REHABILITATING AUSTIN

David Egan

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the continued relevance of J. L. Austin's work in the philosophy of language, and characterizes his close attention to ordinary language as marked by an emphasis on the concreteness of language and a resistance to idealization. It claims that Austin's reputation has declined due to misunderstandings and misappropriations of his work. In particular, it considers criticisms of Austin's work by Grice and Searle that have generally been taken to be decisive. Grice argues that we can separate the literal meaning of many utterances from their pragmatic implicatures through the mechanism of cancellation. However, Grice's conception of cancellation reveals itself as flawed when we consider that the cancellation must itself take the form of an utterance with implicatures of its own. Searle criticizes Austin's conception of a locutionary act, proposing to replace it with his own conception of a propositional act. Although Searle is right to find fault with Austin with regard to locutionary acts, his conception of a propositional act draws exactly the wrong lesson, and depends on exempting the expression "express the proposition" from considerations that are meant to apply to all utterances. If these rejections of Austin's work fail, we are in a position to reassess a conception of language that gives primary importance to illocutionary acts.

I. INTRODUCTION

J. L. Austin was one of the driving forces behind what came to be known as 'Ordinary Language Philosophy' in post-war Oxford, and was one of the most influential

philosophers of his generation. Oxford Ordinary Language Philosophy, however, has suffered the same fate as logical positivism before it: once a dominant trend in analytic philosophy, it is now regarded primarily as an historical curiosity whose lasting contributions are few and peripheral. My claim in this paper is threefold: first, that this decline in Austin's influence is unjust and unjustified; second, that this decline is due to misunderstandings and misappropriations of his work; and third, that reassessing Austin shows that his work remains relevant, and presents a significant challenge to the mainstream of contemporary philosophy of language.

In rehabilitating Austin, I focus on the work of Paul Grice and John Searle. The former is commonly taken to have dealt a fatal blow to Ordinary Language Philosophy by distinguishing matters of conversational appropriateness from matters of truth. The latter, styling himself as Austin's successor, adopted some aspects of Austin's work but rejected much of what is original to it, thereby sending the study of speech acts in the wrong direction. In their attempts to delegitimize what they take to be Austin's missteps, both Grice and Searle beg the question in subtle ways. In particular, both try to isolate the literal meaning of utterances in a way that presupposes the conception of literal meaning they want to establish. I do not consider developments in the philosophy of language in the last four decades in any detail, but Grice's and Searle's work is foundational to much of what has come since, so my response to it is not merely of historical interest.

I begin by providing an overview of Austin's method, emphasizing Austin's resistance to idealizations of linguistic entities (section 2), before applying that method to the challenges posed by Grice (section 3). I then look more closely at Austin's ternary distinction of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts and respond to what I take to be its misappropriation by Searle (section 4). I conclude by suggesting how a more charitable assessment of Austin's achievement might change the way we approach the philosophy of language (section 5).

2. AUSTIN'S METHOD

Characterizations of Austin's method tend to emphasize his close attention to the details of linguistic usage—for instance, he teases out the distinction between doing something by accident and doing it by mistake (1979, 185), and distinguishes doing something by mistake, owing to a mistake, mistakenly, and so on (1979, 198)—and his emphasis on attending to the overall context in which a word is used.[1] However, I think we come closer to understanding what makes Austin distinctive as a philosopher if we attend to the stubborn concreteness of his thinking about language. Austin doggedly reminds us that language is something that is *used* in *utterances* and he shows a deep distrust for abstractions that draw our attention away from concrete circumstances of use. For instance, at the beginning of his essay, 'Truth,' he warns against the heady abstractions of asking 'whether Truth is a substance . . . or a quality . . . or a relation' and demotes this capitalized abstract noun to its lowercase adjectival form: 'philosophers should take something more nearly their own size to strain at. What needs discussing rather is the use, or certain uses, of the word "true"' (1979, 117). Austin does not want us to look at how words are used (how we use the word 'true') *rather than* looking at what things are (what Truth is), but rather sees the former as the only responsible way of treating the latter. Learning how we use the words 'true,' 'truth,' and cognates simply *is* what it is to learn what truth is.[2]

Austin frequently rails against generalization and simplification as plagues upon philosophy,[3] but I think the primary target of his critical ire might better be regarded as idealization. The trouble with these generalizations and simplifications is not simply that

[1] There's some truth to both of these characterizations, but they also both risk misleading. Any self-respecting philosopher of language pays close attention to the details of linguistic usage, so if Austin does so to an exceptional degree, such a characterization only paints him as an exceptional philosopher of language, and fails to register how his method distinguishes him from most mainstream contemporary philosophy of language. And to say that he thinks context is important risks painting him as a proto-contextualist, but as Avner Baz (2012) shows, a significant gulf separates Austin from contemporary contextualism.

[2] See e.g. Austin (1979, 58); (1979, 83n2); and (1979, 182). Cavell (1976a) develops this point in detail.

[3] See e.g. Austin (1962, 3, 82); (1975, 38); and (1979, 58).

they lead philosophers to jump too hastily to the wrong conclusion, but that they motivate entire philosophical problematics whose incoherence becomes apparent under closer scrutiny. In *Sense and Sensibilia*, Austin argues that the very idea of sense-data arises only through misuses of ordinary expressions. In various papers and lectures, he also points to how our conception of meaning is distorted by asking in a general sense about 'the meaning of a word,' how our conception of freedom is distorted by assuming we can apply the adverb 'freely' or its opposite to any verb of action whatsoever, how the supposition that any sentence in the indicative must be either true or false blinds us to the performative aspect of language, and so on. These generalizing moves motivate philosophers to posit idealized entities: sense-data and propositions as well as the capitalized parade of philosophical abstractions such as Truth, Meaning, and Freedom. These idealizations arise from neglecting the concrete circumstances of linguistic use, but they also subsequently distract us from the more concrete investigations that, according to Austin, are our only path toward conceptual clarity. Part of what is radical about Austin's method is that he thinks we can approach language—and philosophy—without the need for theoretical abstractions. His positive work, as we will see, consists of classification rather than idealization. But let me discuss his critical method before saying more about his positive work.

2.1. Austin's method: critical aspects

Austin's criticism aims not to expose errors in established positions, but rather to show that, properly considered, these positions cannot find expression at all. If the problem with a theory of sense-data is not that it falls foul of a subtle objection, or that it fails to cover all cases, but rather that the basic moves used to set up the theory rely on abuses of language, then the theory is not wrong so much as nonsensical. In a very literal sense, philosophers who speak nonsense *cannot mean* what they think they are saying. For instance, in Chapter III of *Sense and Sensibilia*, Austin examines Ayer's presentation of the argument from illusion, showing that Ayer assumes that a wide range of non-standard visual

experiences—from refraction to hallucination to mirror images—all qualify as instances of illusion, and that all illusions are cases of delusion. By teasing apart the differences in these cases, and showing the difference between illusion and delusion, Austin dismantles the basis for building a general argument from illusion. The conclusion he pushes us toward is not that the argument from illusion is false, but that, if we are careful in our use of words, the purported argument cannot even find coherent expression.

