

Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy

Volume 79

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SPEECH ACTS, MIND, AND SOCIAL REALITY

Discussions with John R. Searle

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FRANK KANNETZKY

EXPRESSIBILITY, EXPLICABILITY, AND TAXONOMY

*Some Remarks on the Principle of Expressibility**

1.

Searle's principle of expressibility, the claim "whatever can be meant can be said" (Searle 1969: 19), is often understood as the postulate that the transformation of implicit or primary speech acts¹ into explicit ones is always possible.² This reading is supported by the following claim: "... it is always possible for him [the speaker] to say exactly what he means. Therefore, *it is in principle possible for every speech act one performs or could perform to be uniquely determined by a given sentence (or set of sentences)*, given the assumptions that the speaker is speaking literally and that the context is appropriate" (Searle 1969: 18; my emphasis).

The distinction 'explicit-implicit' is often explained in terms of 'conscious-unconscious' or 'intentional-unintentional', e.g. in analogy to the difference between knowledge currently not present and knowledge directly available at the moment. Another characterization of that pair of terms aims at the difference between what is said in literal meaning (explicit) and what is said due to conceptual and contextual relations (implicit consequences and implicatures), that is, it aims at the logical and pragmatic preconditions that are necessary for what is said being in effect or valid (presuppositions).

Concerning the pragmatic role of utterances which has to be inferred primarily from the context, I will not use the terms 'explicit' and 'implicit' in the first sense, but rather in the second. For example the utterance "You stand on my foot" is usually treated as a demand and not as a statement, and the illocutionary role of that utterance is explicated correspondingly. Here the distinction between explicit and implicit coincides at least partly with the distinction 'clear/distinct' vs. 'unclear/indistinct' or between 'unambiguous' vs. 'ambiguous'. Accordingly, a speech act is implicit if what the speaker means by a corresponding utterance is not unmistakably accessible from its form. A paradigmatic case is irony. Explicating a speech act means nothing else than giving the utterance an unmistakable form — at least with respect to the given situation. In this sense, the principle of expressibility states that such an explication is always possible by choosing the explicit performative form of the speech act. Austin calls such a form "the normal or standard form". For Searle explicit performative speech acts take the following

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form: $F(p)$ where F stands for an explicit performative verb ("illocutionary force indicating devices") that represents the corresponding illocutionary force, and p stands for the propositional content of the speech act ("it takes expressions for propositions"). Here the words are used in their literal meaning (Searle 1969: 31; Searle 1975: 1). According to Searle, this form is the 'real' object of the theoretical analysis of speech acts. In effect, the principle of expressibility works as a translation thesis: It is always possible to translate the normal language into a kind of an ideal language that does not leave space for misunderstandings because of its standardization. This is the methodical role of the principle of expressibility: If the principle holds, it is sufficient to examine the linguistic expressions in order to grasp the meaning of utterances.

If the principle of expressibility is interpreted as the claim that all speech acts can be made explicit in the sense explained, then one faces the following question: Is the principle not restricted by the fact that most of our speech acts really are 'implicit' in some way or other and by the fact that there are even certain implicit or indirect speech acts or illocutionary roles that cannot be performed at all if we would make them explicit? It is reasonable to understand the principle of expressibility not only as a claim of the semantic equivalence of implicit and explicit expressions for the purpose of analysis, but also as a claim of a pragmatic equivalence of implicit and explicit utterances in concrete situations? Standard counterexamples against the claim for pragmatic equivalence of implicit and explicit speech acts and therefore against the principle itself are apparently 'lying', 'offending' and 'hinting'.³ If I want to offend someone, I will miss my intent if I say "Hereby I offend you!" Such an utterance is not an offence. If I tell someone explicitly that I am lying to him, then there is no lying at all. The same holds for hinting. In those cases an explicit expression prevents the success of the speech act.

Searle is right, however, not to be moved by such considerations. Implicit speech acts do not contradict the principle of expressibility. One reason for that is that the principle does not fix the addressee of the explication, it merely states that one can explicate what was (implicitly) meant. The addressee must not be identical with the hearer. When I explain my behaviour to someone by using the words "I lied to Miller" I also make my speech act explicit. Nevertheless, to Miller I lied. The difference between the two kinds of explication is that in the case of "direct lying" the addressee is the "target" of the speech act, while in the second case he is my "peer". This differentiation is irrelevant for the principle of expressibility.

Second, it is not in any case reasonable to make the speech act explicit to everyone if it is to have success. Theoretically, this is not too relevant. The circumstance that a speech act does not lead to the intended outcome (for example that the addressee is offended) if it is made explicit to the addressee, does not affect the possibility of the explication. With respect to the intended result, the use of explicit performative verbs or any other explication of the speech act could be a pragmatic mistake.

Third, one should not confuse performing a speech act with reflecting upon it, and reflecting upon it with explicating it.

2. EXPLICATION AS THE ASSIGNMENT OF A SYNTACTIC FORM

If possible 'misunderstandability' or 'partial incomprehensibility' is a condition for a given utterance to be implicit, then 'making it explicit' means nothing else than making the utterance unambiguous or fully comprehensible. That means to give the utterance a certain syntactic form — the so called 'normal or standard form'. This form will make explicit the illocutionary role (i.e. the modus of the utterance), its propositional content (reference and predication), and the conditions for its fulfilment or 'happiness' (Austin). Disregarding the difficulties with this imagined separation between modus and content, and provided that the explication of the propositional content does not produce any problems, the question still remains whether every illocutionary role could be syntactically represented. Searle claims that there is a kind of correspondence principle between semantics and syntax. He thinks that "basic semantic differences are likely to have syntactical consequences" (Searle 1975: 1). Therefore it seems reasonable to look for semantic differences if there are syntactic ones. The question is whether there is an unambiguous explicit performative, conventional verbalization for every illocutionary role, which captures the semantic differences only by linguistic expressions. Is it possible to state the illocutionary role of an expression in a *context-invariant manner* by giving its explicit performative form, despite the different ways of using expressions?

