

Deskewing the Searlean picture

A new speech act ontology for linguistics

Philosophy of language, especially speech act theory, and theoretical linguistics, especially theory of sentence mood, are related but clearly distinct disciplines. But why is it that there is much less fruitful interaction and mutual stimulation between the two than one would expect given their systematic connection? The fact that speech act theorists are rarely well-trained syntacticians and vice versa can only be part of the answer because there could be fruitful cooperation between the specialists. The paper argues that a more complete answer can be derived from the analysis of an curious mismatch: The most often used classification of speech acts into basic illocution types is Searle's quinary distinction of Assertives, Directives, Commissive, Expressives, and Declarations (Searle 1975). On the other hand, typological findings show that across the world's languages declarative, interrogative, imperative and, with some distance, exclamative sentence mood are the most widespread grammatical (and thus general) indicators of illocution type (König and Siemund forthcoming). So there are two pictures of the top categories of an ontology of illocutions, one from analytical investigations and one from the observation of cross-linguistically shared grammatical structure.

The aim of the paper is to show four things: First, that the Searlean picture is skewed compared to the grammatical picture in that it overemphasizes non-universal aspects of human language and misses important generalizations; second, that the grammatical picture can be made precise on the basis of very few elementary and universally valid assumptions about the functions of human language; third, that this precise reconstruction helps in analyzing intricate syntactic patterns that interrelate German clause types; and last, that an approximation of the Searlean picture can be derived from the new picture by adding some special constraints.

To show the first point Searle's decomposition of the factors of illocution types is confronted with a decompositional analysis of sentence mood meanings. It turns out (a) that the seeming systematicity of the former decreases considerably on closer inspection, (b) that the mood decomposition can be done without any special tools by combining modal operators such as volition, causation and knowledge, which come for free since they are independently needed, and (c) that the Searlean picture is skewed insofar as it destroys the integrity of the questions by subsuming them under the Directives, and as it attributes a role and weight to Commissive, Declarations and Expressives that is poorly motivated.

The second point is shown by spelling out basic hypotheses about human language and developing them into a systematic account of its functions. Due to their very nature, which associates perceivable actions with inferable conceptual contents, linguistic signs can be used first of all for mind activating and structuring, and second, when externalized, for mind sharing. The core elements of mind sharing are attention sharing, goal sharing, knowledge sharing and emotion sharing (cf. Zaefferer forthcoming). The abovementioned modal operators are assumed to operate on different kinds of propositional content, which are conceived as cognitivized versions of Austinian propositions (Barwise and Etchemendy 1987). From these building blocks a precise classification of illocutionary acts is constructed which, being based on assumptions about the essence of its objects, deserves the name of an ontology.

The third point is demonstrated by applying this ontology in an analysis of the sentence mood meanings of German, where canonically root clauses, which carry illocutionary force, are verb-initial (verb-first or verb-second) whereas embedded clauses, which lack force, are verb-final. The challenge consists in (a) explaining why verb-final root and verb-initial embedded clauses also occur, (b) establishing their licensing conditions, and (c) giving a satisfactory account of the forces of verb-final root clauses (cf. Truckenbrodt forthcoming).

To show the last point the crucial factors that skew the Searlean picture are isolated by reconstructing most of this old view through reallocating certain elements of the new one.

References

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