inform or remind his readers that Jesus came from Galilee to John the Baptist at the Jordan River. (The choice between reminding and informing depends on whether Matthew though his readers were already aware of Jesus' coming, etc.

But have we materially advanced our knowledge of Matthew's speech acts by asking what were his intended perlocutionary acts? We determined his intended perlocutionary acts strictly on the basis of his illocutionary acts plus an assumption that asserting is done to inform or remind—as assumption for languages universally, not for Matthew's language specifically. So answering "What were his illocutionary acts?" turns out to be equivalent, given a set of such universal assumptions, to answering, "What were his intended perlocutionary acts?"

From this example, then, we can propose the following answer to our major question:

(9) In translation for effective communication we are primarily concerned to preserve (a) the propositional acts and (b) the illocutionary acts (equivalently, the intended perlocutionary acts) of the original speaker/writer.

Note that the intended perlocutionary acts of the writer are not necessarily his expected ones. In John 20.30,31 we are told that the writer's intended perlocutionary act for his whole work was the inducing of belief. But that fact does not entail that he expected every reader of his Gospel to respond by believing.

I now want to consider two more areas—embedded speech acts and figurative speech—to see whether either will suggest any modification of (9) above.

3. EMBEDDED SPEECH ACTS

In the example just discussed from Matthew 3.13 we were dealing only with the speech acts of Matthew. But when a writer reports or otherwise mentions someone's speech acts, then we have speech acts embedded within the writer's speech acts. More specifically, the writer's propositional acts include the predicating of someone that he performed some speech acts. For example, in 1.20 Matthew asserts that an angel said to Joseph, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary..." Here we have not only Matthew's speech acts, but also those of the angel—or, more exactly, the speech acts of the angel as asserted by Matthew. In this case, we recognize the angel's illocutionary acts of addressing in "Joseph, son of David," of commanding in "do not fear..." and in "you shall call his name Jesus," and of

asserting (more specifically, explaining and predicting) in "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit," "she will bear a son," and "he will save his people from their sins." From verse 24, "Joseph...did as the angel...commanded him," we can infer that the angel performed the perlocutionary act of getting Joseph to do something. And certainly this perlocutionary act must be preserved in faithful translation.

Does this mean, then, that we must strive to preserve perlocutionary acts in translation after all? No, for the perlocutionary act of the angel is embedded in Matthew's speech acts, and forms a part of Matthew's propositional and illocutionary acts. If we preserve the writer's propositional and illocutionary acts as (9) requires, then all of the angel's speech acts, to the extent that they are reported by Matthew, are thereby included.

A similar example is found in Acts 2, where in verse 37 the writer asserts how the crowd responded to Peter's words—i.e. asserts what perlocutionary acts Peter performed in verses 14-36. Again, in preserving the writer's propositional and illocutionary acts, we cover Peter's perlocutionary acts as reported by the writer.

The principle of embedded speech acts can be extended indefinitely. In Luke 16.27-28 we have Luke *asserting* that

Jesus *asserted* that
the rich man *requested* that
Lazarus *warn* his brothers.

4. FIGURATIVE SPEECH

Consider Matthew 7.18: "A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit." Analyzing not Matthew's speech acts, but Jesus' speech acts as reported by Matthew, we can reasonably make the following analysis:

propositional acts: referring to sound trees, bad trees, evil fruit and good fruit; predicating of sound trees that they cannot bear evil fruit, and of bad trees that they cannot bear good fruit;

illocutionary act: asserting the propositions just mentioned, and also asserting that people cannot produce behaviour inconsistent with their character.

Presumably effective translation would preserve, explicitly or implicitly, all the propositional and illocutionary acts given in this analysis. The translator would use expressions for referring to sound and bad trees, good and evil fruit, and for asserting the propositions about them. He would further take pains to ensure that the expressions used in the receptor language, either for this sentence alone or taken in the broader context of verses 15-20, could be normally used to assert that people cannot produce behaviour inconsistent with their

character. By this analysis of the translator's task, then (9) stands as given.

But what if the rules governing the use of figurative speech in the receptor language preclude tha possibility of asserting something about people by referring to trees and fruit? Or what if trees and fruit are unknown to the speakers of the language? Or, what is more likely, what if grapes, thorns, figs, and thistles are unknown, and we wish to translate verse 16b: "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?"