The question presupposes the existence of such an expression. But let us ask first if there are explicit speech acts in the sense of unmistakable utterances at all. The answer is: yes and no. We usually understand what other people mean. We know the fulfilment conditions of their speech acts, we are able to judge the consequences, e.g. what social facts are produced by, and which commitments and entitlements arise from the performance of these speech acts for speakers and hearers. Understanding is indicated then by the proper continuation of either a discourse or a common action, or in the following or resulting actions (for example positive or negative sanctions, or simply the absence of inadequate reactions). The corresponding criteria of correctness and adequacy are normally not expressed, but they are known (implicitly or practically) due to the fact that we participate in a collective practice. If intelligibility is a sufficient condition for explicitness then there exist explicit speech acts in the sense of the concept of understanding mentioned. However, explicitness in this sense does not depend on a certain syntactic form of the utterances, e.g. the standard form of speech acts.

On the other hand, misunderstanding can never be completely excluded, even if the explicit performative form (or standard form) of speech acts is used. Therefore the question whether there exists explicit and therefore unmistakable speech acts has a negative answer. The reason is this: explicating a given utterance in order to make it understandable is to explain what can be done with it in a given context, what follows from it (logically *and* pragmatically), what counts as reason for it, what is regarded as proper response etc. That is, explicating an utterance means to explain how it is embedded into a given familiar practice.

Speech act theory wants to "translate" the utterance into its explicit performative form and state the corresponding rules for the proper and meaningful use of these linguistic forms (Searle) or its "conditions of happiness" (Austin).⁴ However, can

there really be a theory of the structure of speech acts and of the corresponding rules for using performative verbs that can fulfill this task? The explicit performative form of an utterance (that is given by a speaker, for example, in order to clarify the meaning of his initial utterance to the hearer) has to fit in the context as well as the implicit form. This means that the explicit form is subjected to the same difficulties as the implicit form. Frege's discussion of the so-called "assertive force" ("behauptende Kraft") shows that giving an explicit form is not sufficient for exploring the true role of an utterance. For an utterance that is separated from its context to have the linguistic form of an assertion does not mean automatically that it is an assertion. Frege takes as example an actor standing at the stage and exclaiming "Fire!" The actor would not be more credible if he said that he truly asserted that the house were on fire and that he did not pretend it (see Frege 1918: 63f.). The assertive force does not arise just from *saying* that one truly asserts something or just from saying that something is true, but the circumstances have also to be appropriate. In other words: Understanding involves more than grasping what is explicitly said.

To sum up: Sometimes it is not advisable to make implicit speech acts explicit by assigning a certain syntactical form, and sometimes it is not helpful. In the first case, implicit and explicit speech acts are not pragmatically equivalent, in the second they might be pragmatically equivalent, but this does not help making them unmistakable.

3. EXPLICATION AS THE CLASSIFICATION WITHIN A TAXONOMY

Searle's main concern is the semantics of speech acts and not ensuring their intended pragmatic effects. If he wants to give a semantic analysis of utterances, he needs a criterion for the equality of implicit and explicit speech acts or utterances. However, he does not give such a criterion. Referring to certain syntactic forms — in this case to the occurrence of certain (performative) verbs — is circular, since the principle of expressibility just should guarantee that one can orientate on (syntactically) explicit utterances in speech act theory. But the 'context equivalence' of implicit and explicit speech acts could be a criterion. That two speech acts are context equivalent means that they have the same fulfilment conditions, it means that they bring about the same obligations and entitlements and the same shift of rights between speaker and hearer, that both produce the same (institutional) facts — one does, or can do, the same things by performing those speech acts in equal contexts. The context equivalence of speech acts means that they play the same communicative role. It seems as if Searle had in mind just this when he proposed a taxonomy of speech acts, which is at the same time a taxonomy of possible communicative roles of linguistic utterances (Searle 1975). One can go a step further: It is not only a taxonomy of communicative roles, but — due to the principle of expressibility and its constitutive position for speech act theory⁵ — it is also a taxonomy of linguistic expressions, especially of performative verbs. In this sense, it is a kind of meaning theory for the pragmatic sense of speech act words, whether used in an explicitly performative way or not.

In his book "Speech Acts" Searle showed how speech acts and meaning cohere: the meaning of utterances is composed of the illocutionary role and the propositional content. This is a structural analysis of speech acts, but not a complete theory of meaning. It would allow full understanding of every possible speech act only if one had a complete classification of the possible pragmatic or illocutionary roles that can be played by speech acts. This task should just be done by a taxonomy of speech acts. Hence, under the assumptions of speech act theory, the taxonomy of speech acts could be regarded as a kind of meaning theory, at least as a partial one. If we can classify an utterance within the taxonomy, we understand at least the pragmatic component of its meaning and — given an understanding of the propositional content — the entire expression.

However, the speech act theory faces the following dilemma: On the one hand the principle of expressibility is needed as a methodical precondition for the investigation of speech acts, that is, according to Searle, for a theory of meaning as well. On the other hand the principle of expressibility presupposes just such a theory if it is read as postulating that implicit speech acts can always be transformed into explicit ones. For judging this transformation correctly one needs a criterion for regarding implicit and explicit speech acts as equal. Otherwise one could not know whether the speech act in question is in fact properly represented or not, or whether the primary utterance and its explication are truly synonymous or not. A *complete* taxonomy or classification of speech acts could be a starting point to solve this difficulty.

Explicating a primary utterance or giving its meaning would be then a two-step assignment to a speech act type that is determined by rules fixed in the taxonomy. First, the illocutionary role of the utterance is clarified by assigning the proper performative verb. The utterance is categorized by this assignment into a classificatory scheme of possible speech acts that contains the rules for using the performative verb. Second, the propositional content is represented by expressions in its literal meaning, that is, in a kind of fixed or standardized language.⁶ The transformation of implicit speech acts into explicit ones is consequently tied to a taxonomy of speech acts, and therefore to a (complete) classification of possible language games and actions. Otherwise — that is, in case an utterance does not match any of the given taxonomic categories — we could not explain the meaning of this utterance by using the taxonomy.

