
Acts and Speech Acts

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Résumé

This paper defends a simple theory of speech acts according to which someone is performing a given speech act in virtue of them intending to perform that speech act: someone is saying that *P*, for instance, in virtue of them intending to say that *P*. This simple theory was proposed by Dummett (1981: p. 300) and McDowell ((1980) 1998: p. 42), though I do much here to motivate it and relate it to the two main approaches to speech acts.

I first motivate the simple theory of speech acts given a general principle of action according to which someone is *A*ing in virtue of them intending to *A*. If that general principle applies to speech acts, then the simple theory of speech acts follows. Moreover, applying the general principle reveals that much work within the intentionalist approach to speech acts is misguided. The intentionalist approach, traceable back to Grice ((1957) 1989), holds that the performance of a given speech act is a matter of the speaker having certain intentions, where proponents of the approach have been at great pains to specify the complex collection of intentions underlying the various types of speech act.

The remainder of the paper relates the simple theory of speech acts and the general principle of action to the conventionalist approach to speech acts. The conventionalist approach, inaugurated by Austin (1962), holds that the performance of a given speech act is a matter of the speaker participating in some social convention. I show that at least one conventionalist thesis about speech acts is consistent with both the simple theory and the general principle. I then refine a suggestion from Dummett (1981) that there is a difficulty with, or something incomplete about, the simple theory that requires it be combined with some form of conventionalism.

References

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