One of Austin's preferred terms of criticism is 'serious': the philosophers he criticizes cannot be serious in what they say. To give just three examples from his attack on sense-data theory:[4]

> … if we are to be seriously inclined to speak of something as being perceived indirectly… (1962, 18)

> Does anyone suppose that if something is straight, then it jolly well has to *look* straight at all times and in all circumstances? Obviously no one seriously supposes this. (1962, 29)

> If … a church were cunningly camouflaged so that it looked like a barn, how could any serious question be raised about what we see when we look at it? We see, of course, *a church* that now *looks like a barn*. We do *not* see an immaterial barn, an immaterial church, or an immaterial anything else. And what in this case could seriously tempt us to say that we do? (1962, 30)

[4] For other references to seriousness, cf. Austin (1979, 46, 48, 134, 219, 231, 264) and (1975, 66). In his reading of Austin, Jacques Derrida (1988) challenges Austin's invocation of seriousness. Addressing Derrida's challenge falls beyond the scope of this paper, but the use of 'serious' that Derrida challenges is importantly different from the ones referred to here. Derrida questions Austin's exclusion of utterances made on a stage, in poetry, and in joking as 'non-serious,' whereas I am interested in Austin's claim that philosophers he disagrees with cannot be serious in what they say.

These appeals to seriousness undermine the argument for sense-data not by denying the existence of sense-data, but by questioning the very intelligibility of the notion of sense-data. Austin says, 'I am *not* ... going to maintain that we ought to be "realists," to embrace, that is, the doctrine that we *do* perceive material things (or objects). This doctrine would be no less scholastic and erroneous than its antithesis' (1962, 3 – 4). Adopting a realist thesis would mean accepting the sense-data theorist's misuses of 'perceive' and 'material things' in order to advance an alternative, whereas Austin wants to show that the problem lies precisely with the misuses of these words. Arguing for its opposite would give sense-data theory too much credit by implicitly accepting it as a coherent doctrine worth opposing.[5] We cannot oppose an incoherent doctrine by presenting arguments to the contrary (since what are they contrary to?). Instead, Austin exposes the incoherence and then simply asks whether anyone can seriously maintain this position.

2.2. Austin's method: constructive aspects

In its positive aspect, Austin's method provides a more careful account of the matters he feels others have unjustly neglected. This positive work includes familiar philosophical fodder, such as truth, meaning, and the problem of other minds, as well as aspects of our life with words, such as excuses and performative utterances, which had been neglected by philosophers, but which Austin uses to significant philosophical purpose.

I presented generalization and simplification as targets of Austin's criticism, and claimed that he is sceptical of idealizations of all sorts. In his constructive work, Austin

[5] In this respect, Austin's appeal to ordinary language is subtler than G. E. Moore's (1925) appeal to common sense. Moore takes it as commonsensical to claim that he has spent his entire life on or near the surface of the earth, but Austin refuses to be baited into some form of dogmatic realism. Austin does not insist on a simpler and more 'commonsensical' set of beliefs than those that philosophers normally play around with, but rather points to the rich diversity of our ordinary linguistic practices, which the philosophical mania for over-simplification obscures. Austin does not demand that philosophers see that things are less complicated than they make them out to be, but rather that philosophers acknowledge that language—and the world—is much more complicated than they generally take it to be.

provides clarity not by positing theoretical entities that *explain* the phenomena under investigation, but by providing classifications that perspicuously *describe* the phenomena under investigation, without adding anything further to them.[6] He follows not the model of the physicist, who finds the general laws underlying particular cases, but that of the Linnean biologist or the anthropologist, who finds the most perspicuous classificatory rubric under which to examine a rich diversity of data (and here we should ask whether language has more in common with the subject matter of physics or with that of biology and anthropology). Austin's intricate categorizations are not a form of idealization, but rather arise from dissatisfaction with idealization. Austin's categories highlight differences in language, and stand against the temptation to impose generalizations that fudge these differences.

This classificatory work may clarify particular muddles, but Austin is wryly sceptical of his ability to give a definitive classification. Witness his 'motto for a sober philosophy: *Neither a be-all nor an end-all be*' (1979, 271n). His most detailed, and most famous, attempt at classification is his discussion of performative utterances in *How To Do Things With Words*. This work does not represent a completed theory, and in many ways is at its most suggestive in its failures.

Austin begins with the intuitive distinction between 'performative' and 'constative' utterances, where the former 'do not "describe" or "report" or constate anything at all, are not "true or false,"' and that 'the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as "just," saying something' (1975, 5). For instance, making a promise or placing a bet involve uttering sentences in the first person present indicative, and these utterances don't make true or false statements but rather make promises or bets. Supposing that all sentences in the indicative are constatives

[6] This contrast between description and explanation takes its cue from Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, §109. Although I think there are important differences between Wittgenstein and Austin, I believe they share this emphasis on description over explanation.

commits what Austin calls the '"descriptive" fallacy' (1975, 3).[7] The descriptive fallacy, in turn, feeds what Austin calls 'the true/false fetish' (1975, 151), that is, the inclination to evaluate sentences primarily or exclusively in terms of their truth-conditions. In this regard, Austin puts himself at odds with a great deal of contemporary work in semantics.[8] I will return to this point in my discussion of Grice.

In the first seven lectures of *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin tries to zero in on a clear criterion by which we can distinguish performative utterances, but the more he tightens his theoretical net, the more the criterion he seeks eludes him. Many of the features he initially took to be distinctive of performative utterances apply also to constatives, and conversely, performatives are in important ways beholden to the facts, giving them an aftertaste of truth-value, which was thought to be the exclusive domain of constatives. Indeed, certain utterances, like 'I censure' might be either performative or constative depending on the context, so no context-independent criterion can isolate one from the other. In retrospect, he concedes, the project of singling out just those utterances that 'do something' was doomed from the get-go: 'When we issue any utterance whatsoever, are we not "doing something"?' (1975, 92).

In the remaining five lectures, Austin shifts his focus to three different categories of 'speech acts.' No speech act is purely performative or constative, but is rather composed of: the locutionary act of uttering some words with sense and reference; the illocutionary act of doing something *in* uttering those words; and the perlocutionary act of doing something *by* uttering them. For example, if a woman says to her boyfriend, 'I just want to be friends,' she has performed the locutionary act of saying something about what she wants and making reference to friendship among other things; the illocutionary act of ending the relationship *in* saying these words; and the perlocutionary act of breaking her boyfriend's heart *by* saying these words. Austin finds that these three acts are no more strictly distinguishable than

[7] Cf. also Austin (1979, 103, 131).

[8] For instance, a standard text in formal semantics opens with the sentence: 'To know the meaning of a sentence is to know its truth-conditions' (Heim and Kratzer 1998, 1).

performative and constative utterances, and settles on the claim that they represent three somewhat distinct aspects of a speech act, which emphasize different dimensions of assessment. To make full sense of an utterance, we must understand it in its full context: 'the total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating' (1975, 148). For Austin, the meaningful unit of expression is not a proposition or a sentence, but rather a total speech act,[9] which includes a context that makes clear what illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are performed.

