# Meaning and Speech Acts

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# MEANING AND SPEECH ACTS

## I. Introduction

A CONTROVERSY has been brewing up for some time now between those who want to explain the meanings of certain words in terms of the speech acts which those words (or sentences containing them) are standardly used to perform, and those who say that this is a mistake. Let us call these two parties the performers and the critics. I have myself, in my treatment of "good," put on one of the performances which is criticized; and Professor Strawson, in his account of "true," has put on another.[1] Professor Searle appears by turns as one of the most interesting performers and as one of the most trenchant critics. For he says, in general, in his recent excellent book, *Speech Acts:*

A study of the meaning of sentences is not in principle distinct from a study of speech acts. Properly construed, they are the same study. Since every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts), and since every possible speech act can in principle be given an exact formulation in a sentence or sentences (assuming an appropriate context of utterance), the study of the meanings of sentences and the study of speech acts are not two independent studies but one study from two different points of view [p. 18].

and in an article, with which I agree almost entirely, he attacks the view (attributed perhaps wrongly to Austin) that meaning is wholly distinct from illocutionary force.[2] And in particular he convincingly analyzes the word "promise" in terms of the speech act of promising,[3] and analyzes referring expressions in terms of the speech act of referring.[4] But on the other hand he

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[1] See his articles in *Truth*, ed. by G. Pitcher.
[2] *Philosophical Review*, LXXVII (1968).
[3] *Speech Acts*, ch. 3; *Philosophical Review*, LXXIII (1964), 44 f.
[4] *Speech Acts*, ch. 4.

severely criticizes those who would treat "good" in a similar way.[5]

Searle's book is a welcome sign of the growing interest in this aspect of meaning theory. When we understand more about it, we shall know what has put us at cross-purposes; and it is as a contribution to such an understanding, rather than merely as a defense of my own views, that this article is intended.

The performers put forward theories of the following general type: they claim that the meaning of a certain word can be explained, or partly explained, by saying that, when incorporated in an appropriate sentence in an appropriate place, it gives to that whole sentence the property that an utterance of it would be, in the appropriate context, a performance of a certain kind of speech act. This is the same as to say that the utterance would have, in Austin's term, a certain illocutionary force; and it is the same as to say, with Professor Alston, that the sentence has a certain illocutionary-act potential.[6] Thus, to take Searle's relatively uncontroversial example, the incorporation of the word "promise" in that particular place in the sentence (that particular sentence) "I promise to pay you $5 tomorrow" gives to that whole sentence the property that an utterance of it would be, in an appropriate context, a performance of the speech act of promising to pay the person addressed $5 on the day following the utterance; and, it is claimed, to say this is to say something (not necessarily everything) about the meaning of the word "promise." This is intended as a general characterization of the type of theory, not as a statement of Searle's own views, for which his book can be consulted.

To proceed to a more controversial example with which I shall be most concerned: it has been claimed that the incorporation of the word "good" in the sentence "That is a good movie" gives to the whole sentence the property that an utterance of it would be, in an appropriate context, a performance of the speech act of commending the film in question; and that to say this is to say something (but not necessarily everything) about the

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[5] *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962); *Speech Acts*, ch. 6.2.

[6] *Philosophy of Language*, ch. 2.

meaning of the word "good." Naturally, it has to be further explained what the speech act of commending is; but this I shall not attempt in this paper. The above claim is to be carefully distinguished from the claim that the sentence "That is a good movie" means the same as the explicit performative "I (hereby) commend that as a movie," to which, as we shall see, there is a powerful objection. It is also to be distinguished from the claim that "That is a good movie" means the same as the report "I do, as a matter of fact, commend that as a movie." I do not know whether anybody has ever made either of these claims.

The criticism which the critics put forward can come in bolder or in less bold forms, which must be distinguished. I leave it to the reader to examine the writings of the critics and see how bold each of them is (Searle's views on "promise" put him into the less bold class). In the bolder form, the criticism would say that illocutionary force is something different from meaning, and that therefore no account of the illocutionary force of an utterance tells us anything about the meaning of the utterance or of any word used in it. A less bold form of the criticism would be this: although there are certain words whose meaning can be explained, or partly explained, by giving the illocutionary force of utterances in which they occur ("promise" would be an example), this is not the case with certain other words which have figured in well-known theories (for example, that about "good" just mentioned).