4. EXPLICATION, REFLECTION, AND TAXONOMY

When reflecting on given speech acts we name them with "title words" like 'asking', 'asserting', 'promising' and so on. The differentiations that we name with such title words are practically familiar to us, and we master these forms quite naturally. We often distinguish, for example, a question from an assertion by means of intonation; a request is emphasized in another way than a question.⁷ We distinguish the propriety of the responses to such utterances accordingly: In case of a decision question (i.e. a yes-no-question) the mere repetition of the question would not count as proper response, since an approval or a disapproval is expected, yes or no; while a repetition of the content is an entirely usual response in case of a command.

Nevertheless, the ability to name such illocutions does not belong to the practical mastery of these linguistic forms, as we can see by observing children. They are able to ask, to assert etc., even if they lack the ability to name these forms correctly. This reflective ability belongs to a full language competence, of course.

When a speech act fails we often determine its role by explicitly naming it: "That was a question, not a statement", "I only informed you about, I haven't asserted it", "I wanted to apologize, not to justify" etc. This is an act of (anaphoric) reflection on a preceding action in order to explicate what one actually meant or wanted to do or in order to commit oneself to a certain illocution by using these title words or terms of reflection. We can then use these title words also to perform the speech acts in question directly. "Hereby I ask you, whether...", "Hereby I promise you that..." etc. However, this reflective use is methodically later than the practical performance of these speech acts — the capability to perform a speech act does not imply the capability to do it reflectively. This is indicated by the fact that not all primary speech acts can be done explicitly. "I hereby offend you" is (pragmatically) meaningless, at least in modern language.⁸

Therefore, the question of how to explicate the illocutionary role of speech acts should be distinguished from the question of naming them with title words and the corresponding assignment into a classification scheme. The explication of what was meant or of the intended illocutionary role is often not done by translating or by paraphrasing it into the standard form of speech acts, but by an additional explanation, namely by giving contrasting cases or well-known special cases, sometimes by giving a more common case, by analogy and so on.

Consequently, not every explication results in a denomination or in assigning a title word. Moreover, this would be possible only if one had a true classification of speech acts at one's disposal, that is, a complete separation into disjunctive subclasses of possible speech acts (res. illocutionary forces). The idea is that, given such a taxonomy, the assignment of a classificatory title word could meet the needs of the explication of a primary speech act sufficiently in all cases. According to Searle, by categorizing an utterance we would know what a speaker does by uttering an expression: telling how things are (assertives), bringing people to do something (directives), committing oneself to do something (commissives), changing something in the social world (declaratives), and expressing feelings, attitudes etc. (expressives). These five types make up a complete list of "the basic categories of illocutionary acts", that is, what can be done by using language (see Searle 1975: 12f.).

However, there is no such complete taxonomy of speech acts (and there cannot be one) for fundamental reasons. Every classification (by forming equivalence classes) depends on certain distinctive marks. Which features are regarded as significant depends on the aim of the analysis and the level of explication one is satisfied with. On the one hand, a taxonomy can be imagined that gets along with a handful of differentiations (e.g. by classifying all possible speech acts as acts of information or acts of expressing preferences). On the other hand, a given class that could be fundamental in one taxonomy can be further subdivided in the framework of another taxonomy. For example the category of interrogatives can be split into decision questions and questions that require a complete proposition as an answer.

The latter are, roughly, questions beginning with 'why', 'what', 'how' etc. What counts as a question in a given taxonomical system is in another system segmented into a variety of speech acts, each one of them requiring its proper response.⁹ We can find such contractions and dilations of given speech act classifications also for types other than questions. While one taxonomy only knows assertives, another classification could differentiate between ascertaining, claiming, announcing, notifying, stating, declaring, diagnosing, confessing, delivering a message, confiding etc. A survey in various cultures (including our own) reveals that even an act like greeting can be segmented into an entire bundle of various kinds of greetings correlated to different commitments and entitlements (the appropriate "etiquette" in a given social situation). The same holds probably for all kinds of speech acts. Of course, speaking about speech acts is speaking within the framework of a taxonomy, but this does not presuppose the existence of an absolute and definitive taxonomy of speech acts. Therefore, it is difficult to state of a concrete utterance which speech act it represents without knowing the purpose of explication.

Searle regards it as wrong to confuse the analysis of types of illocutionary acts with the analysis of illocutionary verbs (Searle 1975: 2). This diagnosis presupposes having a complete taxonomy of possible speech acts or illocutionary acts. In other words one needs a criterion for assigning the illocutionary verbs to the taxonomic categories. However, I do not find such a criterion in Searle's paper about taxonomy. Searle's concentration on only three of the twelve dimensions of differentiation of speech acts given there (Searle 1975: 2—8) seems quite arbitrary.¹⁰ Searle justifies this confinement as follows: "Illocutions are a part of language as opposed to particular languages. Illocutionary verbs are always part of a particular language." (Searle 1975: 2). This means that many performative verbs occur in particular languages, although of course the same speech act words (respectively their translations) do not always occur in every language. Every particular language contains, however, only the mentioned types of illocutions. Therefore he regards it as an error to confuse analyzing illocutionary verbs with analyzing illocutions.

Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine quite various ways of performing illocutions in one and the same particular language. There is no evidence that every language contains the same set of illocutionary acts. On the contrary, the fact that there is a great variety of illocutionary verbs in particular languages can as well indicate the existence of various types of illocutions that must not occur necessarily in every particular language. Searle has not yet shown that there is only a limited number of speech act types. Even if there were a complete analysis of all known languages up to this time, that would not predetermine that in a future language an amendment of the known taxonomy is impossible.

Searle's empirical argument that — at least until now — all language uses can be assigned to one of his five categories, does not hold. First, there are speech acts (for example asking and greeting) that do not fit exactly in one and only one category. Second, even if one found empirically that every utterance can be assigned to one of the taxonomic categories, this depends on the decision to categorize language use in a given manner (that is in a given coordinate system). However, nothing speaks against another form of categorization. As long as there is no convincing reason for

using only the three dimensions of differentiation considered by Searle, there is also no reason to accept exactly his five types of speech acts. The important systematic question is: What counts for which purpose as a relevant distinguishing feature of illocutions?