In my discussion of Searle, I will interrogate more closely the role of the locutionary act, as well as the conception of illocutionary 'forces' that Austin resorts to. For the moment, however, I focus on Austin's own assessment of his achievement. In repeatedly undermining the distinctions he draws, Austin approaches his subject matter like Penelope, undoing the threads he has woven almost as soon as he has woven them. The ultimate positive achievement of *How To Do Things With Words* is a 'general preliminary classification' of illocutionary acts, which 'only give [us] a run around, or rather a flounder around' (1975, 150 – 51). Far more important, I suggest, is Austin's determined failure to find anything more solid. He does the helpful work of going through the motions, but he anticipates this failure from the outset. He footnotes his initial 'preliminary isolation of the performative,' warning us that 'everything said in these sections is provisional, and subject to revision in the light of later sections' (1975, 4n). In this respect, I think Searle is exactly wrong in taking Austin to have been in the preparatory stages of developing a general theory of speech acts, which fell to his students to complete due to his untimely death (Searle 1977, 205). Austin's failure to find a satisfactory theory of the performative follows from the fact that theory building requires idealization. A 'total' elucidation would be like a map with a 1:1 scale: it would be accurate, but totally useless for any theoretical purpose. Austin is not

[9] On my reading, the ultimate target of Derrida's criticism is this idea that we can delimit a speech act in its totality. Indeed, in postulating this idea of a 'total' speech act, Austin himself falls prey to the temptation to idealization. I discuss the confrontation between Derrida and Austin in the longer book chapter from which this article is excerpted.

opposed outright to sketching theoretical divisions that might help us see our way more clearly, but these divisions can only be provisional guides that will not stand close scrutiny. Despite, or rather because of, his fine-grained classifications, Austin remains a staunchly anti-theoretical philosopher.[10]

3. GRICE AND IMPLICATURE

Austin attacks the sort of generalizations and over-simplifications that lead to bland dilemmas: all statements in the indicative are *either* true *or* false, all verbs of action can be qualified by *either* one adverb *or* its opposite (freely/not freely, voluntarily/involuntarily, etc.), and so on. In examining how 'voluntarily' and 'involuntarily' are used, and pointing to the asymmetries in their use, Austin speaks not just about the quirks of linguistic usage, but about *what it is* for an action to be voluntary or involuntary (1979, 191 – 93).

This claim that we cannot describe any action whatsoever as either voluntary or involuntary has fallen out of favour. It might be *odd*, for example, to describe an action as performed voluntarily when there was no question of constraint, but such a description is hardly meaningless. Contemporary philosophers of language distinguish what an utterance *literally means*—its semantic component—from its pragmatic implications: when and how it is appropriately uttered, and what further inferences hearers may draw beyond what is literally expressed. Armed with this distinction, Austin's successors have kept some of his results while rejecting the method that inspired them, claiming that the inappropriateness of describing certain actions as voluntary or involuntary is simply a pragmatic concern that has no impact on the truth of the expressed proposition.

[10] I should add that Austin's anti-theoretical bent does not make his philosophy 'therapeutic,' as some readings portray the later Wittgenstein. Austin did not seem particularly troubled by the sorts of metaphilosophical concerns that motivated Wittgenstein. His classificatory method is simply his idea of doing philosophy well, and the generalizations and abstractions of much philosophical theorizing is his idea of doing philosophy badly.

However, I think this criticism misses its mark in two respects. First, Austin does not equate conversational inappropriateness or oddness with nonsense. The point, rather, is that the temptation to say odd-sounding things manifests the tendencies toward idealization that Austin deplores. What leads philosophical theories into incoherence, according to Austin, is not that they rely on certain utterances that violate the rules of sense—whatever those are—but rather that they attempt to generalize over a diversity that resists such generalization. In talking about 'illusions,' Ayer presumably wants to talk about *one sort of thing*, but if he cannot clearly say what sort of thing this is, his attempts to do so are nonsensical. The problem with stretching the meaning of 'illusion' to cover all the cases Ayer wants to cover isn't that it's *odd* to call a mirror image an illusion, but rather that the resulting classification has no basis in language or reality. Conversational inappropriateness is a symptom, not the disease.

Second, the criticism that Austin fails to distinguish literal meaning from pragmatic implications relies on—one might say presupposes—a conception of literal meaning that itself cannot withstand Austinian scrutiny. In this section, I examine the source of this distinction and argue that, far from landing a devastating blow to Austin's critical method, Austin's method exposes this distinction itself as incoherent.

This line of criticism begins with Paul Grice, who is generally regarded as the father of pragmatics.[11] Grice cannot speak for all critics of Austin's method, but confronting his challenge provides a framework for questioning the ready dismissal of Austin's method in more contemporary work. Grice argues that we can make sense of the literal meaning of a

[11] For claims that Grice diminished the influence of ordinary language philosophy, see, e.g. Soames (2003, 197 – 210) and Neale (2005). Korta and Perry's (2011) general account of pragmatics begins with Austin and Grice, and credits Grice with establishing pragmatics as a distinct area of philosophical study with a rigorous methodology. The story is, of course, more complicated than this. Whether Grice intended to distinguish semantics from pragmatics is unclear, and indeed he never expressed a distinction in these terms (Szabó 2005, 3). Furthermore, how we should draw the boundary between semantics and pragmatics, and whether we can draw it at all, is a live topic of debate. My questioning of this distinction is hardly new, though I do so differently from those that want to reconcile pragmatics with formal semantics.

statement independent of its use, and in particular, that we can determine the truth-conditions of the statement without considering the use or appropriateness of its utterance. Truth-conditions, he claims, pertain to *what is said*, while he dubs as *implicatures* the sorts of implications that follow from an utterance by virtue of the less rigorously defined principles of conversational appropriateness. He first advances these claims in 'A Causal Theory of Perception,' and works out the mechanics of implicature in greater detail in 'Logic and Conversation.'

In this section, I begin by sketching Grice's argument and his conception of conversational implicature. Then I show that this argument at best succeeds against a shallow caricature of Austin, but not the genuine article. And lastly, I claim that, properly applied, Austin's method exposes the incoherence of Grice's conception of implicature. In particular, I claim, Grice's conception of conversational implicature subtly begs the question: it aims to isolate the literal meaning of a sentence from questions of conversational appropriateness, but it does so by assuming that we can identify the literal meaning of an utterance of cancellation—the mechanism of this isolation—independent of the context in which this utterance is used. If my argument is correct, Grice's influential method of distinguishing the literal meanings of utterances from their pragmatic implicatures fails, and with it an entire line of argument against Austin's continued relevance.

3.1. Grice's Argument

'A Causal Theory of Perception' considers statements of the form '*X* looks *p* to me,' but the guiding thought is meant to apply more generally. Such statements (Grice calls them '*L*-statements') found philosophical currency as a form of expression that seems to give immediate and infallible sensory reports. While I may be deceived about what I see, the story goes, I cannot be deceived about how things look to me. A stock of such infallible statements is an important starting point for sense-data theory and other foundationalist

projects in epistemology and the philosophy of perception.[12] Grice considers a challenge to the universal applicability of *L*-statements. If *L*-statements cannot be used in any context, they lack the universality that a general theory of knowledge or perception requires. In particular, Grice's imagined objector claims, one would not say, e.g. 'The sky looks blue to me' rather than just 'The sky is blue' unless there were some reason for doubting or denying that the sky is blue (Grice calls this the 'doubt-or-denial condition,' or simply '*D*-or-*D* condition'). According to Grice's objector, *L*-statements, far from being unmistakably true, are neither true nor false when used where the doubt-or-denial condition does not hold.