I shall not attempt in this paper to solve all the manifold problems of speech-act theory; nor even to deal with all the critics' arguments. I shall deal only with what has appeared to many to be their strongest one. This runs as follows. The words in question occur not only in affirmative, categorical, indicative sentences, but also in negative sentences, interrogative sentences, and subordinate clauses of all kinds, including especially conditional clauses. In all these other contexts, it is false to say that the man who utters the sentence containing the word is thereby performing the speech act which he *is* performing when he utters an affirmative categorical indicative sentence containing the word. Thus, although it may be admitted for the sake of

argument that when I say "That was a good movie" I am commending the movie, I am not commending it (nor is anybody else) when I say "That is not a good movie" or "Is that a good movie?" or "If it is a good movie, it will make a lot of money." But, the critics go on, an explanation of the meaning of a word must take into account all these contexts, and make it possible for it to have the same meaning in them all. Otherwise, for example, the man who says "It is not a good movie" will not be denying what the man who says "It is a good movie" is affirming; the statement "It is a good movie" will not be an answer to the question "Is it a good movie?" (for the questioner and answerer will be at cross-purposes); and the inference from "If it is a good movie, it will make a lot of money" in conjunction with "It is a good movie" to "It will make a lot of money" will suffer from a fallacy of equivocation. These absurd results, say the critics, can be avoided only if we insist that an explanation of the meaning of a word must allow it the same meaning in all such syntactical transformations. But this, it is alleged, the performers do not do.

A critic might make use of all the instances I have cited. But most critics lay more weight on the conditional case—no doubt because they think it the hardest for a performer to deal with. I shall reverse this tactic, and start with the negative and interrogative cases, in which the point I wish to make against the critics can be expounded most clearly. And I shall attempt first to refute the bolder critics (those who think that illocutionary force is altogether different from meaning), and after that assail the timider critics (who think that sometimes meaning can be explained partly in terms of illocutionary force, but not in the case of "good").

## II. QUESTIONS AND NEGATIONS

I shall use two examples of illocutionary force indicating devices. The first is the word "promise" already mentioned. The second is the sign of indicative or imperative mood which occurs regularly in natural languages and is, as we shall briefly note, a necessity for logic. Both these linguistic elements, in

their central or standard uses, act as signs that a certain kind of speech act is being performed. In the affirmative categorical, the occurrence of "I promise" indicates that the speaker is promising. Likewise, the fact that, in an utterance like "The cat is on the mat," the verb is indicative tells us, in the absence of certain contextual counterindications, that the speaker is performing one of the genus of speech acts which we may call "assertions." Species of this genus are: statements, declarations, guesses, and so forth. Although this is not the place to characterize either the species or the genus as accurately as they need, it is very important that there are both species and genera of speech acts; some weak arguments have recently been founded on the neglect of this fact.[7]

Would someone who did not know that the man who said "I promise" was promising, or that the man who said "The cat is on the mat" was making an assertion, be said to know the meaning of these words? The answer seems to be plainly that he would not. The Latin words "*i*" ("go," imperative) and "*ibis*" ("you will go," future indicative) clearly have different meanings. Any complete explanation of the meaning of a verb occurring in a sentence must explain the meaning of its mood (in the sense in which indicative and imperative are moods) as well as, for example, its tense, person, voice, and so forth; and it is hard to see how this could be done otherwise than by specifying the kind of speech act to which that mood is assigned by the conventions which constitute our language. To be in a certain mood is to be assigned to the performance of a certain genus of speech acts. And analogously, to say what we mean by "I promise" we have to make clear that in uttering it (in the appropriate context) we are promising and, of course, make clear also what the speech act of promising is.[8]

Having given this explanation of "I promise" in the sentence "I promise to pay you $5 tomorrow," how do we go on to explain the meanings of utterances like "Do you promise to pay me $5

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[7] See, e.g., my review of G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, in *Mind*, LXXVII (1968), 436.

[8] Cf. Searle, "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is,' " *Philosophical Review*, LXXIII (1964), 44 f.; and *Speech Acts*, pp. 20 f., 178 f.

tomorrow?" and "I do not promise to pay you $5 tomorrow"? Here there is a trap to be avoided. Some occurrences of the verb "promise" which are not themselves performances of the speech act of promising are to be explained as reports or predictions or in general statements that such an act has been or is being or will be performed. For example, if I am writing something on a piece of paper, and you ask me what I am doing, I may say "I am just promising to pay Jones $5 tomorrow." In what follows, we must put aside, entirely, such second-order statements about speech acts, since they are quite irrelevant to the question we are discussing and can only be a source of confusion—as, indeed, they have often been. It would be a serious mistake to suppose that "Do you promise to pay me $5 tomorrow?" means the same as "Are you promising to pay me $5 tomorrow?" (except as the latter expression is used in the dialect of Damon Runyon). The former admits of the answer "Yes, I promise," which is a promise; the latter admits of the answer "Yes, I am promising," which is not a promise but a report of a promise.

