THE PROBLEM OF INFERRED MODALITY IN NARRATIVE

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In a lecture 'On the Nature of Visions', given in 1912 Oskar Kokoschka makes the radical phenomenological claim that 'Consciousness is the source of all things and of all conceptions. It is a sea ringed with visions'.¹ I wish to take this view as a point of departure for a critique of a narrow, though precise, definition of meaning as found in a current theory of language and juxtapose to it a broader definition of meaning as required for the reading of literary texts and, more generally, all cultural-historical exchange.

If we compare the tradition of close textual reading (e.g. Spitzer, English and American New Critical writers, explication de textes) with writers from some of the current theoretical schools (Francesco Orlando, Terry Eagleton, Wolfgang Iser, Tzvetan Todorov)² we cannot help but note the relationship between achievement and blind spots on either side. On the one hand, the accomplishments of often highly subtle interpretations of poetic language in the best of practical criticism has been matched by an astounding naiveté vis-à-vis its own theoretical premises and relationships with surrounding disciplines. On the other, the precision tools developed in some recent theories are often blunt when it comes to shifts and nuances of meaning which literary critics have learned to take for granted.

While coping well, for example, with inferred manners of speaking in narrative propositions, literary critics could not claim any degree of systematic exactitude in this field. By contrast, one recent theory of language promises to have to say a good many precise things about the inferences which we tend to make about the utterers of statements: the theory of speech acts.³ But how sensitive really is this theory? Since neither an untheoretical literary criticism nor an unliterary theory is able to answer the questions which critics and readers now pose, we must either darken poetically our philosophical awareness and produce more deconstruction-constructions or attempt to throw light at least on some principles which would allow a synthesis, however temporary, of the needs of reading and the argu-
ments of theory. I will opt for the latter by challenging a few central assumptions made by John R Searle in his seminal *Speech Acts* and some related papers⁴ by an abbreviated reading of James Joyce's 'The Sisters'.

**Toward a Broad Definition of Modality**

But before I proceed with the analysis I must give a broad summary definition of modality, a field to which Searle's work belongs and which literary critics have always used intuitively. Unfortunately, both modal logic and traditional linguistics have had a highly restrictive influence on the discussion of modality.⁵ Summarily speaking, the attention of modal logic has been focussed on such modalities as necessity, permission, obligation, or possibility, while linguistics has put its emphasis on auxiliaries, tense, adverbs, and a few other special cases of modality. Fortunately, though, some more recent work in linguistics, notably that of Michael Halliday⁶ and Gunther Kress/Robert Hodge⁷ has considerably widened the scope of the concept. For the purposes of this paper and the needs of the critique which I wish to submit, I would like to define modality as the manner of statements with its spatial and temporal locus, aspects of acts and inferred personality, ideas and values, and an ideological stance. Further, I wish to claim that inferred modality is a necessary condition of meaning construction in natural languages and indeed in all cultural exchange. This means that whenever we hear or read a statement (proposition), we make sense of it not merely as to its so-called propositional content, but also by intuiting a quasi-physical speech situation and the utterer's probable mental acts, and ultimately even non-conscious processes.

One may object that such a project far surpasses what could possibly be assessed in any systematic way. And yet, to leave these features out of our discussion would mean that we are not really dealing with what actually happens in everyday speech, let alone with what we do when we read literary texts. In fact, we would be addressing ourselves only to a part of language which happens to fit conveniently into the frame of the present stage of the development of a theory of language, namely its purely formal logical aspects.

It appears that discussions which have their roots in atomistic language philosophy tend to look exclusively at the formal relations
and 'minimal meaning units' of natural languages, while literary, anthropological and phenomenological approaches focus on intertextual, metafictional, referential and quasi-referential features. A study of the very examples used by such opposite approaches - a comparative analysis, for example, of Ryle and Sartre - would yield fascinating insights about possible conceptions of meaning. In my own view, both kinds of theory ought to inform one another, the one by exploring what logically secure single steps there might be and its holistic counterpart by suggesting where we need to put the ladder in the first place.

John R. Searle's Speech Act Theory

It is of course impossible here to do full justice - and perhaps even full injustice - to Searle's work and I will have to restrict myself to a mere mention of some of his basic assumptions and definitions. I will have to say little about the development of his argument, except to stress that it is brilliant and fully deserves to be as influential as indeed it has been. Searle opens his book *Speech Acts* with the following observations: 8

How do words relate to the world?