Grice responds by saying that utterances may carry unspoken implications in a number of different ways, that in some cases utterances maintain their literal meaning without carrying the implication, and that this is true of utterances expressing *L*-statements. In particular, he distinguishes presupposition from implicature, claiming that what an utterance presupposes is inextricably a part of the meaning of the uttered statement, but that what is implicated is not.[13]

Grice's example of presupposition is 'Smith has left off beating his wife.' Without the presupposition that Smith used to beat his wife, this statement makes no sense, and can be neither true nor false without the presupposition.[14] This statement cannot be rephrased without changing its truth-conditions, nor can the presupposition be cancelled by some sort of addendum like '...but I don't mean to imply that Smith used to beat his wife.'

Conventional implicature—implicature carried across by the conventional meaning of a locution within an utterance—operates in statements such as 'She was poor but she was honest,' where the 'but' suggests a contrast between poverty and honesty. Despite the

[12] See e. g. Russell [1914] (1993) and Carnap [1928] (2003).

[13] I want to present Grice's position clearly, charitably, and concisely, and in doing so I often diverge from section 3 of 'The Causal Theory of Perception' in favour of his more systematic account of implicature in 'Logic and Conversation.' For instance, Grice does not use the term 'implicature' in 'A Causal Theory of Perception' even if the phenomenon to which he later gives that name is in full play.

[14] Nothing in my discussion hangs on this point, but this claim is hardly uncontroversial. Some would say 'Smith has left off beating his wife' is false rather than meaningless if Smith never beat his wife.

implicated contrast, the use of 'but' instead of 'and' does not affect the truth-conditions of the utterance according to Grice, so the implicature can be detached by replacing the statement with its truth-functional equivalent: 'She was poor and she was honest.'[15]

Conversational implicature follows not from linguistic convention, but rather from less stringent maxims of conversation, such as 'Never substitute a weaker claim for a stronger claim.' 'My wife is either in the kitchen or in the bedroom' implicates that I do not know which of these two rooms my wife is in: if I knew she was in the kitchen, I would not add the second disjunct. We can also create an implicature by deliberately flouting a conversational maxim: a professor who writes in a recommendation letter 'Smith's sentences are well-formed and his English is grammatical' implicates by his refusal to say more than this that Smith is useless in philosophy. While we cannot detach conversational implicature—no rephrasing of the above example could detach the implicature that Smith is useless in philosophy—we can cancel it. It might be odd for the professor then to add, '...but I do not mean to suggest that Smith is no good in philosophy,' but doing so would cancel the implicature of the previous utterance.

We cannot cancel or detach presuppositions without altering the truth-conditions of the uttered statement, but we can cancel conversational implicature and detach conventional implicature without affecting a statement's truth-conditions. Grice argues that the doubt-or-denial condition attaching to *L*-statements is a conversational implicature, so *L*-statements have truth-conditions that are not affected by the doubt-or-denial condition, and so we can talk meaningfully about how things look to us even if it sounds odd. Grice's objector—who seems at least inspired by Austin, if not modelled on him—argues that *L*-statements without the doubt-or-denial condition are neither true nor false, but Grice replies that this objector confuses implicature with presupposition. Sentences that violate Grice's conversational maxims sound odd, but we can still grasp their literal meaning, and their violation of such maxims does not affect their truth-value.

[15] Even within mainstream pragmatics this point is controversial. See Bach (1999).

3.2. Grice's objector isn't Austin

I will not defend Grice's objector, and insist the doubt-or-denial condition attaches itself to *L*-statements more strongly than Grice supposes. Rather, I hope to show that Grice's objector is not Austin, and in fact shares certain basic assumptions about language that bring the objector closer to Grice than to Austin. In particular, the objector has a weakness for generalization and a fixation on truth-value that Austin does not share. Grice never mentions Austin by name, but *Sense and Sensibilia* was the most prominent contemporary attack on sense-data theory, so Austin is naturally read as the prime target in this attempt to rehabilitate a causal theory of perception. Grice also criticizes Austin explicitly elsewhere, challenging the Austinian maxim of 'No modification without aberration' (1979, 189), which is at work in 'looks to me' cases (Grice 1989, 8).

As it happens, Austin explicitly examines statements of the form '*X* looks *p* to me,' and he does not say that a condition of doubt or denial must always attach to them. In 'Other Minds,' he claims that a sentence like 'Here is something that looks to me red' could be variously interpreted:

> Contrast 'Here is something that (definitely) *looks to me* (anyhow) red' with 'Here is something that looks to me (something like) *red* (I should say).' In the former case I am quite confident that, however it may look to others, whatever it may 'really be,' &c., it certainly does look red to me at the moment. In the other case I'm not confident at all: it looks reddish, but I've never seen anything quite like it before, I can't quite describe it—or, I'm not very good at recognizing colours, I never feel quite happy about them, I've constantly been caught out about them. (1979, 91)

Neither Austin nor Grice holds the view of Grice's imagined objector, that certain implications *must* always attach to any utterance of a 'looks to me' locution. But the lesson

here is not simply that Austin does not claim something like a doubt-or-denial condition always attaches to 'looks to me' locutions. More to the point, Austin wants to spell out the context of an utterance before he can make sense of it. To say of a certain class of statements that a certain condition always attaches to them is as gross a generalization as the assertion that every statement has a fixed literal meaning regardless of what further implicatures might be conveyed through contextual or other cues in its utterance.

Besides this tendency toward generalization, another point where Grice's objector stands with Grice, and in opposition to Austin, is a conception of meaning that privileges truth-value. Grice's objector takes the non-fulfilment of the doubt-or-denial condition as a case for a third truth-value, *N*, which attaches to statements when neither *T* nor *F* apply (Grice 1965, 455). Grice seems to read Austin's disparagement of the 'true/false fetish' as an objection to the Law of the Excluded Middle, insisting that we need a third truth-value to account for utterances where we cannot say that something either true or false has been asserted.[16]

But Austin's concern with the 'true/false fetish' isn't that this pair of truth-values must be supplemented by a further truth-value in order to capture the semantic values of all statements. Rather, he is concerned that a too-narrow focus on truth-value risks blinding us to other ways of evaluating speech acts, which often better capture what is expressed. A promise is neither true nor false, but Austin does not claim that statements of promise thus take a third truth-value, *N*, which they share with various forms of nonsense. His point is not that there are more than two values in the domain of truth-value, but rather that there are more dimensions to meaning than the one defined by the true-false axis. Falsehood is one kind of infelicity—and truth one kind of felicity—that can befall our utterances, and *How To Do Things With Words* shows, among other things, that truth and falsity occupy only a small place in a much larger picture.

[16] Even defenders of Austin occasionally take this route. Charles Travis (1991) talks about a third truth-value, *N*, in his defence of Austin against Grice.