Even the words "I promise" are sometimes used to make not promises but statements about promises. For example, if asked "What do you do if you can't pay the money that you owe?," I may answer "I promise to pay tomorrow." This use also must be carefully put aside.

We are concerned, then, with the question "Do you promise?" which admits a promise as an answer, and with the negation "I do not promise" which is the negation (in some sense) of a promise. It has to be asked how, in the light of these examples, it can be claimed—as it is tempting to claim, and as at any rate one of the critics, Searle, does claim—both that the meaning of "I promise" can be explained by explaining the speech act which is performed in utterances containing it,[9] and that "Any analysis of the meaning of a word (or morpheme) must be consistent with the fact that the same word (or morpheme) can mean the same thing in all the grammatically different kinds of sentences in which it can occur."[10] For if the meaning of "I promise" is

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[9] *Speech Acts*, pp. 57-61.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

to be explained by saying that it is the phrase we use for performing the speech act of promising, as maintained in the first thesis, then, by the second thesis, we ought to be performing the speech act of promising when we say "Do you promise?" or "I do not promise"; but we are not. Yet both theses seem to have a lot to be said for them; so we must try to find a way of interpreting them which will allow us to hold both of them in the face of such apparent counterexamples.

The clue to the interpretation lies in a phrase used by Searle: he says that the speech act in question is sometimes not actually performed in the utterance of the word, but is "in the offing."[11] He unfortunately does not sufficiently distinguish between the different ways in which a speech act can be "in the offing," and confines his attention to cases in which the act is reported, and the like (the cases which we have just put aside). In his latest account of the matter,[12] he says, correctly, that performers "were thus not committed to the view that every literal utterance of $W$ is a performance of act $A$, but rather that utterances which are not performances of the act have to be explained in terms of utterances which are." But in suggesting possible explanations of this sort, he considers only cases in which $W$ (the word whose meaning is being explained) occurs as part of a report of a speech act or in some closely related manner. For example, he speaks of cases where the act is reported in the past ("He promised"), cases where it is "hypothesized" ("If he promises . . ."); and adds "etc." He might have added cases where it is denied that the act took place or will take place or is taking place (negations of reports or predictions) and cases where it is asked whether it took place, and so forth (questions requiring as answers reports, and so forth, or their negations). But having mentioned this class of cases, which we have ourselves put aside as irrelevant, he passes on without considering the cases which we have just mentioned— namely, those in which what is negated is not a report of a promise but a promise, and those in which the question expects as answer not a report, but either a promise or the negation of

[11] *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), 425.
[12] *Speech Acts*, p. 138.

a promise. In these, the speech act is in the offing in a different way; but all the same it is possible for the performer to explain the meaning of the word "promise," in this syntactical context, in terms of it, as we shall see. The trouble for Searle is that the type of explanation, once understood, can be extended to cover "good" as well as "promise," as we shall also see.

How then can we explain the meaning of "Do you promise?" and "I do not promise"? We can do it indirectly, by first explaining the meaning of "I promise" as the phrase we use for promising, and then applying to this result what we already know about the meanings of the interrogative sentence form or sentence frame, and likewise the negative. I shall not actually, in this paper, try to explain the meaning of "I promise" (Searle has done it fairly successfully), or of the negative sentence form (which has been the subject of much discussion and is still obscure). But something needs to be said about the type of interrogative sentence form exemplified by "Do you promise?" The simplest explanation of this kind of interrogative sentence form that I have been able to think of is that typified by many questionnaires and by multiple-choice examinations. A question (of the type we are considering) is an invitation or request, or perhaps on occasions even an order, to make just one out of a number of suggested assertions. Thus a questionnaire may begin, "Check as applicable (or appropriate)," and contain a lot of sentences like

I am married ☐
I am not married ☐

This is to offer the answerer an opportunity (indeed, positively to tell him) to make either the assertion that he is married, or the assertion that he is not married. Note that this invitation does not imply a permission to make either of these assertions at will; before he can decide which to make, the answerer has to consider which he is willing to make, which will, if he is a truthful person, depend on which is true. In passing, we may notice that the other kind of question, that prefaced by words like "Who" or "How," could be analyzed as an invitation, and so forth, to fill in a constant in place of a variable in a propositional

function. Searle is no doubt aware of all this,[13] and the point is not a new one.[14]

If we apply the same method to the question "Do you promise to pay me $5 tomorrow?," we get the pair of promise expressions (instead of assertion expressions)

I promise to pay you $5 tomorrow ☐
I do not promise to pay you $5 tomorrow ☐

similarly prefaced by some such request as "Check as appropriate." What answer is given will be, as before, determined by whether the answerer is willing to make the promise or not (though, of course, the affirmative answer is not a *statement that* he is willing, nor the negative answer a *statement that* he is not, any more than in the previous case the answers were statements that the answerer was willing to make the affirmative or negative assertions; just as those answers were assertions, so these are a promise and an act of declining to promise). The type of negation is, however, different in the two cases, as we shall shortly see.