Searle's expositions imply that a multitude of performative verbs could fulfil one and the same illocutionary role. There is no reason to assume "that any two non-synonymous verbs must mark different illocutionary acts" (Searle 1975: 9). But there is also no reason to assume the opposite. In addition, one should not forget the "correspondence principle" of semantics and syntax mentioned above: Semantic differences are shown by syntactical differences. If we assume that every speech act can be given in a normal form $F(p)$ and that the instantiations of F are exhausted by Searle's five illocutionary roles¹¹, then we have to answer the question why there are so many performative verbs with obviously different meanings but only a restricted number of illocutionary roles. Hence, taking the taxonomy seriously, we are faced with the dilemma that *either* the taxonomy does not embrace enough illocutionary roles or things to do with language and therefore the normal form of speech acts absorbs important meaning differences, *or* the meaning differences between performative verbs are only fictitious, that is, it should be possible to use the verbs of one category interchangeably. In the first case the explication of primary utterances by using the taxonomy and the assignment of speech act types would be impossible due to a lack of suitable categories. The second case contradicts our experiences as competent speakers.

There is also no reason against the assumption that one performative verb can have different illocutionary roles. For example, saying "I promise you that I will come tomorrow" does not mean necessarily that I promise my coming to you. Depending on our relations and on other context parameters — which, like the direction of fit and other dimensions listed by Searle (Searle 1975: 4—8), help us equally in identifying speech acts — I can as well threaten you, or I just announce my coming.

Trying to explain the fact that some of the performative verbs do not fit in any of his taxonomic categories, Searle postulates that they do not mark illocutions at all, but modes of their realization like style, intensity, admissibility etc. If this is true Searle should differentiate more clearly between performative and illocutionary verbs, the latter being a subclass of the former one. Every illocutionary verb marks an illocution, but not every performative verb does so. Searle thinks that verbs like 'confiding' and 'announcing' denote merely different styles of performing an illocutionary act, and not two different illocutions (Searle 1975: preface and 8). Admittedly, announcing may describe a style of performing speech acts. One can promise, report or command something in the modus of announcing it. However, it sounds strange that a command or a declaration can be performed in a confidential mode as implied by Searle's considerations ("Top secret!" is itself a command, not a modus). I think that the plausibility of Searle's claim is at least partly based on a selection of examples that accidentally fits his purposes. Accepting Searle's terminology, we can use the dimension of style for distinguishing different kinds of speech acts as well as, for example, the criterion of the direction of fit. The success of confiding something to someone requires a different set of continuations by the

hearer than the continuations required for successfully announcing the same thing to the same person. Each case as a specific set of continuations excludes the other, at least partially. To take a standard speech-act-theoretical example, if the illocutionary point of a promise consists in undertaking certain obligations toward the addressee, why should not 'confiding' commit the addressee to keep the information to himself? Certainly, promises are broken and confidence is frustrated in everyday life. Not everybody will comply with these commitments. However, this is not only true of confiding, but also for promising and other speech acts. We should not neglect such important differences in analyzing speech acts.

Searle's way of reasoning regarding categorizing speech acts can be best understood if we presuppose a basically intentionalist approach. Such an approach is centered on the speaker and its intentions rather than on the cooperative and collective aspects of communication. Therefore, Searle primarily takes into account those distinguishing criteria that are concerned with the intentions of the speaker, namely the illocutionary point, the direction of fit, and the "expressed sincerity conditions" (Searle 1975: 12). However, if one thinks that understanding an utterance is equally determined by the appropriate continuation of a "commonly experienced" situation, then other factors also become important for its appropriate analysis, especially factors that influence the embedding of single utterances in a dialog, the relations between speaker and hearer, and also the institutional setup required for performing certain types of speech acts.¹² From such a point of view that focuses on the speaker, the hearer, and the situation, the condition of sincerity, for example, would not be of great relevance for communicative understanding and the things we can do with language.

5. PROBLEMS OF THE APPLICATION OF A TAXONOMY

Regardless of the difficulties in finding a common taxonomy of speech acts, we can assume that we have one and try to use it. In this case we face the following application problems: Which utterance counts in which situation as which speech act? What criteria could and should we use? A possible solution according to the principle of expressibility could be the orientation on linguistic expressions, that is the analysis of the linguistic surface form, especially looking for performative verbs. However, such expressions do not indicate reliably the type of the speech act, even in cases of apparently explicit utterances. The main problem here is the context dependence of meaning, in other words the "background problem". This can be split into two questions: the problem of the stability of the affiliation and the equivalence of contexts.

In the first case the question is to which degree a speech act can be modified without losing its affiliation to a certain taxonomic category. This can be done by changes in its intonation, by gestures and facial expressions, and last but not least by adverbs changing the meaning of the performative verb. For example, does the utterance "I will probably come tomorrow" represent the same speech act as "I will come tomorrow" in the same context? Is this a partial rescission of a given promise, but still a promise, or is it the superfluous (because obvious) hint that something can always come in between? The answer to this questions depends entirely on the

situation. The orientation on written language and literal meaning and the acceptance of a kind of the principle of compositionality simulates context-invariance that is illusory for the spoken language. It is illusory because no expression, whether complying with certain syntactical or semantic norms or not, whether implicit or explicit, determines its meaning by itself. Only because we can rely on a practice of ordinary use of expressions, their literal, explicit meaning — which can be fixed in dictionaries or even in a taxonomy — can give us valid orientation for the analysis of meaning of an utterance.¹³

A taxonomy or classification of speech acts can serve as an aid for explicating utterances only if one is familiar with the usage of the classified forms and the corresponding title words. If speaker and hearer are familiar with the use of speech act words, then to identify a speech act type can help to explicate and to understand an utterance. For example: "It was a nomination, not a request." However, new ways of using linguistic tools which are already part of a taxonomy cannot be represented in just this taxonomy. If the use of language is creative, that is, if it can be used in unpredictable contexts and for new purposes, then a taxonomy is always incomplete. Therefore, the assignment or denomination of an utterance with taxonomic title words is not sufficient for the complete explication of its meaning.

