



## Hare on Meaning and Speech Acts

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HARE ON MEANING AND SPEECH ACTS

IN HIS ARTICLE "Meaning and Speech Acts" (*Philosophical Review*, LXXIX [1970], 3-24), Professor Hare apparently wishes to defend the thesis that "the meanings of certain words" are to be explained "in terms of the speech acts which those words (or sentences containing them) are standardly used to perform." I say "apparently" since it is not wholly clear to me what thesis it is that he wishes to defend. Does he envisage explanation "in terms of" speech acts of the meanings of *certain* words only, or of *all* words? Or again, of *certain* sentences only, or of *all* sentences?

One might say: the thesis he is defending is about the meanings of *certain words*—after all, he says so explicitly, in the very first sentence. Yes: but a little later (p. 14) he makes an observation which would seem inevitably to stretch the coverage of his thesis to all sentences, and thence unavoidably to all words. To explain the meaning of "The cat is on the mat," he there says, one has to explain not merely that it is an assertion, but what assertion it is—that is, that it is the assertion that the cat is on the mat, as distinct from the assertions, say, that the cat is not on the mat, that the dog is on the mat, or that the cat is on the sofa. These would be "different assertions," he says, and *therefore different speech acts*. But now, if that is right, it seems to follow that we have a different speech act if *any word* in "The cat is on the mat" is replaced by any other (nonsynonymous, but some-sense-preserving) word; for in such a case we will surely have a different assertion, and in some cases perhaps a different kind of speech act altogether—in any case, a different speech act. But then we can extend that. "Is that a horse?" is a different question from "Is that a cow?"; "Go West" is a different piece of advice from "Go East"; and so on. And if these are all different speech acts, does it not evidently follow that *every* word is associated with a *different* array of speech acts from that of any other word with which it is not synonymous? Is this Hare's thesis?

I am inclined to think, however, that this may really be a slip. It is easy to forget, as Hare observes (p. 7), that "there are both species and genera of speech acts"; and I believe that at this point Hare has himself forgotten it. In one sense, it is after all true that to say "Go East" is to perform a different speech act from that performed in saying "Go West"—namely, in Austin's terms, a different phatic, or rhetic, or

locutionary act. But it is reasonably clear that Hare is not really concerned with such speech acts. If he were, his thesis would of course be a truism; for no one will deny that we can explain the meanings of words "in terms of" speech acts, if the sorts of speech acts meant are those which by definition *consist in* saying certain words with certain meanings. For in this sense, that to say "Go East" is to perform a different speech act from saying "Go West" is just another way of saying that "Go East" and "Go West"—and thence, I suppose, "East" and "West"—do not mean the same. But this tautology, fortunately in a way, is not Hare's thesis. What he is contending for is that the meanings of certain words are to be explained in terms of *illocutionary forces*, of speech acts as *illocutionary* acts. But now, for Austin certainly, and I think for most others, "Go East" and "Go West" would, if both used in giving advice, be used in performing the *same* speech (that is, illocutionary) act, notwithstanding that the advice given is not the same. It is possible to perform the same speech act—namely, that of asserting, in making different assertions, and so on. No doubt it is true that "there are both species and genera of speech acts"; nevertheless, in any orthodox use, there are a great many fewer varieties of illocutionary acts than there are nonsynonymous sentences. If Hare is not using the term in that way, he is simply at cross-purposes with those whom he takes to be his opponents; but I think that in fact he *is* using the term in that way, and, in the passage on page 14, has simply skidded.

Next, Hare is, I believe, both injudicious and misleading in claiming Professor Searle as even partially an ally. For two reasons. First, Hare says that he is talking about the meanings of certain *words*; and this is not what Searle says. Searle (in the passage quoted approvingly [p. 3] by Hare from *Speech Acts*) is clearly talking about sentences. He rightly takes it that the unit, so to speak, for the performance of any illocutionary act is a sentence, not a word; and thus, while maintaining that "a study of the meaning of sentences is not in principle distinct from a study of speech acts," he could and would maintain that the meaning of words is a different matter. If Hare, then, *is* talking about *words*, Searle is not an ally. It is worth noting here that, in *Speech Acts*, Searle does not, as Hare says he does, analyze "the word 'promise' in terms of the speech act of promising"; what he so analyzes is *sentences* like "I promise to pay you five dollars," or just possibly the use (*one* use) of the particular phrase "I promise." Second, what Searle says in the passage quoted is in any case fallacious. For even if "every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts)," it does not follow

that to study its meaning is "not in principle distinct" from studying those speech acts; for it might be (as, in general, it is) that to study the latter we have to bring in something additional to, something quite distinct from, the meaning—as, for instance, the circumstances of the utterance, or the intentions of the speaker. And even if "every possible speech act can in principle be given an exact formulation in a sentence or sentences (assuming an appropriate context of utterance)," in the first place we *do* have to assume an appropriate context of utterance—that is, not *just* know what the sentences mean; and in the second place, it is very frequently not the case in fact that the speech act or acts performed in the utterance of a sentence are—or at any rate are *all*—"exactly formulated" in the sentence itself. So Searle's grounds for saying that sentence meanings and speech acts are "the same study" are, at least, not clear; and even if this were what Hare is arguing for, Searle might not be much help.