We may observe in passing that the check or tick which the answerer puts in the appropriate box, coupled with his signature of the entire document, constitutes a very important element in language, to which I shall come back near the end of this paper, and call the "sign of subscription" or "neustic." The left-hand (vertical) stroke of Frege's "assertion-sign" had this role. Wittgenstein's dismissal of Frege's sign as "logically meaningless"[15] was perhaps too hasty. But I must leave a full discussion of these "subatomic particles" of logic, however tempting, for another occasion. The sign of subscription, or neustic, is to be distinguished from the sign of mood, or, as I shall be calling it, the tropic; and both are to be distinguished from the term used above, "sentence form," which is a much wider notion (see below).

We have thus explained the meaning of "Do you promise to pay me $5 tomorrow?" in two stages. First, we explained the meaning of "I promise" by saying that it was the phrase used

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[13] Cf. *Speech Acts*, p. 69.

[14] See my article in *Mind*, LVIII (1949), 24, in which I was not conscious of being original.

[15] *Tractatus*, 4.442; *Investigations*, par. 21 ff.

to perform a certain speech act; then, we gave a general explanation of the interrogative sentence form. The speech act of promising is not being performed by the man who utters the interrogative; but once we understand the meaning of the categorical affirmative "I promise" in terms of the speech act which its utterer performs, and understand the meaning of the interrogative sentence form, we are in a position to put the two together and understand the meaning of the interrogative "Do you promise?"

What about the negative "I do not promise"? It would be out of place here, as I have said, to attempt a general explanation of what negation is—a much more difficult matter than interrogation. But there is a complication which must be noted. There are two kinds of negation (at least). They are commonly called "internal" and "external" negation. The internal negation of "I promise to pay you before the end of the tax year" is "I promise not to pay you before the end of the tax year." The external negation of the same promise is "I do not promise to pay you before the end of the tax year." Nearly all speech acts, including assertions, can be negated in these two ways. The internal negation of "The cat is on the mat" is, of course, "The cat is not on the mat." Its external negation is normally expressed by the use of a negated explicit performative: "I don't say that the cat is on the mat," but it is arguable that one use of the sentence "The cat may not be on the mat" is to express this same external negation.[16]

A similar account is to be given in all these cases of how we get from the meaning of the categorical affirmative to the meaning of the negative of either sort. It is the same as before: we know the meaning of the categorical affirmative "I promise to pay" (by reference to the speech act of promising); we know the two negative sentence forms; thus we apply these sentence forms to the categorical affirmative "I promise to pay," and get the two kinds of negative "I do not promise to pay" and "I promise

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[16] See my article in *Mind*, LXXVI (1967), 321. A similar suggestion has been made by the linguists J. Boyd and J. P. Thorne in a paper, "The Semantics of Modal Verbs," *Journal of Linguistics*, 5 (1969), 57.

not to pay." And thus we know that the man who utters the first is (explicitly) refraining from performing the speech act in question, whereas the man who utters the second is performing the speech act (of the same type—that is, a promise) whose content is the negation of the content of "I promise to pay."

The same thing happens with mood signs. We cannot know the meaning of the indicative sentence "The cat is on the mat" unless we know, among other things, the meaning attached to the indicative mood of the verb "is." We know this when we know that it is the mood we use for performing the speech act of asserting, and not, for example, commanding. Then, if someone says "Is the cat on the mat?," we know the meaning of this because we know, in addition, the meaning of the interrogative sentence form. We know, that is to say, that the person who says this is performing the speech act of asking us to perform either the speech act of asserting that the cat is on the mat, or the speech act of asserting its internal negation (as appropriate), but not both. That the alternative to affirmation is internal negation in this case, and not external negation as in the case of "Do you promise?" is apparent from the form of the questions: "Do you promise?" uses the explicit performative verb, and thus invites the alternative answers (also using it) "I promise" or "I do not promise"; "Is the cat on the mat?" is the interrogative transform of what Austin might have called the "primary," as opposed to "explicit," assertion, and therefore admits as answers either the primary assertion ("The cat is on the mat") or its negation, which is normally internal. "I don't say that it is" would hardly be an *answer* to "Is the cat on the mat?"