In responding to the claim that statements like 'The sky looks blue to me' have invariant truth-conditions, one route we could take is to generate examples of such statements where the truth-conditions actually do turn out to vary depending on the contexts in which they are uttered.[17] In other words, we could try to prove that Grice is wrong. Charles Travis takes this route, suggesting that it is one of two strategies one might adopt in challenging what he calls the 'classical picture' of semantics: 'One might try to show that the picture is senseless: that somehow or other, in stating it, we have appealed to some (putative) notion that is not, and could not be well defined. Or one might accept the picture as sensible and coherent, and argue that it is false' (Travis 1989, 14 – 15). While Travis opts for the second strategy,[18] I am more inclined to pursue the first.[19]

3.3. An Austinian Response

One problem with 'proving Grice wrong,' if such a thing is possible, is that it accepts implicitly a privileging of the true/false dimension of assessment: Grice's argument consists of a series of assertions, some of these assertions are false, therefore Grice's argument does not hold up. Just as there are more ways of appraising a sentence than just its truth or falsity, there are more ways of appraising an argument than just its soundness or unsoundness. Instead of proving Grice wrong, I will use an Austinian term of criticism and argue that Grice cannot seriously mean what he thinks he means.

Grice claims that the cancellability of conversational implicature shows that we can separate what is said (which cannot be cancelled without altering the sentence's truth-conditions) from what is conversationally implicated (the part that is cancelled), so that the

[17] Travis is particularly creative in this regard, with sentences like 'The table is covered in butter' (1991, 240) or 'There's milk in the refrigerator' (1989, 19).

[18] Travis has engaged with Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore on this topic, who defend a 'semantic minimalism' that would be more sympathetic to Grice. See Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 2006) and Travis (2006) for some of the moves in this debate.

[19] Baz (2012), especially chap. 4, explores the divergence between Travis and ordinary language philosophers like Austin in some detail.

truth-conditions of a statement rely only on the former, and the meaning of the statement does not essentially include the latter. For instance, 'The sky looks blue to me' carries the implicature (according to Grice) that the speaker has some cause for doubt or denial because it violates the conversational maxim of Manner, being more prolix than the straightforward 'The sky is blue.' But, says Grice, we can cancel this implicature by adding further prolixity: 'The sky looks blue to me, but I don't mean to suggest that I have any reason to doubt or deny that the sky is in fact blue.'

Can Grice seriously mean this? Would hearing that last sentence really cancel any implicature of doubt or denial that a hearer might draw from 'The sky looks blue to me'? If 'The sky looks blue to me' carries an implicature of doubt or denial because its prolixity flouts the Gricean Maxim of Manner, this much longer sentence flouts it even more so, and its utterance must have implicatures of its own. Rather than cancelling an implicature, it more likely suggests the speaker is trying to backpedal from words she wishes she had not uttered, and if anything, heighten the suspicion of doubt or denial. Compare: 'I can't believe she's dating a black man… not that I think there's anything wrong with that!' The latter half of that sentence, far from being accepted as a standard cancellation of the implicated racist sentiment of the first half, has become a cliché of ham-handed attempts to deny racist sentiment that instead only highlights it. Far from cancelling the first implicature, the added words simply add a further implicature. The lady doth protest too much.[20]

Two separate points are at play here. The first, which I raised in the above paragraph, is that the so-called cancellation of an implicature is as much a speech act as the original utterance, and should be just as subject to implicatures and infelicities as the original utterance on a Gricean reading. The second, which I alluded to above and will argue for below, is that, if we treat cancellations as the speech acts that they must surely be, they can no longer do the work that Grice wants them to do.

[20] After developing this argument, I discovered a similar line of criticism against conversational implicature in Weiner 2006, although Weiner doesn't make this argument part of a broader methodological point.

Let us consider how we use utterances of the form '... but by that I don't mean to suggest ...' which is the form of the Gricean cancellation. We often use these clauses to clarify an utterance that might have been misunderstood. If my words could be taken in more than one way, I can clarify my meaning by denying a possible understanding that I don't intend. To illustrate this point, we can adapt Grice's letter of recommendation: the professor is speaking to a colleague about a student and says, 'Smith is a fine thespian.' The professor says that, knowing and admiring his student's theatrical accomplishments. But then he realizes that, in the context of this conversation, and what with Smith on the job market, his praise might be mistaken for a dismissal of the student's philosophical ability, and so hastily adds, 'but I don't mean to suggest by that anything to the detriment of Smith's work in philosophy.' The professor can reasonably hope to make clear that he does not wish to denigrate his student's philosophical abilities, but only because the original utterance could plausibly have been interpreted in the sense that the added clause later makes explicit. We do better, then, to interpret the added clause not as a 'cancellation,' which simply removes something from the original speech act, but rather as a further speech act that resolves a possible misunderstanding of the original speech act.[21] In other words, '... but by that I don't mean to suggest ...' locutions do not deal with implicatures at all, but rather with ambiguities.

Grice considers cases where only one natural interpretation is available. His purported cancellation of the doubt-or-denial condition attaching to *L*-statements is meant to remove an implicature even in cases where there is no ambiguity.[22] Gricean cancellation

[21] This reading helps us to imagine a felicitous utterance of 'I can't believe she's dating a black man... not that I think that there's anything wrong with that.' Suppose the woman in question has often made racist remarks in my hearing, or she is the daughter of a well-known segregationist. In these cases, however, the 'not that I think there's anything wrong with that' clears up a possible misunderstanding, which is precisely why it is acceptable.

[22] One could, of course, imagine scenarios where 'The sky looks blue to me' could be taken in more than one way. Suppose I'm sitting outside with a child who's drawing a picture of the landscape and colours the sky purple. As a gentle corrective, I say, 'The sky looks blue to me,' just as a third party approaches. I might clarify my meaning to this third party by saying, 'I wasn't suggesting that there's any reason to doubt or deny that the

does not try to clarify a possible misunderstanding, but rather to insist that we understand an utterance otherwise than the one way in which it is typically understood. As I suggested above, the words Grice wants to use in that role do something else. I might add that it seems highly unlikely that any words could play that role: Humpty Dumpty might claim that his utterances can be understood otherwise than the one way in which they are typically understood, but the rest of us do not have this luxury. Cancellation is not so much unsuccessful as incoherent.

Ultimately, the whole matter of cancellation merely postpones the problem it is supposed to solve. Utterances often seem to mean something more or something else than what they strictly seem to say, and conversational implicature is supposed to account for that something more or something else. It also makes room for an analysis of what utterances strictly say by isolating this something more or something else and providing means for cancelling it so that analysis can focus exclusively on what is said. Grice claims we can cancel the implicature through a further utterance, which he calls a 'cancellation.' He analyzes the original utterance in considerable detail, but he devotes no attention to the utterance of the cancellation. He does not countenance the possibility that this utterance might also mean something more or something else than what it strictly says. Cancellation does not effect the separation of what is said from what is implicated, but rather, at best, diverts the question of their separation to a second, more elaborate utterance.