But now let us take it that Hare is not really propounding a thesis about all words nor, as Searle seems to be, about all or even some sentences, but rather, as he says at the outset, about *certain* words. Now, for the thesis that the meanings of at any rate *some* words are to be explained "in terms of" speech acts, he seems to me to offer, or at any rate to have available, two very good grounds. If, however, we consider what sort of words these are, I submit that it emerges (a) that the thesis he is defending is really an absolute truism (though not the same truism as that mentioned above) and (b) that it lends no support to his own position on such a controversial case as the word "good."

Take, for a start, the word "promise." Hare's thesis here can, I think, be stated thus: (a) the words "I promise" are used, typically though not solely, in promising; and someone who did not know that this was so could not be said to know the meaning of those words (in that context); (b) while of course there are occurrences of "promise," and even of "I promise," in which promising is not done, what the word means in these occurrences is to be explained "in terms of" that use in which promising *is* done. This, however, is ambiguous; and in one sense the thesis is dubious, in the other a truism. One way of taking the thesis would be as contending that uses in general of the word "promise" are to be explained, and can be explained only, "in terms of" the explicitly performative use of "I promise." This is dubious; for possibly one might know what "promise" means—what promising *is*—without knowing that it standardly was, or even could be, *done* by saying "I promise." Just as marrying is not done by saying "I marry..." it might have been the case that promising was not done by saying "I

promise" (indeed, sometimes, it is not); and just as I could know what "marry" means without knowing how marrying was done, I might know what "promise" means without knowing how promising was done. Perhaps, in that case, I would not know what "promise" means in the promise-making context "I promise"; but that is (a) dubious—does the word "promise," in "I promise," have a different *meaning*?—and (b) irrelevant, since it seems possible to know what it means in *other* contexts without understanding the explicitly performative use, or even knowing of its existence. This, surely, is only to be expected. For it seems intuitively obvious that the use of a certain formula to signalize explicitly the performance of some linguistic act must be secondary, so to speak, to the performance itself; to put it bluntly, we must know what the performance *is* before we can understand, or even raise, the question what counts as a fully explicit performance of it. Thus, in *this* way of taking Hare's thesis, the thesis is wrong because it is upside down. In order to understand "I promise," we have to know what promising *is*—that is (in English) to know *in general* what "promise" means. But that of course is to say that in this case, as surely in others, the explicitly performative use is secondary to, presupposes understanding of, is to be explained "in terms of," *other* uses of the word, and *not* vice versa.

But the thesis can be taken another way. Perhaps what Hare really means is that the meaning (in general) of "promise" is to be explained, not "in terms of" the explicitly performative use of "I promise," but simply "in terms of," essentially by reference to, the speech act of promising, however we suppose that to be performed. Well, that is indeed undeniable. For indeed one must explain the meaning of the word "in terms of" the speech act, since it is, after all, the *word for* the speech act—it is exactly the speech act of promising that "promising" *means*. But this can be generalized. It is safe to say that one must explain "in terms of" a speech act the meaning of any word which is, like "promise," itself the word for, or name of, a speech act of some sort. But for the thesis that the meanings of *some* words must be so explained that ground is, though good, too good; for it makes the thesis not only true, but an absolute truism.

The other sort of case which Hare considers is that in which some word in a sentence—often, its main verb—serves to identify the "mood" of the sentence, and thus—often rather nonspecifically—a kind of speech act which that sentence is standardly used to perform. Here too he holds that the meaning of such a word (in such a use) is to be explained "in terms of" the associated speech act; but here too the case

seems to be, though indeed good, too good. For if it is the primary, essential function of a certain word to signal that, in the utterance of a sentence in which (in a certain way) it occurs, a certain speech act is standardly performed, then only too obviously the meaning of that word will have to be explained, at least in part, in terms of that speech act. For *such words*, again, the thesis seems no more than a truism.

It seems to me, then, that Hare offers, or anyway could offer, reason to believe that we can and should explain "in terms of" speech acts the meanings (a) of words which are actually *names* of speech acts, and (b) of words—perhaps also of "forms"—whose primary function is precisely to signalize the performance of certain speech acts. This makes his thesis, however—that the meanings of *certain* words must be so explained—too true to be good; and it is not clear how it can provide any support to the "performer's" doctrine about such disputed cases as "good," or "true," or (*pace* Austin) "know." For it is obvious that *these* words, like most words after all, are not words for, or names of, speech acts; nor is it at all evident that the primary business of these *words* is to identify, by way of "mood" or anything else, the performance of any speech acts in particular. I believe that Hare would claim only to have removed certain sorts of objections to his doctrine about "good," and perhaps to his more general doctrine about "prescriptive meaning." Well, if those objections have consisted in the imprudent claim that *no* mention of speech acts need *ever* occur in explanations of the meanings of *any* words, then Hare has shot them down. But I do not see that this goes any way at all toward showing those doctrines to be actually correct. On the contrary, he makes it look likely, I would think, that they are not correct, for the reason that "good," like many other words said to have prescriptive meaning, is so obviously not the *sort* of word for which there has emerged any reason to suppose that speech acts must come into explanations of meanings. The central objection, I would think, to Hare's doctrine about "good" is not that, *if* its meaning were explained "in terms of" some speech act, one could not then accommodate the obvious fact that the word means the same in conditionals and so forth as in simple indicative sentences. The central issue is the simpler one, whether there is any reason to think that the meaning of the *word* in fact *should* be explained "in terms of" any speech act.

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