We know the meaning of the negatives of both kinds because we know the meanings of their corresponding affirmatives (which involves knowing about the speech acts which they are standardly used to perform) and know also the use of the different negative sentence forms. I have been assuming with Frege[17] that both internal negations and their corresponding affirmations are properly treated as assertions; the difference is that in the negation

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[17] "Negation," in Geach and Black, p. 130.

what is asserted is negative. Since I have made this assumption, a critic might object that my answer to him, in the case of internal negation, misfires. He might admit that in the affirmative "The cat is on the mat" the word "is" has to have its mood explained by saying that it is the mood used for assertion. But he might claim that since in the internal negation, too, an assertion is made (a negative one) there is no objection here, on any view, to treating "is" and its mood sign as meaning the same in both cases. Therefore, he might claim, I cannot use this example as a parallel to what happens in the case of "good"; for there, on my view, the affirmative expresses a commendation whereas the negative does not (the speech acts differ), but in the case of "The cat is on the mat" and its internal negation, since both are assertions, there is no difference in speech act. But this objection misses the point. To explain the meaning of "The cat is on the mat" I have to explain not merely that it is an assertion, but *what* assertion it is. An explanation of the meaning even of the internal negation, therefore, has to explain how, once we know the meaning of "The cat is on the mat" (by knowing that it is an assertion, and what assertion it is), we can go on to understand "The cat is not on the mat," which is a *different* assertion, and therefore a *different* speech act, albeit one of the same assertoric kind.

However this may be, the interrogative examples and the example of the external negation of "I promise" are sufficient to refute the *general* objection made by the bolder critics against explaining meaning in terms of speech acts. Not only have we shown (following and extending a move made by one of the less bold critics) that there are some expressions whose meaning has to be explained in terms of speech acts. We have also shown that when it has been so explained, the explanation can be extended to cover the meaning of utterances in which the speech act in question is not performed, provided that the utterance is generated by a transformation, whose form we understand, of the original speech act. The examples of negatives and interrogatives, therefore, provide no general objection to the general thesis that it is sometimes possible to explain meaning in terms of speech acts. The critics have to show that there is something

special about "good" or about commendation (or the other words and speech acts treated by the performers) which prevents the kind of explanation given above, and the kind of answer offered to the critics' objection, being used in these cases. It is not immediately obvious what this "something special" could be. Why cannot we explain the meaning of the affirmative assertion "That is a good movie" partly in terms of the speech act of commending the movie, and then explain the meaning of "Is that a good movie?" and "That is not a good movie" indirectly, as transformations of this, in an analogous manner to that used in the case of "I promise" and the indicative mood sign? The question "Is that a good movie?" seems to resolve itself quite naturally into an invitation to say either "That is a good movie" (which is a commendation) or "That is not a good movie" (which is the negation of a commendation). The same could be said about the indirect interrogative "I wonder whether that is a good movie" (a type of example used by some critics); this is very similar in meaning to "I ask myself, 'Is that a good movie?'" Such cases present no extra difficulties beyond those associated with all cases of *oratio obliqua*—a form of speech whose logical character is still somewhat obscure.

Negation is more troublesome, because of its two varieties. It certainly looks as if "That is not a good movie" were the *internal* negation of "That is a good movie"; and, if that is so, certain consequences follow. It follows that we can do something with "That is a good movie" which we cannot do with "I (hereby) commend that movie"—namely, negate it internally. This provides the critics with an objection (similar to one which we shall put forward in more detail in the case of hypotheticals) to any performer who injudiciously claims that "That is a good movie" is equivalent to "I commend that movie." But if the performer is content to put his thesis in the form that to say "That is a good movie" is to commend it as a movie, it does not seem that this objection touches him. He has, no doubt, to admit that the commendation sentence "That is a good movie" is like the assertion sentence "That is a long movie" in this respect, that both can be internally negated; but does this do anything whatever to impugn the view that the former is, and

the latter is not, a commendation sentence, and that this needs to be noted in any full explanation of its meaning? In other words, "is a good movie" behaves grammatically like a predicate; but nobody need deny this, and it is perfectly consistent with the view that it is a predicate whose meaning has to be explained, in part, by mentioning the kind of speech act, commendation, which is standardly performed in uttering it.

## III. HYPOTHETICALS

A critic might accept what we have said about negations and questions, but demur to an extension of our defense to cover hypotheticals. Would he be justified in demurring? The key to this controversy lies in the question of how the hypothetical sentence form operates. It would be unfair to expect the performer to have a clear answer to this question to which nobody yet has a clear answer, any more than to the similar question about negation; he is to be criticized only if his thesis lands him in peculiar troubles which do not afflict those who disagree with him. I am going to be bold and offer a tentative (though not original) answer to the question of how hypotheticals work. To understand the "If . . . then" form of sentence is to understand the place that it has in logic (to understand its logical properties). It is, in fact, to understand the operation of *modus ponens* and related inferences. If a man denies the validity of *modus ponens*, he must be using "if" in a different way from most of us. As Professor Max Black says, "Given a simple argument patently invalid, say of the form '$P$, if $P$ then $Q$, therefore not-$Q$,' we can make no sense of the supposition that somebody might utter it, understand what he was saying, and mean what he seemed to be saying."[18] We may notice in passing that this is the solution of Lewis Carroll's paradox about "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles" (*Mind*, 1895). Achilles' correct reply to the Tortoise would have been that the Tortoise could not be using "if" in the same way as most of us.