A second problem is this: In order to assign an implicit speech act a place in the classification system one has to presume a certain degree of unambiguity regarding which contexts can be regarded as equal. An utterance is meaningful only with respect to a certain background that determines the speech situation, at least partially. For example: 'to open a book' and 'open one's eyes' are different actions, even if 'to open' has in both cases the same literal meaning. 'To open the moon' could be at best metaphorically used, because we do not normally associate a meaningful action to it. Other context factors of speech situations are their institutional frame, the (corresponding) expectations of the hearer, the degree to which speaker and hearer share the same background of practical abilities and knowledge, and finally also the intentions of the speaker. In other words: We already need to know by which criteria we judge and/or stipulate the *equality of contexts*. In order to do this we need, among other things, a typology of possible (communicative) purposes and of (always institutionally co-determined) speaker intentions. That is, what counts as relevant for judging the equivalence of communicative contexts depends among other things on the purposes that are pursued by the communicants. However, the realm of purposes is not finite — the use of natural language can serve new and unpredictable ends again and again that are not already contained in a closed typology of possible aims.

6. THE PRINCIPLE OF EXPRESSIBILITY AND THE PARADOX OF ANALYSIS

Since there are no context-independent or context-invariant meanings of expressions, there are no (absolutely) unmistakable utterances, either in the standard form or not. Therefore, even if we had an indisputable and definite taxonomy of speech acts, the principle of expressibility would be useless for an explication of speech acts due to the following reason: In order to analyze a given utterance x (i.e.

a primary or implicit speech act) we should bring it into the normal form x^* . To do this unambiguously we need a criterion that x and x^* are equal with respect to their meanings. However, the application of such a criterion already presupposes understanding x , that is the knowledge of its meaning. Otherwise we cannot know whether x^* really represents x and not another utterance y . One could think that x^* represents x if and only if x^* expresses completely what was *meant* with x . But we can compare expressions only with expressions. We cannot compare them with (hypostasized) meanings nor with what a speaker means using the expression. All we can learn is that x^* captures the meaning of the utterance x more adequately, that is, x^* gives a better understanding of x than y^* . Even the speaker himself cannot give more than better paraphrases of x in order to clarify which speech act has been performed. This is making a proposal of how to understand the utterance x .¹⁴

For this reason, if the principle of expressibility is understood as a transformation postulate in the mentioned sense, a dilemma arises for its application. The principle is correctly applied (i.e. we assign according to a taxonomy the correct standard form to an implicit utterance) only if it is redundant, because its application already presupposes an understanding of the utterance in question. On the other hand, when we do not understand the primary utterance or when there is (still) not an explicit form available and the postulated transformation should first *enable* a better understanding of the utterance, the principle is of no help for us. In such cases we simply do not know which standardized expressions should be assigned to the utterance. Hence, the principle of expressibility always comes too late. It can be applied only when new uses of language (and the corresponding linguistic forms) are already established. They are stabilized then to such an extent that they are understood also by hearers who are normally not well acquainted with unfamiliar expressions. In this case we can explicate the already stabilized expressions by assigning them a taxonomic 'standard meaning'. In this respect this dilemma is relevant only for the aspect of application. On the semantic level, if the speech act theory is a serious theory of meaning, then it should postulate that the explicit form of an utterance gives its meaning, according to the principle of expressibility. However, Searle does not give a criterion for meaning equivalence of implicit and explicit utterances. Such a criterion is necessary, but as we will see, we cannot formulate one.

If understood as a postulate for the transformability of every primary or implicit speech act into an explicit one, the principle of expressibility results in a dilemmatic situation that is similar to the paradox of analysis. In a concrete speech situation, an explicit speech act can be regarded only as an elucidation or an explanation of an implicit one, but not as its replacement in the sense of a meaning equivalent substitution. This is so because the implicit utterance means in a given context always a little bit more (or something different) than its literal meaning. If the context is sufficiently determined, then there is no need for a complete explication of everything for being understandable or for fulfilling the communicative purpose of the utterance. On the other hand, if an explicit utterance is required for making a given utterance sufficiently intelligible, the 'primary' utterance can be regarded as underdetermined with respect to its meaning. Either it does not articulate the intended distinction in the given context, or the situation is too ambiguous for

achieving the communicative goal. In this case, the explicit form could have enough expressive power and could be sufficiently helpful to understand the primary utterance in a given context. Then the explicit form cannot mean the same as the implicit form, because its field of possible meaning assignments is restricted to a greater extent than that of the initial utterance. The replacement of an implicit speech act by an explicit one is therefore *either* correct (i.e. it is an equivalent substitution), but then it does not further clarify what was said, *or* it really helps to explain the primary speech act, but then it cannot be an equivalent substitution (i.e. it is incorrect).

7. ILLOCUTIONARY ROLE AND FIRST PERSON AUTHORITY

A possible way out of the dilemma is the differentiation between the explication of a speech act and its mere denomination with a taxonomic title word and the corresponding assignment to a taxonomic category. The dilemma comes into existence if the explication of a primary speech act is reduced to its mere designation with a title word (including the associated rules of use). Explicating an utterance means, however, making it understandable, and this is not necessarily connected with an exact taxonomic classification. Of course, sometimes the denomination of a speech act can be a satisfactory explication. Often, however, we use other ways of explication: simply paraphrasing the utterance or showing the consequences of the speech act in question in a given situation. An explication does not depend on the use of the explicit denomination of the speech act, because we can understand the explicit form only if we already master the speech act in question practically, that is, if we master the practice of asserting, promising etc. in the sense of a practical ability or a know-how. We solve the dilemma if we abandon the thesis that performing a speech act is merely expressing a pre-existing intention that only awaits being designated correctly.

Does not, however, the acceptance of first person authority entail the methodical primacy of pre-existing intentions? It is not possible to obtain context invariant criteria for judging which type of speech act was performed by an utterance from the speaker's point of view? The speaker seems to be the ultimate instance for the explication of his speech act. Provided he understands the taxonomy (or he masters his "implicit meaning theory"), the speaker should be able to identify the taxonomic category of his utterance.

It is a widespread opinion that a speaker cannot misunderstand what he means, especially with respect to the illocutionary role of his utterance. However, one cannot mean something that is beyond the boundaries of one's language and of the corresponding common practices, ways of life and traditions. One is always involved in real or imagined communication situations which, in a certain manner, first define the realm of the meaningful. In this sense, a speaker can be in error with respect to the illocutionary role of his utterances, although this appears to be impossible from the point of view of first person authority. The following examples shall elucidate this point: The utterance "Be spontaneous!" is a paradoxical one, even if the speaker thinks of it as an order. A slave as a "speaking tool" is not in position to make a promise to his master because his social role deprives him from

certain entitlements. This does not imply, however, that he cannot master the linguistic forms of promising — but promises to the master are simply without effect.¹⁵ And last but not least: Saying "yes" in the appropriate context implies the intention to get married. The wedding is not cancelled just because after the ceremony one of the spouses declares that he or she did not mean it seriously.