On this analysis, Grice is guilty of a subtle form of question begging. He wants to insist on the sharp separability of what is said from what is implicated by virtue of the cancellability of implicatures (in the case of conversational implicature, which is what interests us here). But the very intelligibility of the notion of cancellability already assumes this separation: we are asked to consider only the semantic impact of the cancellation without considering what implicature might attach to its utterance. In other words, Grice's

sky is blue.' But this utterance makes sense precisely because it resolves an ambiguity. Grice wants cancellation to be able to apply generally, even when there is no ambiguity.

cancellation is an idealization, a piece of semantic fiction that only does the work it's intended to do if we turn a blind eye to how it might actually be used in an utterance. In begging the question on this point, Grice blinds himself to the fact that cancellation cannot neatly isolate the semantic component of a statement.

Grice's conception of cancellation is meant to show, among other things, that Austin's fine-grained examination of the details of 'what we should say when' (Austin 1979, 182) cannot disrupt the generalizing thrust that much philosophical theorizing requires. However odd it might sound, Grice wants to say, we can still isolate the literal meaning of 'looks to me' locutions in a way that allows us to build a causal theory of perception—or, more generally, we can still isolate the literal meanings of odd-sounding expressions in a way that allows us to build philosophical theories. But if the notion of cancellation is incoherent, so is the notion of literal meaning that it supports: both of them are idealizations of the sort Austin criticizes.

Grice's argument attempts to isolate the literal meaning of an expression, and I have claimed that his attempt fails. Searle also attempts to supersede Austin by isolating the literal meaning of expressions. But where Grice attempts to move against Austin's method, Searle attempts to appropriate and improve on Austin's work.

4. SEARLE AND THE ILLOCUTIONARY ACT

Grice's attack on Austin is more insidious than a straightforward refutation: because Austin can be seen as a forebear of the semantics/pragmatics distinction, Austin comes out of his encounter with Grice seeming not so much refuted as superseded. John Searle, a student and self-styled successor of Austin's, undermines Austin even more subtly because he deliberately undertakes to complete the work of *How To Do Things With Words*, providing a general theory of speech acts where Austin acknowledges having given only 'a run around, or rather a flounder around.' Given his respect for Austin, his criticism is all the more damning. I now consider Searle's extension of Austin, arguing that, as with Grice,

Searle's encounter with Austin takes place on Searle's own terms, where Searle's argument rests upon a conception of literal meaning that he smuggles in with an idealized conception of expressing a proposition.

Searle's theory of speech acts treats the philosophy of language as a species of the philosophy of action, and here he acknowledges his debt to Austin. For both, *saying* something is *doing* something, and they believe we can resolve many errors and confusions in the philosophy of language by considering language in terms of action. Searle adopts Austin's account of illocutionary acts, claiming that we cannot make full sense of the meaning of an utterance unless we consider its illocutionary force, which is distinct from its truth-conditions (Searle 1968, 416). However, Searle says this while criticizing Austin's conception of illocutionary acts, and defending a notion of literal meaning that brings him closer to Grice. Grice simply assumes a privileged role for truth-conditions in determining meaning, but Searle actively takes Austin to task for failing to appreciate the importance of truth-conditions. Searle's Austin is far closer to the genuine article than the objector put forward by Grice, so his attack is more robust. I will argue that Searle is right to find fault with Austin's conception of the locutionary act, but his fix of positing a 'propositional act' draws exactly the wrong lesson.

4.1 Problems for the locutionary act

Searle takes a major difference between Austin's locutionary and illocutionary acts to be that a locutionary act is fixed by the words in a sentence whereas fixing an illocutionary act depends on broader contextual clues. 'I'm going to do it' can be a warning, a prediction, a promise, a statement of intent, etc., and we rely on context to tell us which illocutionary act it is, but it is the same locutionary act in all of these cases (modulo indexical reference). However, in some cases a sentence wears its illocutionary force on its sleeve: Searle gives the example of 'I hereby promise I'm going to do it.' In this case, we hardly need a locutionary/illocutionary distinction because the illocutionary act is explicitly a part of what

is said. The locutionary/illocutionary distinction comes into play, says Searle, only when the literal meaning of the sentence is force-neutral—as in 'I'm going to do it'—where a particular locutionary act is ambiguous as regards its illocutionary force. However, Searle (1968, 412) argues, no sentence is entirely force-neutral: saying, telling, and stating might be less specific acts than promising, warning, and betting, but they are illocutionary acts for all that. All meaningful utterances are illocutionary acts, and in that sense, says Searle, we cannot fruitfully distinguish locutionary from illocutionary acts. This point becomes clear in the case of reported speech: there is no force-neutral way in which we can report what someone said (asserted, promised, vowed, etc.). In reporting the speech, we necessarily report it as an illocutionary act.

Searle's point is not simply the weak one (with which Austin would not disagree: see Austin 1975, 98) that every performance of a locutionary act is also the performance of an illocutionary act. Rather, he makes the stronger claim that we cannot characterize a locutionary act except *as* an illocutionary act. Reporting that someone said a string of words may report a less precise illocutionary act than reporting that someone issued a warning or a threat in saying those words, but both are reports on *illocutionary* acts. Thus, says Searle, locutionary and illocutionary acts collapse on to one another, a point that Austin missed because he 'did not see that the supposedly locutionary verb phrases "tell someone to do something," "say that," "ask whether" are as much illocutionary verb phrases as "state that," "order someone to," or "promise someone that"' (Searle 1968, 417).

This accusation is strange for two reasons, especially coming from a close student of Austin's. First, Austin does acknowledge that telling, saying, and asking are illocutionary acts. Austin classes these verbs as 'expositives,' and explicitly lists 'tell' and 'ask' among his examples of expositives (Austin 1975, 162). Searle might misread Austin on this point because he thinks that accepting all verbs of utterance as illocutionary verbs is fatal to the locutionary/illocutionary distinction, and this is the second point on which Searle misreads Austin. In the second half of *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin abandons the

performative/constative distinction precisely because no grammatical criterion distinguishes the one from the other. His locutionary/illocutionary/perlocutionary distinction does not separate out three different acts, but rather distinguishes three aspects of a single speech act (Austin 1975, 145 – 6). That locutionary and illocutionary acts are not fully separable, far from being fatal to Austin's distinction, is a part of his point in drawing the distinction in the first place.

Nevertheless, Searle's attack on Austin's locutionary act identifies a difficulty in Austin's formulation. Austin describes the locutionary act as itself composed of three distinguishable acts: the phonetic act of uttering certain sounds, the phatic act of uttering certain vocables and words that conform to a certain vocabulary and grammar, and the rhetic act 'of using those vocables with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference' (1975, 95). Austin distinguishes the phatic from the rhetic act by noting that a phatic act must be reported through quotation—'He said, "The cat is on the mat"'—whereas the rhetic act can be reported through indirect speech—'He said that the cat was on the mat'. However, as Searle notes, any report using indirect speech necessarily reports not a rhetic act, but an illocutionary act: even 'said' carries illocutionary force, so we are not simply describing *what* was uttered, but also *how* it was uttered.

I glossed Austin's ternary distinction earlier with the example of 'I just want to be friends':

> … she has performed three acts: the locutionary act of saying something about what she wants and making reference to friendship among other things; the illocutionary act of ending the relationship *in* saying these words; and the perlocutionary act of breaking her boyfriend's heart *by* saying these words.