Suppose, then, that a man utters the hypothetical sentence

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[18] *Philosophical Review*, LXXVII (1968), 177; cf. my *Language of Morals*, p. 25.

"If the cat is on the mat, it is purring." As I pointed out earlier, in order to understand the meaning of the affirmative categorical "The cat is on the mat," we have to understand, among other things, the meaning of the mood of its verb, and to understand this is to know that this sentence, because its main verb is in this mood, is standardly used to perform the kind of speech act called "making an assertion." But in the conditional clause of the hypothetical no assertion is made, although the word "is" occurs just the same. Ought not the critics to argue, therefore, that the use of this hypothetical plus the corresponding categorical "The cat is on the mat" in a *modus ponens* would result in a fallacy of equivocation? For the argument is no different from that which they use against the performers. This same point has been made very succinctly and cogently by Mr. Hinton.[19] How can the critics admit (as most of us do) the validity in general of *modus ponens*, without abandoning their argument against the performers' view of the meaning of "good"? I can see only one way in which a critic might avoid this difficulty, and that is by denying what I have claimed earlier—namely, that in order to explain fully the meaning of "is" we have to advert to the fact that it is in the indicative mood, and that this is the mood standardly used for the speech act of asserting. This, however, would be a difficult position to sustain in the light of the examples given earlier—and doubly difficult for philosophers like Searle who want, in general, to make an account of speech acts a very fundamental part of the theory of meaning.

To know the meaning of the whole sentence "If the cat is on the mat, it is purring," we have to know (1) the meaning of the hypothetical sentence form, which we know if we know how to do *modus ponens*; (2) the meanings of the categoricals which have got encaged in this sentence form; and we know the latter if we know (*a*) that they are (when not encaged) used to make assertions and (*b*) what assertions they are used to make. And there is, so far as I can see, nothing to stop us knowing any of these things. Since we know them, we know how to handle the hypothetical assertion that has been made. We know, that is to say,

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[19] *Philosophical Books*, (Leicester, Eng., 1964), pp. 22-24.

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that if we are in a position to affirm the categorical "The cat is on the mat," we can go on to affirm the categorical "It is purring."

It is true, as in the case of negations, that both "The cat is on the mat" and "If the cat is on the mat it is purring" are used to make assertions, one categorical and one hypothetical. A critic might therefore claim that in this case there is no transition, in the transformation which yields the hypothetical sentence, from something that expresses an assertion to something that does not (whereas, on the performers' view, categorical commendations do get transformed into something else when they get inserted into conditional clauses). This, as before, misses the point. For, first of all, the critic, like all of us, has to explain how, having mastered the meaning of the speech act performed by the utterer of "The cat is on the mat," we can go on to understand the speech act performed by the utterer of "If the cat is on the mat it is purring." For although the two speech acts are assertions, they are different assertions. And, secondly, the problem was about the word "is" in "The cat is on the mat" and about *its* indicative mood. This was explained in the categorical by reference to the speech act of assertion; but this "is" is not, in the conditional, used to perform any assertion. The other "is," in the second half of the sentence (the main verb) has, no doubt, the function of making the whole hypothetical sentence express an assertion; but what has become of the explanation of the meaning of the first "is" (the one after "cat")? Unless its meaning can be explained indirectly in the way that I have been suggesting, what *does* it mean?

We have, therefore, shown that it is possible to take a sentence whose meaning has been explained partly by reference to a speech act, and transfer it into a conditional clause in which that speech act is not performed, without altering its meaning in any sense that would be damaging to *modus ponens*. Indeed, it is by understanding *modus ponens* that we understand the function of conditional clauses. It must be admitted, however, that this kind of explanation cannot be reproduced in the case of "I promise." For explicit performative verbs, for a reason which will shortly be explained, cannot be put into conditional

clauses at all, as critics have noted. If, therefore, any performer were injudicious enough to claim that "That is a good movie" meant the same as "I commend that as a movie," he would be open to the objection that the definiendum can, but the definiens cannot, appear in conditional clauses. But he can escape this objection, as in the negative case, by being careful to put his thesis always in the form that sentences containing "good" are commendations, and never in the form that they are equivalent to sentences beginning "I commend."