How is it possible that when a speaker stands before a hearer and emits an acoustic blast such remarkable things occur as: the speaker means something; the sounds he emits mean something; the hearer understands what is meant;

The passage contains assumptions about meaning which we find discussed in greater detail later: 9

1. Understanding the sentence 'Hello' is knowing its meaning.
2. The meaning of 'Hello' is determined by semantic rules, which specify both its conditions of utterance and what the utterance counts as. The rules specify that under certain conditions the utterance of 'Hello' counts as a greeting of the hearer by the speaker.
3. Uttering 'Hello' and meaning it is a matter of (a) intending to get the hearer to recognise that he is being greeted, (b) intending to get him to recognise that he is being greeted by means of getting him to recognise one's intention to greet him, (c) intending to get him to recognise one's intention to greet him in virtue of his knowledge of the meaning of the sentence 'Hello'.
4. The sentence 'Hello' then provides a conventional means of greeting people.

From its initial, tight assumptions about perfect meaning exchange Searle's work moves towards accommodating an ever increasing number of aspects of speech situations which he realises 'modify' meaning.
At one stage of this process, in 'A Classification of Illocutionary Acts', he sets out the following twelve criteria various combinations of which allow us to group speech acts in English into classes.

1. Illocutionary point (to get a hearer to understand a speech intention).
2. The direction of fit (word-to-word: detective following shopper; statements, descriptions; world-to-word: shopper's list; promises, requests).
4. Force of illocutionary point (I suggest we ... I insist ...).
5. Status of speaker and hearer.
6. Ways in which an utterance relates to interests of speaker and hearer.
7. Ways in which an utterance relates to rest of the discourse.
8. Differences in propositional content determined by illocutionary force indicators (report - past; prediction - future).
9. Acts which must always be speech acts versus those that do not.
10. Acts which require extralinguistic institutions (I excommunicate).
11. Illocutionary verbs which are performatives versus those that are not (promise - threaten).
12. Differences in style of performance of illocutionary acts (announcing, confiding).

With the help of these criteria Searle establishes a list of five basic categories of illocutionary acts with some overlap: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. But it turns out that for their identification the first four criteria suffice: illocutionary point, direction of fit, psychological state, and force of illocutionary point. This leads Searle to reject the claims of the existence of a vast number of uses of language and to replace it by a classification which permits the reduction of the linguistic field to 'a rather limited number of basic things we do with language'.

Lastly, Searle's discussion of 'Indirect Speech Acts' is a fur-
ther attempt at coming to logical grips with more and more elusive aspects of speech communication.

The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says. In such cases the speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect in the hearer, and he intends to produce this effect by getting the hearer to recognise his intention to produce it, and he intends to get the hearer to recognise this intention by virtue of the hearer's knowledge of the rules that govern the utterance of the sentence. But notoriously, not all cases of meaning are this simple: in hints, insinuations, irony, and metaphor - to mention a few examples - the speaker's utterance meaning and the sentence meaning come apart in various ways.

And

In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer. To be more specific, the apparatus necessary to explain the indirect part of indirect speech acts includes a theory of speech acts, certain general principles of cooperative conversation [some of which have been discussed by Grice (this volume)] and mutually shared factual background information of the speaker and hearer, together with an ability on the part of the hearer to make inferences.

So far John R. Searle. Let me now question some of Searle's assumptions, criteria, and method. First the assumption of perfect meaning exchange rests on a highly restrictive conception of languages and proves a disappointing basis for the discussion of natural languages and especially literary texts on two grounds: (a) because of what I would like to call the fluidity of lexemes (which size dictionary, for instance, do we have in mind?) and (b) because of the necessary existential grasp of a vast number of language items, especially of a referential and quasi-referential kind, on the part of both speaker or narrator and hearer or reader. The examples usually employed in the philosophy of language such as 'hello' and 'cat' tend to obscure both problems. This becomes clearer when we substitute the more complex examples of 'ratbag' and 'heavy grey truculent face'. The further possibility of the surface items of language entering into multiple relations in imaginative free play far beyond the rules of everyday discourse, a dominant form of communication in modernist texts, also defies Searle's definition of meaning.