I specified the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts with simple English phrases, but the locutionary act required more awkward phrasing to avoid the redundancy of 'the locutionary

act of saying that she just wants to be friends.' Grice's favoured phrase for isolating the semantic component of an utterance is that it picks out 'what is said.'[23] However, consider how we explain in actual cases what was said in a given utterance: all we offer are further utterances. Such explanations can specify illocutionary and perlocutionary acts: '*In*/*By* saying *x*, she....' These explanations can also clear up ambiguity or misunderstandings in the original utterance: 'When she said "I don't want to," she was talking about going to the dentist tomorrow, not about going to your party tonight.' However, when the original utterance is itself perfectly clear, specifying 'what is said' is a strikingly pointless undertaking. Consider Austin's specification of a locutionary act: 'He said to me "Shoot her!" meaning by "shoot" shoot and referring by "her" to *her*' (1975, 101). No locutionary act here can be distinguished from the utterance itself.

The original motivation for positing a distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts is that saying (for instance) 'I promise' can be described both as the action of saying some words and as the action of making a promise. The possibility of multiple descriptions gives the impression that we can distinguish multiple acts being performed in the one utterance. And indeed we can; but rather than posit a distinct locutionary act, we would do better to say that any speech act can be described in terms of various different illocutionary acts depending on the aims of the description. 'I promise' can be described both as the *illocutionary* act of saying some words *and* as the illocutionary act of making a promise. In this respect, I concur with Searle's claim that Austin's locutionary and illocutionary acts collapse together.[24]

[23] See Grice (1989, 25), and *passim*.

[24] Dispensing with the locutionary act also rescues Austin from a potential embarrassment: if all utterances are, among other things, locutionary acts, and if locutionary acts are defined in the Fregean terms of sense and reference, all utterances can be evaluated according to their truth and falsity, which would complicate Austin's diagnosis of the descriptive fallacy.

4.2 Problems for the propositional act and literal meaning

However, Searle draws a very different lesson from this collapse of locutionary and illocutionary acts: he takes Austin's locutionary act to aim at identifying the literal meaning of a sentence, which it cannot do if it is always entwined with context-dependent illocutionary forces. To remedy what he perceives to be Austin's error, Searle proposes replacing the locutionary act with the propositional act, which he describes as 'the act of *expressing the proposition* (a phrase which is neutral as to illocutionary force)' (Searle 1968, 420). In other words, Searle takes Austin's failing to be that he fails to specify the literal meaning of an utterance. In this respect, I think Searle has it exactly wrong: the problem is precisely with the notion of literal meaning encapsulated in Searle's propositional act rather than its inextricability from the illocutionary act.

Why 'expressing the proposition' is neutral as to illocutionary force where 'saying,' 'telling,' and 'asking' are not, Searle does not say. This point is not just incidental. In saying all verbs of utterance bear illocutionary force, Searle tells us that there is no entirely force-neutral way of describing an utterance. If a sentence containing the phrase 'expresses the proposition' carries illocutionary force just like any other sentence, Searle's propositional act is no more isolable from the total context of a speech act than Austin's locutionary act.

At the heart of Searle's revision of Austin is his 'Principle of Expressivity' (1968, 415; 1969, 19), which claims that 'whatever can be meant can be said.' Searle does not mean to deny that I might sometimes find myself unable to say just what I mean—because I lack the words, for instance—but he argues that such limitations are merely contingent, and can in principle always be remedied with enough knowledge and imagination. He also points out that we can sometimes say less than we mean: 'You ask me, "Are you going to the party?" I say, "Yes." But what I mean is "Yes, I am going to the party," not "Yes, it is a fine day"' (1968, 415). Enshrined in the principle, then, is the notion of a propositional act, such that two different utterances can mean exactly the same thing by virtue of expressing the same proposition. On this view, a shorter sentence is elliptical for the longer one, and, in

particular, the longer version is actually what the shorter one means (rather than vice versa).[25]

This Principle of Expressivity is logically equivalent to the claim: 'If you can mean it, then you can say it.' This restatement leaves open the possibility that one can say things that one cannot mean, but not that one can mean things that one cannot say. In granting that one can say more than one means, Searle envisages the same propositional act being performed in different utterances: one can say the same thing in many ways. And in claiming that one cannot mean more than one can say, he claims that there is a fully explicit, literal formulation of anything we could mean, both in terms of the propositional and the illocutionary acts we perform in speaking. 'I'm going to do it' may be ambiguous as to its illocutionary force, but, Searle says, the same expression can be restated unambiguously as 'I hereby promise...,' 'I hereby warn...,' 'I hereby predict...,' and so on. We may have all manner of reasons for not giving completely literal and unambiguous expressions of our meaning—Grice's conversational maxims providing some valuable ones—but such literal and unambiguous expression is always in principle possible. This claim reinforces a sharp distinction between semantics and pragmatics: whatever the pragmatic implicatures of my saying what I say in the way that I say it, the underlying literal meaning remains fixed.

Searle diagnoses Austin and his contemporaries with having made a number of fallacies that his own theory of speech acts remedies. The most pertinent to the discussion at hand is called 'the assertion fallacy' (Searle 1969, 141). Like Grice, Searle criticizes the notion that one can only make certain assertions under certain circumstances, singling out such claims as that I cannot *know* that I am in pain, that in normal circumstances I cannot be said to *remember* my name, and that an action performed in normal circumstances cannot be described as being done *voluntarily*. Searle agrees that such statements would be odd, but

[25] Wittgenstein provides an illuminating discussion of elliptical expressions in *PI* §§19 – 20, but I will not dwell on this point here.

not because they would be meaningless or false, but rather because they would be so obviously true.

Two points in Searle's argument are worth singling out. First, he denies that these limitations on what we should say when reveal something about the concepts of knowledge, remembering, voluntary action, and so on. He claims that just the same oddness attaches to sentences without any of these potentially philosophical words, such as 'He has five fingers' or 'He is breathing.' The oddness, Searle says, is no more revelatory of the concept of knowledge in the one case than it is of the concept of fingers in the other. And second, he claims, these sentences cannot be completely meaningless—by which he means devoid of truth-conditions—because their negations can quite obviously be false: 'He does not remember his name' or 'He is not breathing' are unambiguously false when said of a person of sound mind and sound health.[26]

Searle himself later acknowledges that the concept of knowledge has application within a web of other concepts, presuppositions, excluders, and so on, that makes it more philosophically pertinent than the concept of fingers (Searle 1969, 150). Another difference is that claims about what I know are not statements about me right now in the way that 'I am breathing' is: verbs like 'know,' 'remember,' 'doubt,' etc., are rarely used in the present progressive form because they are not the things one can talk about in terms of stopping and starting, interrupting and resuming. This difference points to a difference in Searle's argument from negation: must we interpret 'He does not know he's in pain' as an obvious falsehood? Searle is probably thinking of these words uttered in front of someone writhing on the floor in agony, in which case their potential falsehood would be only the least of their infelicities: stop doing philosophy and help the poor man. But Wittgenstein says something very close to this at *Philosophical Investigations* §246, and he does not put it forward as an

[26] Grice (1965, 452 – 3) argues similarly in 'The Causal Theory of Perception,' giving an example of an *L*-statement that is clearly false without its falsity presupposing the fulfilment of the *D*-or-*D* condition.

obvious falsehood.[27] One of the dangers of providing no context for our words is that we risk missing the sorts of contexts in which they find application.