Is there, in fact, anything to prevent us treating "That is a good movie," when it goes into a conditional clause, in exactly the same way as we have treated "The cat is on the mat"? As before, we know the meaning of the hypothetical sentence form. And we know the meanings of the categoricals that are encaged in it. So we can easily perform the standard maneuver for letting the consequent of the hypothetical out of its cage. Thus, if I am prepared to say that it is a good movie, and that if it is a good movie it will make a lot of money, I can go on to say "It will make a lot of money." The only difference between this and the preceding case is that to affirm the minor premise "It is a good movie" is here to commend the movie. But this does not make the meaning of "It is a good movie" in the categorical premise different from that of the same words in the conditional clause of the hypothetical premise in any sense that is damaging to the inference, any more than the fact that "The cat is on the mat" (categorical) is used to assert that the cat is on the mat, whereas the same words occurring in a conditional clause are not used to make this assertion, invalidated the inference we discussed earlier.

## IV. NEUSTICS, TROPICS, AND PHRASTICS

The limited argument of this paper is now complete. It was designed to show, first, that the appearance of a word in interrogatives, negatives, and conditional clauses provides no general argument against explaining its meaning in terms of the speech act standardly performed in categorical affirmative utterances

containing it; and secondly that, once we understand the transformations which turn simple sentences into these more complex forms, we understand also how the words in them have meaning, even though the speech acts in terms of which their meaning was explained are no longer being performed. But it must be admitted that this whole region of meaning theory is still very obscure, and will not become clearer until much more work has been done on it. I will end, therefore, by just mentioning a technical device, invented by Frege and Russell, which can shed a little more light on the questions discussed above, and possibly explain the reasons for some of the phenomena noticed.

Russell, in *Principles of Mathematics* (§38), says that "the *p* and the *q* which enter into [the proposition '*p* implies *q*'] are not strictly the same as the *p* or the *q* which are separate propositions." And he took over Frege's assertion sign in order to show how they were not the same. When a sentence occurs categorically and is used to make an assertion, it has the assertion sign in front of it; when it occurs in the conditional clause of an asserted hypothetical sentence, *it* has no assertion sign; the only assertion sign is that governing the whole hypothetical sentence.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made here which Russell did not make, and which, although I made it in some earlier unpublished work, I omitted to make when I took over the Frege-Russell device in *The Language of Morals* (Ch. 2). In that book, I used a particle called the *neustic*, which did two jobs, one of them that of the Frege-Russell assertion sign (which itself has two functions, corresponding to the two strokes of Frege's sign; but we need not complicate the present issue by bringing in that distinction); the other job that my neustic did was that of a sign of mood to differentiate imperatives and indicatives. I now think that, in the supposed interests of simplicity, I sinned against the light by blurring the distinction between sign of mood and sign of subscription. The commonly used expression "assertion sign" can easily lead us to ignore this distinction, and also that between assertion (whose content can be negative) and affirmation. For this sin I will now try to atone by using the term "neustic" more narrowly for the sign of subscription to an assertion or other speech act, and inventing

a new term *"tropic"* (from the Greek word for "mood") for the sign of mood.

I shall retain the term *"phrastic"* for the part of sentences which is governed by the tropic and is common to sentences with different tropics. In internally negated sentences, it is perhaps best to treat the sign of negation as part of the phrastic; and it is possible that some other logical connectives should be so treated, but others should not. For example, the sign of external negation belongs outside the phrastic. It would be rash to broach this difficult subject here; I wish merely to emphasize, to avoid confusion, that the sign of internal negation is not, in my view, a tropic. The reader must not, therefore, confuse the narrower notion of "tropic" with the wider notion of "sentence form" used above.

When we say that "The cat is on the mat" is a typical indicative (when we mention its mood, that is), we identify the type of speech act which it is standardly used to perform. Thus mood signs or tropics classify sentences according to the speech acts to which they are assigned by the conventions which give meanings to those signs. When we take a categorical sentence, however, and transfer it into a conditional clause, what happens? As it occurs categorically, the sentence has (1) a sign of mood or tropic; but also (2) a sign of subscription or neustic (expressed or understood). When it goes into the cage, it takes its tropic with it, but loses its neustic. The whole sentence in which it is encaged has a neustic, but not the conditional clause by itself. That, indeed, is what we mean when we say that when a hypothetical sentence of the form "If $p$ then $q$" is uttered, the statement corresponding to "$p$" is not being asserted. But if the sentence were set out with its mood signs or tropics, "$p$" would still have one.

What happens in "if"-clauses also happens in many "that"-clauses. In "It is the case that $p$" and "It is true that $p$" (two of the most vexed examples), the sentence substituted for "$p$" will have a tropic and a phrastic but no neustic. It would be out of place to discuss here the difficult question of why "It is the case that $p$" means (roughly) the same as "$p$," and why "It is not the case that $p$" means (roughly) the same as "not $p$."