Second, Searle's classification of speech acts leaves out such important issues as the spatial position of the speaker and is vague
about inferrable values and ideological commitment. Moreover, in his application of his criteria out of the twelve listed in the beginning only the first four are used. But it is precisely the remaining eight, especially those relating to 'status' and 'interest' as well as some not listed which play a significant part in the more complex situations of everyday speech and the reading of literary texts.

Third, although Searle's discussion of 'Indirect Speech Acts' recognises the significance of non-linguistic aspects of communication, his starting point and method (propositional content modified by illocutionary features) deny him the full exploration of what goes on when we make meaning. It is therefore somewhat surprising, when in his paper 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse' Searle acknowledges the importance of visualisation in the act of reading. But it remains an isolated item, an uncomfortable extra, which he is not able to accommodate in his theory of meaning. In commenting on Iris Murdoch's *The Red and the Green*, he remarks, 'What we visualise when we read the passage is a man pottering about his garden thinking about horses'.

In contradistinction to Searle's restricted definition of meaning I would argue that in everyday speech and particularly in the reading of literary texts meaning construction relies a good deal on imagining and fantasising and that there is a dialectic process which links our conceptual and imaginative responses, both modifying one another and in so doing being responsible for meaning production.

*Reading James Joyce's 'The Sisters'*

As we read Joyce's sentences we construct through the material basis of print/sound and the linguistic structures a conceptual and imaginative world. Its temporal frame are the evening of July 1st, 1895 and the morning and evening of the following day. The incidents during 'vacation time' are narrated in retrospect by an adult narrator remembering his responses as a young boy, say of the age of thirteen, to the death of his friend Father Flynn. 'There was no hope this time: it was his third stroke' links the *in medias res* narrative with an immediate and a more distant past.

Spatially, the presented world is framed by the boy's uncle's
home, the house in which the deceased is coffined and the streets in front and near the 'Drapery'. But the more important spatial aspects of the story pertain to the priest's face which to the boy is both familiar and a haunting riddle.

Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child, I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew my blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly, as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin.

'I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic' and 'I tried to think of Christmas' point to two poles of the narrative which the reader is guided to explore as fully as possible. The contrast of fascination and fear is prefigured in the story's first paragraph by the narrator's reference to the word 'paralysis': 'It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work'. Both the personae of the presented world and the personae of the viewing process, then, deserve our close attention.

The deceased is introduced gradually with such references as 'him ... he ... your old friend ... Father Flynn ... the old chap ... the heavy grey face of the paralytic ... the Rev. James Flynn ... Poor James ... the old priest ... solemn and truculent in death ... a disappointed man ... too scrupulous ...' and, on the other hand, the boy's memory of him as he 'taught him to pronounce Latin properly' and introduced him to the complexities of the Catholic mass. But in the boy's reflections the priest's spiritual-intellectual side is again set against the extremely vivid images of the paralytic body.

When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip - a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well.

By the end of the story we understand that the priest has had to suffer spiritually a great deal, probably on account of a chalice
he broke during the Eucharist (a mortal or venial sin or merely an imperfection?) an incident from the consequences of which he apparently never fully recovered.

To these features of the presented world we construct at the same time the parallel vision of the way in which they are reflected and remembered by the young boy and mature narrator, respectively. Contrary to the spatial detail of the presented world the spatial locus of the mature narrator remains wholly indeterminate. On the other hand, the spatial position of the mental acts of the boy are tangibly locatable in the presented world.

Temporally, there is the tension between the immediacy of the thought processes of the young boy in the narrated present and the narrative strategies of someone looking back from the vantage point of some ten years later. We sense this tension also in the contrast between the presentation of direct speech and such retrospective remarks as 'It was after sunset' or 'Had he not been dead I would have gone into the shop'.

Our construction of the young narrator is that of a highly sensitive and shy but acutely aware schoolboy who is making his own defiant sense of the riddles of the adult world. When old Cotter attempts to impose his contemptuous view of Father Flynn, the boy's uncle accepts it, his aunt queries it 'piously', while the boy scorns the visitor: 'Tiresome old fool!' and later more sharply, 'Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile'.

Nor is the boy wholly taken in by the teachings of his old friend. In fact he senses that the knowledge he has acquired was bought at the expense of part of his freedom. And although he feels a little guilty at his sensation of freedom - after all the priest 'had taught him a great deal' - he nevertheless emerges at the end of the narrative as a more independent 'personality' than any of the other presented personae.