At this point, I want to return to the line of criticism I used with Grice, which is not to say that Searle is *wrong*, that it is *false* to say that 'I know I am in pain' or 'He is breathing' can be understood without any contextual stage-setting. Rather, I question whether Searle can seriously claim that extracting these words from any possible context identifies their unambiguous, literal meaning.[28] The claim that a sentence like 'He is breathing' has a literal meaning that remains the same and has application regardless of context presupposes that the expression 'literal meaning' has a literal meaning that remains the same and has application regardless of context. But 'literal' is one half of a contrasting pair. We have no trouble explaining the literal meaning of 'It's raining cats and dogs,' but how would we explain the literal meaning of 'The cat is on the mat,' used in a non-figurative context? 'Well, it means that the cat is on the mat.' Nothing is explained here. Although it's sometimes said that (some) figurative language resists paraphrase, it's also true that figurative language is what invites paraphrase in the first place: there's no point in paraphrasing a sentence whose meaning is already clear. To talk about 'literal meaning' at all, we need a term of contrast, and so the notion of 'unambiguous, literal' meaning is confused: we only need to explain the literal meaning of an expression when there is some clear alternative way of understanding it.[29]

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[27] What Wittgenstein actually says is: 'It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I'm in pain.' Wittgenstein doesn't negate 'I know I'm in pain' but questions the possibility of talking about knowledge in this context at all.

[28] The argument that follows draws significantly on a similar one made by Crary (2006, 50).

[29] Another problem with supposing that every utterance has an unambiguous, literal equivalent is problematic for a number of reasons. The simplest is that we are sometimes deliberately ambiguous. Suppose that, in saying 'I'm going to do it,' I want you be unsure whether I intend my words as a warning or as a threat. I am hardly making an equivalent propositional act if I say instead 'I hereby either warn or threaten that I'm going to do it.' The ensuing dialogue is farcical:

– Well, which one is it, a warning or a threat?

– I'm not telling. I want it to be ambiguous.

Can we not still say that every sentence (or almost every sentence) has either a literal meaning or an unambiguous meaning, and whichever one of these it is, this is what a propositional act expresses? To say whether we want to understand a sentence in its literal or its unambiguous sense requires a context to tell us which of these we want to do. We can talk about the literal meaning of 'The cat is on the mat' in contexts where it could be taken metaphorically, or as a parody, or as a coded signal, and we can talk about its unambiguous meaning when there might be some confusion over which cat or which mat. We can only be clear on what propositional act is expressed once we understand the speech act in which it is embedded. Searle rejected the notion of a locutionary act precisely because it was inextricable from the broader speech act, but his propositional act is just as inextricable. As a tool for isolating what Searle calls 'literal meaning,' the propositional act is no more successful than the locutionary act Searle means to replace.

I am not denying that we can make sense of sentences like 'The cat is on the mat' or 'He has five fingers' without embedding them in a particular context (you don't need contextual cues to know which of these two sentences deals with the location of a member of Family Felidae). I am not resisting the possibility of understanding such sentences, but rather the philosophical work Searle and others want this possibility to do. Namely, that we make sense of such sentences by virtue of recognizing something called their 'literal meaning,' which is encoded in a proposition and is expressed in the part of a speech act called the 'propositional act.'

Searle's desire to exempt 'express the proposition' from considerations that are supposed to apply generally to all utterances is analogous to Grice's desire to exempt cancellation from considerations that are supposed to apply generally to all utterances. In both cases, they attempt to express a principle by which they can isolate the literal meaning of an utterance while also not expressing it. This is the essence of what I characterized as idealization: the temptation to invent semantic entities that exist only as abstractions and which cease to do the work they are meant to do as soon as they are given concrete

expression. In this respect, Grice and Searle attempt to take what John McDowell has characterized as a 'sideways perspective' on language: they suppose that we can contemplate the relation between language and reality 'not only from the midst of our ... practices, but also, so to speak, from sideways on—from a standpoint independent of all the human activities and reactions that locate those practices in our "whirl of organism"' (McDowell 1981, 150).[30] Cancellation and 'expressing the proposition' serve as Archimedean points: by exempting them from general linguistic considerations, Grice and Searle try to claim a position outside of language that allows them to articulate conceptions of language whereby a semantic component of an utterance can be isolated and understood independent of the use that utterance is given. However, if these positions cannot find expression in ordinary language, neither Grice nor Searle can seriously advance them. The criticisms that Grice and Searle make of Austin are not so much false as incoherent.

5. CONCLUSION

An important feature of Austin's approach to philosophy is its concreteness: Austin is reluctant to posit abstract entities to explain the phenomenon of language. As the discussion of Grice and Searle aims to show, these abstractions creep into our thinking almost unnoticed. This concreteness demands that anything that can be said about language must be something that *can be said*, a demand that Grice on cancellation and Searle on the propositional act fail to meet. Indeed, as I have argued, even Austin's idea of a locutionary act fails to meet this demand. Remaining rigorously true to this demand challenges the widely held view that an utterance expresses an ideal semantic component that we can identify independently of the way in which it is used.

[30] McDowell's 'whirl of organism' alludes to Cavell 1976b, 52.

Rehabilitating Austin requires adopting a different starting point when thinking about language.[31] Instead of starting with the notion of propositions with truth-conditions, which might then have further pragmatic implicatures depending on the context in which they are expressed, we should begin by considering utterances as illocutionary acts that also have various kinds of perlocutionary force depending on the context in which they are used. From these illocutionary acts, we might then be able to abstract away a 'propositional' or 'locutionary' component for certain purposes. For instance, we are often concerned with the inferential relations between certain utterances and certain other ones. In the appropriate circumstances, 'John is going to ask Jean to marry him' and 'He's going to do it' can have all the same inferential connections to other sentences. These similarities incline us to say that the two sentences have *something* in common. Because we cannot account for that something simply in terms of the actual words in the sentence, we might suppose that both express the same proposition.

This supposition is not in itself particularly harmful. However, we get things backwards if we conclude that the two sentences have the same inferential relations *by virtue of* their expressing the same proposition. Rather, we talk about a similarity in the first place *because* we note a similarity in their inferential relations. The proposition is not a discovery that *explains* the similarity in inferential relations between different sentences, but is rather a placeholder that *describes* a similarity in role between sentences that crops up in the practice of drawing inferences. Our thinking strays from Austin's exemplary concreteness when we posit an abstract entity by virtue of which language is able to function in the way that it does. By recognizing the illocutionary act as more fundamental than propositions, we remind ourselves of something very obvious, but also easily neglected: that language is something lived and used, and that we distort our understanding of language when we abstract it from the life in which it is used.

[31] Although I believe that this starting point requires that we see certain approaches to the study of language as wrong-headed, I certainly don't intend to be dogmatic as to what counts as right-headed. Such dogmatism would be anathema to Austin's own spirit of experimentation.

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