

ART AND EGOCENTRICITY – A Perlocutionary Act ?

‘It is reasonable to ask of every speaker’s utterance “Is it serious ?” (i.e., “Is there something in the situation, in his way of saying it, etc., that indicates that he does not want us to take it in its usual way ?”).’¹ Such a question might reasonably be asked of our ‘utterance’ act, i.e., an utterance of the sentence ‘Keith Arnatt is an artist.’

‘To say that a speaker S meant something by X is to say that S intended the utterance of X to produce some effect in a hearer H by means of the recognition of this intention.’² In this analysis of ‘speaker’s meaning’ Paul Grice shows the close relationship between the notion of meaning and the notion of intention as well as the further important feature of linguistic communication, namely, that a speaker attempts to communicate things to a hearer by means of getting him to recognise his intention to communicate just those things. ‘For example (John Searle says in discussing Grice’s analysis), characteristically, when I make an assertion, I attempt to communicate to and convince my hearer of the truth of a certain proposition; and the means I employ to do this are to utter certain sounds, which utterance I intend to produce in him the desired effect by means of his recognition of my intention to produce just that effect.’³ Searle then illustrates this with an example, of which the following, for the present purpose, is a paraphrase. I might on the one hand attempt to get you to believe that I am an artist by producing ‘artworks’ in a currently acceptable style, and, providing they are ‘successful’ (within their own terms of reference) I may even be asked, and agree, to exhibit these ‘works’ in an art-gallery. Further, I might, in conversations, introduce the topic of art as frequently as possible, display considerable knowledge of the subject and show enthusiasm for, let us say, the work of particular contemporary artists. I might also cultivate artist and art-critic acquaintances. This, then, might be one way in which I might attempt to get you to believe that I am an artist.

But I might on the other hand attempt to get you to believe that I am an artist by simply telling you that I am an artist. Now, what is the difference between these two ways of my attempting to get you to believe that I am an artist? One crucial difference is that in the second case I attempt to get you to believe that I am an artist by getting you to recognise that it is my purported intention to get you to believe just that. That is one of the things involved in telling you that I am an artist. But of course if I try to get you to believe that I am an artist by putting on the act I described, then your recognition of my intention to produce in you the belief that I am an artist is not the means I am employing. Indeed in this case you would, I think, become rather suspicious if you recognised my intention. (Of course, it would not follow from the fact that I perform such an ‘act’, no matter how successfully, that I believe that I am an artist, any more than it would follow that I believe that I am an artist from the fact that I *tell* you that I am an artist. One might mention, in connection with these remarks, the case of Richard Serra. He, it is said,⁴ exhibits his work in an art-gallery and yet says he leaves it to *others* to decide whether what he does is art. Presumably, then, he must also leave it to others to decide whether or not he is an artist.)

The example, quoted above, is a case where ‘speaker’s meaning’ is defined in terms of intending to bring about a perlocutionary effect (the perlocutionary effect being your belief that I am an artist *as a result* of your recognition of my intention to produce in you that belief through my *telling* you that I am an artist). Searle says, however, that to define (speaker’s) meaning in terms of intended effects is to confuse illocutionary with perlocutionary acts. He goes on to say, ‘. . . saying something and meaning it is a matter of intending to perform an illocutionary, not necessarily a perlocutionary, act.’⁵ In the case of an illocutionary act ‘. . . we succeed in doing what we are trying to do by getting our audience to recognise what we are trying to do. But the ‘effect’ on the hearer is not a belief or response, it consists simply in the hearer understanding the utterance of the speaker.’⁶ It is this effect that Searle calls the illocutionary effect. In other words, the characteristic intended effect of meaning is understanding as opposed to any further effect as a result of that understanding. In saying something and meaning it I do not necessarily intend to produce any

correlated perlocutionary effect – I may make a statement or assertion, for example, and not care whether my audience believes it or not. Furthermore, ‘. . . it is not in general the case that when one speaks to someone with the intent of, e.g., telling him some item of information, that one intends that his reason, or even one of his reasons, for believing what one tells him should be that one intends him to believe it. When I read, say, a book of philosophy there are all sorts of reasons for believing what the author says, but it is not one of my reasons for believing what the author says that I recognise that he intends me to believe it. Nor, unless he is an extraordinarily egocentric author, will it have been his intention that I should believe it because I recognise that he intends me to believe it.’⁷

Searle’s view that Grice does not adequately appreciate the distinction between illocutionary uptake (i.e., understanding the utterance) and perlocutionary effect, applies also to a later modification by Grice on his definition of (speaker’s) meaning. Grice here characterises the intended effect of statements as being, not that a hearer should believe what is stated, but that he should believe that the speaker believes it. The intended effect of my telling you that I am an artist would be then, on Grice’s modified definition, to get you to believe that I believe that I am an artist – *still* a perlocutionary effect. However, one may see that I might tell you that I am an artist, *mean what I say* and still not care whether you believe that I believe that I am an artist. The intended effect of a speaker saying something and meaning it is, Searle maintains, that a hearer should know the illocutionary force of a speaker’s utterance act; that is, that a hearer should understand what it is that a speaker is trying to do or that a hearer should understand how to take an utterance by a speaker.

Notes

¹ ‘Saying and Meaning’, Mats Furberg, Blackwell, 1971.

² ‘Speech Acts’, J. R. Searle, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

³ ‘What is a Speech Act?’, J. R. Searle, from ‘The Philosophy of Language’, Oxford University Press, 1971.

⁴ ‘Art after philosophy—part one’, *Studio International*, October 1969, Joseph Kosuth.

⁵⁻⁷ ‘Speech Acts’.



KEITH ARNATT IS AN ARTIST