But it would be hasty and probably wrong to interpret "It is not the case that" as either a tropic or a neustic or a combination of them. The whole sentence is complex, and its complexities need unraveling before we can give an account of any of its parts.

Although a sentence may have an indicative tropic, it cannot be used to make an assertion unless a neustic be added or understood. Neustics are normally understood with uttered sentences unless something special is done to indicate that they are not being subscribed to (for example, it is a convention that sentences written on the blackboard during philosophical, but not during historical, lectures are not being subscribed to). Forms of words like "I hereby declare that" and "I hereby order you to" are combinations of neustics and tropics. Professor J. R. Ross[20] has produced a number of arguments of a purely linguistic character which tend to show that an initial performative expression of the general form "I say to you that" occurs in the deep structure of all indicative sentences. If these arguments are cogent, they add force to much that I have said in this paper. They may also make us wonder quite how fundamental a feature of grammar it is that forbids explicit performatives in conditional clauses—a feature on which critics lay stress and which I have acknowledged. For if all categorical indicatives have an initial explicit performative in their deep structure, the fact that an explicit performative cannot go into a conditional clause cannot be used to differentiate indicatives from other moods or forms of sentences in any fundamental way. But since I am not competent to evaluate Ross's arguments, I shall not rely on them.

Now although a neustic has to be present or understood before a sentence can be used to make an assertion or perform any other speech act, it is in virtue of its tropic that it is used to make an assertion and not to perform some other speech act. And it carries this tropic with it into the cage of a conditional clause, leaving its neustic behind. That is why, when we want to uncage the consequent of a hypothetical by performing *modus ponens*, we have to use, as minor premise, a proposition having

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[20] "On Declarative Sentences," in *Readings in Transformational Grammar*, ed. by R. Jacobs and P. Rosenbaum.

the same tropic as the conditional clause. For example, the following is an *invalid* inference: "If you are going to open the door, I am going to go; open the door; therefore I am going to go." To make this into a valid inference, the second premise, "Open the door," has to be changed to "You are going to open the door," which has the same indicative tropic as the conditional clause of the hypothetical.

The distinction between tropics and neustics helps to explain in what sense sentences change their meaning when they are put into conditional clauses, and in what sense they do not, and thus to interpret the two theses which I attributed to Searle in such a way that they do not conflict with one another. We can see this if we take the two hypothetical sentences we have been considering, "If the cat is on the mat it is purring" and "If it is a good movie it will make a lot of money," and ask how it can be that the following three statements, which are apparently inconsistent with one another, can nevertheless all be true:

(1) "Good" and "is" have the same meanings in the conditional clauses as they have in the corresponding categoricals.

(2) An explanation of their meanings in the corresponding categoricals has to include the fact that these are standardly used to perform the speech acts of commending and asserting respectively.

(3) In the conditional clauses, these speech acts are not performed.

These apparently mutually contradictory statements are all true, and are not really contradictory, because to be used to perform the speech acts, the clause in which the words appear would have to have a neustic, and this is lacking in the conditional clause. So, though the clause would turn into a commendation sentence or an assertion sentence if the word "if" were removed and a neustic understood instead (it is *potentially* commendatory or assertoric, to use an old-fashioned term), it is not actually being used to perform the speech act specified by its tropic, because nobody is subscribing, by a neustic, to the speech act.

It would be a gross oversimplification to say that the word "good" is itself a tropic or mood sign. When a performer says that it is a word used for commending, he does not mean this; rather he means that, in its analysis, which is undoubtedly complex, other tropics besides that of assertion will appear. What these are, and in what combination with the assertoric or indicative tropic, is a difficult question which I am not raising here. I am making only the defensive point that the fact that other tropics may figure in the analysis of this complex word besides the indicative tropic, and that therefore sentences containing it cannot be described without qualification as assertions, but have to be explained in terms of the more complex speech act of commending, is no bar to the appearance of the word in contexts where commending is not taking place, provided that the relation of these contexts to those in which it is taking place can be explained.[21]

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[21] The reader is also referred to the following: Sir David Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford, 1939), p. 33; P. T. Geach, "Ascriptivism," *Philosophical Review*, LXIX (1960), 221, and "Assertion," *Philosophical Review*, LXXIV (1965), 449; J. R. Searle, "Meaning and Speech Acts," *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), reprinted in Rollins (ed.), *Knowledge and Experience*, with discussion by others; P. Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, p. 227; G. J. Warnock, in Pitcher (ed.), *Truth*, pp. 57 f., and *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, p. 78; J. O. Urmson, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics*, ch. 11.