If I stress that I meant *x* and not *y*, this can be either a correction or an insisting to which I am entitled by virtue of my first person authority, or a commitment with the corresponding consequences. However, I will say that I have meant *x* and not *y* only if there are misunderstandings.¹⁶ When I am asked to explicate what I have actually meant, I have the opportunity to put things right. On the other hand, the 'true' intentions of my utterance often becomes clear only 'on demand', for example when the hearer draws my attention to non-intended or unconsidered consequences of my utterance. What is meant with an utterance is not a predetermined and definite (mental) content only awaiting to be articulated. Rather it will be specified to a certain extent "afterwards" according to purpose and situation. (For example, the speaker stipulates or commits himself to certain paraphrases of the utterance, or he agrees with the response of the hearer or at least he does not contradict him.)

What is meant is fixed in a discourse or in view of a possible discourse. By saying something certain possibilities are excluded, but there always remain some ambiguities. To say something is therefore not to express a complete and distinctive meaning, but to restrict the scope of possible meanings, that is to restrict the possibilities of understanding with respect to a certain horizon of expectations and to a background of common capabilities and knowledge.¹⁷ Hence, answering the question of what a speaker meant, does not consist in a report about his mental events and their contents or his propositional and illocutionary attitudes. It does not consist in the information about a relation between speaker and a "meaning" given in advance. The point is, rather, to reinstate a "disturbed balance of understanding" that does not depend only on the speaker, but also on the hearer. For example, the hearer could object that the speaker had not been able to mean *x* in a certain situation, because he was not in a position to know something relevant for meaning *x* at this time. It is not possible just to *state* that somebody has meant something. Assigning and selfassigning of intentions follow other and more complex laws than it seems when one speaks of a relation between a speaker and a propositional content.¹⁸ This becomes obvious if one considers that there is no meaning besides or behind or independently of a linguistic expression or a symbolic act. Understanding such an expression is a matter of *bargaining* between the participants of communication and not a matter of stating it. Therefore, the speaker does not have the ultimate authority concerning both the meaning of his utterances and their illocutionary roles. Although he has an important 'vote', he does not have the last word in determining what was said or which kind of speech act was performed by his utterance.

8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

If misunderstandings are always possible, how is communicative understanding achieved at all? A possible answer to this question is to follow Searle and

distinguish between implicit and explicit speech acts: An implicit speech act can be misunderstood because of hidden parameters made explicit in case of an explicit speech act. This is the reason why Searle introduces the principle of expressibility. He believes that, given the propositional content is already understood, the exact meaning of a speech act is determined by its assignment to the taxonomy of illocutionary roles. The principle of expressibility aims at ensuring the context-independent meaning of utterances. Can such a context independence be created? Is it possible to bring utterances into a form which determines their meaning unambiguously for every context? This is the central question posed by the principle of expressibility. As is shown in the last paragraphs, the principle becomes suspect if this question is answered positively.

Even Searle admits that the principle requires at least one additional condition, namely an appropriate background or context of the speech act (Searle 1968, 18). This request, however, makes the principle both trivial and problematic. It is trivial because given the proper context every utterance has sufficiently expressive power to exclude misunderstandings practically. It is problematic because there is no linguistic expression that is explicit to such a degree that misunderstandings are avoided in *all* possible contexts. Consequently, the question is not whether an expression is explicit or is not, but how precisely the contextual background has to be explicated in order to make the expression sufficiently exact, or how explicit the utterance has to be to become unmistakable in a given context. This problem cannot be solved by giving a standard form, and even the use of a fixed taxonomy of speech acts cannot exclude misunderstandings. The question of explication and understanding is posed incorrectly if the answer is sought only in the application of an implicit meaning theory or taxonomy that is at the disposal of the communicants. There are, however, many ways for establishing understanding without assuming such an implicit meaning theory. We always find clues that allow us to understand the meaning of utterances in concrete situations with adequate accuracy. And this just means that communication 'succeeds' in the sense that no problems remain.

What do we do, when we try to clarify an ambiguous utterance, that is, when we try to make it explicit? Very often we paraphrase it by using "explicit" expressions. This is the only case of explication discussed in the frame of Searle's theory. In contrast to this view, the paraphrases are in the most cases not "translations" into a "standard language". Normally, analogies or metaphors are used instead. There are also other methods for making something understandable: indicating a special case, using antonyms and negations hoping that the hearer knows them, comparing with well known cases, generalizing, and so on. Already this short list illustrates that we are not forced to employ always "more explicit" expressions in order to explain a primary utterance. From a point of view that regards metaphors, vagueness, ambiguities, ellipses etc. as "inexact", the majority of our everyday explications would be just as inexact as the utterances that are to be explained. This "inexact" way of explication works very well in everyday life and does not endanger the general version of the principle of expressibility, because the latter states only that whatever can be meant can be said. The principle does not prescribe, however, *in which way* we are supposed to do this. Only if literal meaning is postulated to be semantically primordial, i.e. only if that what satisfies specific fixed language

standards is regarded as "said", then the practice of language seems to contradict the principle.

Furthermore, we have some additional possibilities to determine the situational meaning and the speech act type of an utterance. We do not only use a certain syntactical form. We can, for instance, *simply ask* how an utterance is to be understood. In such a case the meaning will be "refined" in a dialogue. This process continues until the communicants think that they understand each other. Some pragmatic criteria that the communication succeeds are the adequacy of the following (speech-)actions, the absence of objections, and last but not least the continuation of the communication itself.