An analysis of this sentence parallel to that of verse 18 yields the following:

propositional acts: referring to grapes, thorns, figs and thistles; predicating of grapes the impossibility of gathering them from thorns, and predicating of figs the impossibility of gathering them from thistles;

illocutionary acts: asserting the propositions just mentioned, and also asserting that one cannot encounter in people of one sort behaviour that belongs to people of another sort.

Let us assume that for the language in question, it seems best to translate verse 16b retaining the general image of plants and their fruit, but with no specific reference to the plants mentioned in Matthew or to local "cultural equivalents": "As everyone knows, you can't go to one kind of plant and find on it the fruit which belongs to some other kind of plant." Or for another language, let us assume we must delete the image: "You know that you can't expect anyone to behave in a way contrary to what he is like inside." (These two translations illustrate approaches 1 and 7, respectively, in Beekman and Callow, 1974:145-149.)

In neither of these translations have we preserved the propositional acts of referring to grapes, thorns, etc. In the second one, we have not even preserved the illocutionary act of asserting a proposition about plants. Either these translations are unacceptable, or our analysis of Jesus' speech acts is incorrect, or (9) must be modified.

In light of the discussion in Beekman and Callow, 1974:137-150, I will assume that the suggested translations are in fact acceptable, given certain facts about the receptor language and culture. Can we analyze the speech acts in some other reasonable way, then, or ought we to modify the claim in (9)?

Since Searle explicitly limits his discussion of speech acts to literal uses of language (19-21), his framework offers little guidance for analyzing figurative uses. Consider the following alternative analysis for verse 16b:

propositional acts: referring to people, their character, and their behaviour, and predicating of people that they cannot produce behaviour inconsistent with their character;

illocutionary acts: asserting the above proposition.
By this analysis, any mention of grapes, thorns, etc. would have to be on the level of utterance acts.

The alternative analysis is defective by virtue of its relegating the meaning of the Greek morphemes for "grape" etc. to the level of utterance acts along with the morphemes themselves as grammatical units and the phoneme sequences representing them. We are then left without any principled basis for preserving historical fidelity (as in Beekman and Callow, 1974:35ff.). We also have no way to explain the fact that hearers of Jesus' words had first to react to the literal meaning of "grape" etc. before comprehending that he was making a point about people, not plants.

The former analysis avoids these problems, but has a problem of its own not yet mentioned. That is, it includes an illocutionary act ("asserting that one cannot encounter in people of one sort behaviour that belongs to people of another sort") whose propositional content is not at all reflected in the propositional acts. We can remedy this defect by adding to the propositional acts another set to correspond to that illocutionary act. The resulting analysis follows:

propositional acts:

(a) referring to grapes, thorns, figs, and thistles; predicating of grapes the impossibility of gathering them from thorns; predicating of figs the impossibility of gathering them from thistles;

(b) referring to people, their character, and their behaviour, and predicating of people that they cannot produce behaviour inconsistent with their character;

illocutionary acts:

(a) asserting the propositions in (a) above;

(b) asserting the propositions in (b) above.

While this last analysis may better fit Searle's framework, it in no way solves the problem raised by translation situations where the propositional and illocutionary acts about plants cannot be preserved. I therefore suggest the following modification of claim (9), using "image", "topic", and "point of similarity" in the sense of Beekman and Callow, 1974:137-150. The expression "results in wrong or zero meaning" is also theirs (p. 37).

(10) In translation for effective communication we are primarily concerned to preserve the propositional and illocutionary acts of the original speaker/writer. In cases where preserving the image in the translation of figurative speech results in wrong or zero meaning, the propositional and illocutionary acts involving the image need not be preserved, but the propositional and illocutionary acts involving the topic and the point of similarity must be preserved.

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An intriguing idea developed in some detail by John Beekman (personal communication), and also suggested by David Thomas (personal communication), is the hypothesis that perlocutionary acts are more a function of whole discourses than of the constituents of that discourse. An alternative hypothesis would make explicit the model implicitly followed here, where speech acts of all four sorts are progressively embedded in speech acts of the same sorts at a higher hierarchical level. We could posit an increasing importance for perlocutionary acts as one reaches higher levels, without abandoning the progressive embedding notion implicit in a hierarchical model.

This issue is just one of many that could be profitably pursued at greater length than the above presentation has allowed. Hopefully readers with more experience in translation than I, or with more acquaintance with the literature on translation theory than I, will be able to develop some of these ideas for the sake of effective translation.

6. READING

Besides works mentioned in this paper, other books and articles are listed here that are likely to be useful for anyone interested in pursuing the notion of speech acts. On the other hand, scores of works dealing with questions raised by Austin and Searle are omitted.

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