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EXPRESSIBILITY, EXPLICABILITY, AND TAXONOMY

*Some Remarks on the Principle of Expressibility**

1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. EXPLICATION AS THE ASSIGNMENT OF A SYNTACTIC FORM

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

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

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

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

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