This view is supported by the fact that we very seldom face isolated utterances. Usually utterances have a history — are part of a dialog — and there is also a personal acquaintance of the speakers. They are embedded in a communication history that opens a horizon of expectations. Even if this is not the case, there is a plentitude of means for establishing such a horizon: Dialogues are typically opened with certain formulas (e.g. greeting and asking). The communicants have reciprocal expectations that are the more definitive the closer their acquaintance is. On the other hand, in conversations with strangers we do not assume "inside knowledge", but rely on usual opening strategies that establish a mutual horizon of expectations. Such conventional language games and action schemes are, for instance, buying something, ordering in a restaurant, consulting a doctor, including the corresponding role patterns that determine mutual obligations and expectations (superior/subordinate, married people, customer/salesmen). These schemes interfere with a common background knowledge, i.e. the knowledge about shared ends, purposes resulting from the respective roles, corresponding expectations and habits etc. The background knowledge restricts the space of possible utterance meanings. Misunderstandings occur in most cases only when there are no such "conventional" expectations, or when the speaker or the hearer does not know or does not fulfil them.

Does the reference to such a background result in an infinite regress? Does explicitly expressing something always imply an endless succession of background explications? Obviously, this would be an absurd consequence. We know from our everyday experience that the recourse comes *practically* to an end after few steps, because we refer to a *common* background of orientations and practical abilities that does not leave space for persistent doubts concerning the meaning of an utterance. The principle of expressibility requires such a shared background. Only with respect to such a common background does a speech act determine a meaning at all. Only with respect to this background can the meaning of speech acts be made accessible by explication, because this background restricts the possible uses of expressions.¹⁹ This is the reason why explicitness of an expression does not mean a certain syntactical *form* and why there is no fixed boundary of explication that marks the transition from what is understandable to what is not understandable. In this sense those expressions are explicit that are best understandable with respect to the hearer and the situation.

Why not regard such an expression and its meaning that is understood by all or by the majority as a "standard expression" that can be captured in a taxonomy? This

is not possible because expressions have meaning only due to their use in concrete speech situations. To fix an absolute meaning of an expression would mean to *anticipate* all possible contexts and all ways of use. Obviously, we are not in the position to do this. Hence, explicitness is determined pragmatically by the success or failure of communication and understanding, but not by a preceding norm.

Explicating a primary utterance is a *joint* task of speaker and hearer, whereby the speaker has a greater, but not the absolute authority. Mostly the speaker will look for a suitable expression trying to anticipate and take into account the hearer's possibilities of understanding. He needs the agreement of the hearer or at least the absence of his objections. Therefore explication cannot be done in a monologue, even if there is factually no hearer present or if the present hearers do not respond to what was said. The result is not an absolutely explicit expression, but a more accurate (or proper) one compared with the initial utterance. In this sense, to be explicit means to restrict the equivalence classes of what was said until the speaker can believe himself to be understood. Then — from an observational point of view — we can say that he has “chosen” a linguistic representation of his meaning that both satisfies him and is understandable by the hearer. Speaker and hearer have *bargained* a joint understanding of the utterance in question.

Interpreted as a principle of explicability, the principle of expressibility is not bound to a fixed taxonomy or another kind of standardized language. It is simply false to assume that expressibility means explicability within a kind of an exact ideal language with fixed meanings or rules of use for its expressions. There are a variety of linguistic phenomena that cannot be explicated in an exact language, i.e. that cannot be assigned unambiguously or translated into an “exact” expression of this language. However, making our utterances contextually understandable by normal language use is enough for fulfilling the principle of expressibility. Explicitness is a gradual quality related to possible understanding; understandability is a measure of explicitness. Being understandable is for utterances explicit enough, independently of their compliance with a linguistic norm.

The considerations presented in this paper may seem overdrawn. It could be claimed, for example, that the principle of expressibility does not concern the relation between the speaker and the hearer, but the relation between the speaker and a theorist or an observer, that is, a third party or person. Accordingly, we should distinguish between the speaker-language (i.e. the object-language) and the language of analysis (i.e. a kind of meta-language). The principle of expressibility would then claim that a meaning-theorist can describe the ordinary language use unequivocally in his theory-language (that contains, for example, a taxonomy of speech acts) by relating speaker's meaning, literal meaning, and utterance meaning. However, this is the viewpoint of an “absolute observer” (it can be called “God's point of view”), because it requires a direct, pre-communicative access to the intentions of the speaker that correspond to his utterances, and it demands an overview of all possible uses of the expressions in every possible context. But we cannot occupy God's position, that is, we cannot look into the soul of the actor who is performing a speech act, and we cannot predict the future uses of the expressions in all contexts that are possible. Therefore, even the theorist or observer is always in the position of an ordinary hearer, i.e. in the position of a participant in communication, and he is

confronted with the same difficulties of communicative understanding that are described in this paper.

NOTES

* This work was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

¹ The concept of ‘primary performative utterance’ stems from Austin (Austin 1975: 69) and is used contrasting to ‘explicit performative utterance’. This seems adequate, because a concrete linguistic utterance is not implicit or explicit per se. This is rather a theoretical distinction within the framework of the interpretation of linguistic utterances as speech acts.

² See Warnock 1989 und Tzahotzidis 1981.

³ I do not insist on these examples. If one regards Searle's considerations concerning the taxonomy of speech acts as valid, then one might state that lying is not a speech act at all. But this is not the point. For the argument it is only relevant that there are implicit speech acts at all. The example of ‘hinting’ is discussed by Warnock (Warnock 1989). He interprets the principle of expressibility as stating that there is for every implicit speech act an explicit one, which is not only semantically equivalent to the first, but additionally produces the same pragmatic effects.

⁴ It seems Searle has just this in mind if he regards the speech act theory and the theory of meaning as the two sides of one medal (see Searle 1969: 17f.).

⁵ That means that the principle of expressibility is basically a methodical principle. It shall ensure that meaning-theoretical investigations can be restricted to the consideration of linguistic expressions. (For further details see my paper “The Principle of Expressibility and Private Language”)

⁶ I do not think that one can draw an impermeable border between these two steps of analysis, because this would presuppose that the meaning of the propositional act (as part of a complete speech act) could be determined independently of its illocutionary role. If, according to the “usage theory of meaning”, one does not see the meaning of expressions in its representational content, but rather in the inferences which are permitted by them or lead to them (in a broad sense including “material” inferences as well as the transfer of rights), then the meaning of the propositional act depends directly on the illocutionary role and vice versa.