By comparison, our constructions of the speech acts of the adult narrator and his inferrable personality must remain rather more tentative. But we do get the impression that the immediacy of the experiences of the young consciousness is balanced by an ordering consciousness at one remove. While the young mind appears eager to grasp within the narrow horizon of the presented world the meaning
of paralysis, gnomon, Eucharist, and what goes on behind his friend's grey countenance, the mature narrator is looking back at a case of paralysis and his own remembered fascination with it as part of a wider horizon of reality. The kinds of things which he remembers and the structured way he records them reveals a change from a search for meaning to its artistically patterned expression.

Typifying Interpretation
If we abstract the categorical features of this or any similar close reading we tend to arrive at the following semantic typology of interpretative procedure.

We have constructed meaning from verbal clues and in terms of an imagined presented world with aspects of space (little dark room, heavy grey face), time (night after night, vacation time), acts (he spat rudely into the grate), events (his third stroke), personae (old Cotter, Eliza, my aunt, the Rev. James Flynn), values and ideas (take exercise, a cold bath, winter and summer; venial sins, the Eucharist).

On the other hand, we have made sense of the text also along an imaginative parallel matrix, the matrix of the narrative speech situation or the presentational process with its aspects of space (the spatial locus of the thought processes of the young boy), time (the temporal locus of the mature speech acts versus that of the boy's mental acts), acts (judgments: Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!), events (the nightmare vision of the haunting face), personae (the two narrators), ideas and values (the boy's fierce sense of independence as an ironic reversal of Cotter's regarding him as an impressionable child, or the retrospective view of the significance of paralysis then and now).

In any proposition about the presented world, then, we construct both concepts and images (heavy grey face) and its possible modal implications (how heavy, what kind of heavy, what kind of grey, etc.). For it is crucial for our meaning construction to find in addition to purely conceptual grasp an imaginative quasi-physical determination which to us best reflects the truculent secrecy of Father Flynn's personality.

If we wish to follow the theoretical implications of this kind of
conceptualising and concretising reading further, we arrive at the generalisation 'That for each lexeme we opt for one or several alternative modes to fill in and stabilise the lexeme given in the text, holding them in readiness for subsequent confirmation, modification, or rejection.

This is to say that lexemes, or so-called minimal meaning units, as they appear in linear sequence in the text are fully determined as meanings neither in themselves nor by virtue of their manifold possible combinations in the overall text. Any such determination would have to (1) stipulate an arbitrary size of definition (dictionary entry), (2) restrict lexemes to formal relations (therefore, all, nothing, and) and numerical quantities, (3) disregard lexemes of a referential and quasi-referential kind (essential to the reading of literary texts) depending for their realisation on intersubjectively structured typifications (e.g. visual, aural, kinetic, tactile, etc.) and (4) negate the crucial fact that texts are mediated. Since literary texts are mediated visions to be realised by a reading consciousness, the meanings construed as a response to the given linguistic guidance system rely heavily on modal inferences, i.e. inferences about the way the given proposition was, is, can, or should be meant. The recognizable units of such modal inferences or modes can be grouped according to the formal principles of modality sketched earlier in the paper.

Beyond Literary Interpretation

Purely formal relationships and minimal closed referential meanings, though necessary for the operations of natural languages are never sufficient conditions whenever a broader existential grasp of meaning is involved. This is clearly the case in the reading of literary discourse, but also holds whenever acts of imagining and fantasising are performed to make full sense of the historical, political, personal, physical and atmospheric context within which everyday propositions appear.

Against this schema of general modality even such commands as 'Shut the door!' or whimperatives, their indirect speech act equivalents, 'Would you mind getting off my toe?' lose their apparent innocence. Instead of a merely logical reading, their full meaning
relies on our grasp of their propositional content in competition
with our construction of the full range of their inferred modal-
ities.

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Notes
8. *Speech Acts*, p. 3
9. *Speech Acts*, pp. 48f
10. 'A Classification of Illocutionary Acts', *op. cit.*, pp. 1-23
11. 'Indirect Speech Acts', *op. cit.*, pp. 59 to 61

15. I am working on a more detailed discussion of the notion of *moderne* as a necessary condition of all cultural-historical acts of communication. My point of departure is Husserl's noema-noesis distinction.

References


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