⁷ Therefore, the fixation on the written language may mislead us in philosophy of language, especially questions of communicative understanding. An inscription does not show the corresponding illocutionary role unambiguously. Though punctuation gives some hints, these are not sufficient. On the other hand, one can identify the illocutionary role of an utterance in concrete speech contexts normally without further help. The neglect of the spoken language, which was already complained by Humboldt, produces futile theoretical problems, especially a kind of skepticism concerning the possibility of understanding.

⁸ Of course, sometimes the illocutionary effect may be achieved without using (verbal) language, e.g. in case of rising the hand in order to greet someone. That may force the intentionalist idea that language is only one, though particularly effective, device of achieving such effects, but not a necessary condition for it.

⁹ That case must not be confused with the possibility to do various other things with utterances that have the syntactical form of questions, e.g. suggesting a certain decision, pushing under presuppositions (“Did you stop smoking?”), formulating a problem etc.

¹⁰ Searle's answer is given in his book “Intentionality” by an “intentionalist turn” from philosophy of language to philosophy of mind as the fundamental discipline. However, if one does not believe intentionalism to be sufficient for capturing communicative understanding, that answer cannot be satisfactory. A reason for denying intentionalism is the principle of expressibility interpreted as an articulation of the paradigm of the philosophy of language *after* the linguistic turn. (For details see Kannetzky 2001).

¹¹ It is the declared aim of Searle's paper about taxonomy “to develop a reasoned classification of illocutionary acts into certain basic categories or types”, i.e. “to classify the different types of *F*” (Searle 1975: 1).

¹² The institutional frame of speech acts is of importance not only for particular types of speech acts as indicated by Searle (Searle 1975: 7), but for every speech act, insofar as every speech act requires an appropriate context to determine its meaning. Searle considers this as a condition required by the principle of expressibility (Searle 1969: 18). It is therefore a condition of distinguishing and explicating speech acts as well.

¹³ Applied to written language this view seems self-contradicting. The whole literature consists of apparently context invariant expressions, otherwise it would not be understandable. The flood of interpretations and the difficulties of translation show, however, that the context invariance even of the written language is not nearly as complete as thought. Additionally, the nonliteral use of expressions is an important attribute of literature. That we are able to understand, for instance, metaphors, does not mean solely that dictionaries include also "unusual" literal meaning variants, but that texts "produce" their own contexts in which the particular sentences are put in. Hence, the existence of literature and written language does not mean that the literal meaning and certain linguistic forms that can be captured within a taxonomy constitute the real core of linguistic meaning.

¹⁴ It seems strange that the speaker should make a proposal of how to understand his utterance. A reason for that strange appearance is the implicit assumption that a speaker would have the unrestricted sovereignty over the interpretations of his utterances because of his first person authority. However, he does not have such a sovereignty. The hearers also have a word to say. The speaker can only plea for an understanding of the utterance as meant by him.

¹⁵ Here we could mention the necessity of the (contra factual) assumption of an ideal communication community that presupposes "the reciprocal recognition as subject capable of language and acting" (Habermas) or of the speech of the "transcendental apriori of the communication community" (Apel, Kuhlmann) as a condition of communication at all. The 'slave-example' is from N. Psarros.

¹⁶ I will refrain from considering cases of talkativeness, the necessary redundancy of speech, deafness, absent-mindedness of the hearer, and other reasons for repeating or reformulating an utterance which do not primarily concern the meaning of the utterance.

¹⁷ To avoid misunderstandings: Unlike Davidson's thesis of radical interpretation, I am not talking about a kind of "interpretative understanding", but about the possibility of *immediate* understanding. The mode of interpretative understanding — that is the mode of reflection, whether assuming an (implicit) translation-manual of the idiolects, or the application of a hermeneutic organon — presupposes the possibility of immediate understanding.

¹⁸ Just this is required by Searle's symbolization of the principle of expressibility (Searle 1969: 20), which construes meaning as a relation between a speaker and a propositional content.

¹⁹ Therefore also vague, analogical or metaphorical uses of language could be sufficiently explicit as well. Metaphors, irony, vagueness etc. are not necessarily cases of "mean one thing, saying another".

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EXPRESSING AN INTENTIONAL STATE

1.

I don't have any serious quarrels with John Searle's approach to speech act theory.¹ There's a lot of little things that I do not really understand. (Example: what is a direction of fit?) There are a few minor points which I think are wrong. (Example: the doctrine about "underlying rules" which are "manifested or realized" by conventions, and, to be frank, the whole thing about so called constitutive rules. Why should a statement like "Greeting in a normal context counts as a courteous recognition of the addressee by the speaker" be regarded as conveying a rule? How could one violate, or follow, the alleged rule? Maybe greeting is something which presupposes the existence of certain rules, or maybe statements of the type "x counts as y in context c" are true only in virtue of the fact that certain policies are accepted in the contexts in question, but the statement above, concerning the essence of greeting, is not the statement of a rule.)

So instead of nagging and carping at this or that detail, I should like to concentrate in these precious ten minutes on a point in Searle's account which I take to be of some interest, and not only for speech act theory. It concerns the concept of expressing one's mental states. Here are two pertinent quotations from Searle:

... in the performance of any illocutionary act with a propositional content, the speaker expresses some attitude, state, etc., to that propositional content. Notice that this holds even if he is insincere, even if he does not have the belief, desire, intention, regret or pleasure which he expresses, he nonetheless expresses a belief, desire, intention, regret or pleasure in the performance of the speech act.²

Now to say that the Intentional state which constitutes the sincerity condition is expressed in the performance of the speech act is not to say that one always has to have the Intentional state that one expresses. It is always possible to lie or otherwise perform an insincere speech act. But a lie or other insincere speech act consists in performing a speech act, where one does not have the Intentional state that one expresses.³

In these quoted statements, Searle assumes that there is a concept of expressing an intentional state such that the following is a possibility: a case in which somebody, in doing something, expresses his ψ that p , although he does not ψ that p . Not everybody seems to agree that there is such a sense, for example, of the phrase "to express the belief that p ". But I think that Searle is right, and besides I think that such a concept of expressing a belief is of central concern for any attempt at a theory of belief-ascription.