



# Determination and Uniformity: The Problem with Speech-Act Theories of Fiction

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**Abstract** Taking inspiration from Searle’s ‘The Logic of Fictional Discourse’, this essay presents an argument against different versions of the so-called ‘speech act theory of fiction’. In particular, it argues that a Uniformity Argument may be constructed, which is additional to the Determination Argument commonly attributed to Searle, and which does not rely on his presumably controversial Determination Principle. This Uniformity Argument is equally powerful against the ‘Dedicated Speech Act’ theories that Searle originally targeted, and the more recent, Grice-inspired versions of speech-act approaches to fictional discourse.

A wide variety of positions are typically subsumed under the label of ‘speech act theories of fiction’. This essay deals with two related exemplars within this variety. I call them the *Dedicated Speech Act (DSA)* and the *General Speech Act (GSA)* theories of fiction.

The Dedicated and the General speech act theories of fiction are concerned with the speech acts allegedly performed by an author of a work of fiction, or at least by an author of a work of fiction in the linguistic domain. According to the DSA, ‘a writer of novels is performing the illocutionary act of telling a story’ (Searle 1975a: 323), or at any rate an illocutionary act characterized by a special, fiction-specific illocutionary force. According to the GSA, an author of fiction performs ‘an act of fictive utterance’, that is, ‘a kind of speech act to be understood in the same kind of terms as Paul Grice understood assertion’ (Davies 2015: 39).

Explicit unconditional support for the DSA is uncommon among contemporary philosophers. Indeed, the advocates of the position nowadays most frequently presented as a ‘speech act theory of fiction’, namely the GSA, explicitly distance

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themselves from the notion of a dedicated ‘story-telling’ illocutionary act. Still, the champions of the GSA generally pay considerable attention to certain arguments originally directed against the DSA, notably the considerations put forth by John Searle at the beginning of his influential ‘The Logic of Fictional Discourse’ (Searle 1975a). Part of the aim of this essay is to argue that this widespread preoccupation for Searle is not misplaced: with opportune modifications, Searle’s worries target the GSA to no lesser extent than its currently less fashionable ancestor, the DSA.

Yet, my ultimate aim is not merely that of re-interpreting Searle in terms relevant for the General Speech Act theory of fiction. My main conclusion is rather that certain Searle-inspired considerations provide *good* arguments against the GSA—in particular, that they provide arguments that fail to be addressed, let alone neutralized, by current defences of that position. As indirectly indicated by the description of my views as ‘Searle-inspired’, I do not aspire to exegetical accuracy: if the arguments stand, their relevance is not diminished by the presumed historical inadequacy of my attribution. Still, as I argue below, close attention to Searle’s text yields interesting payoffs. It does, in particular, hint (albeit perhaps only indirectly) at a strategy different from, and, in my view, stronger than the sort of argument that typically catches the attention of friends and foes of speech act theories of fiction.

More precisely, as I explain in section one, Searle’s considerations are generally interpreted in terms of what I call the *Determination Argument*, and are challenged by the denial of the *Determination Principle* upon which it rests. Towards the end of section one, I express my dissatisfaction with these rebuttals: an approach to sentential form and illocutionary force weaker than that entailed by customary interpretations of the Determination Principle continues to be problematic for a variety of ‘speech act’ analyses of fiction. More importantly, Searle’s comments also suggest a different development of the ambiguity-based objection that lies behind the Determination Argument, and eventually yield what I call the *Uniformity Argument*. I devote section two to the Uniformity Argument, to its relationships with Searle’s more explicit Determination Argument, and to the independent problems it raises for the Dedicated Speech Act theory of fiction. In section three, I argue that these problems generalize, and that they affect not only the DSA, but also its more recent descendant, the General Speech Act theory of fiction.

## 1 Searle’s Determination Argument

Speech act theory aims at providing a systematic account of ‘the things we do with words’ (Austin 1962). It is, in this sense, a theory of action *and* a linguistic theory: it discusses the fundamental features of, say, asserting, asking, or requesting, and it explains the relationships between these acts and particular features of a natural language.

Following Searle’s suggestion (Searle 1969a, b), it is convenient to represent speech acts in a force-content format, as in:  $F(C)$ , the speech act with semantic content  $C$  and force  $F$ . The primary aim of a theory of speech *acts* is the study of the conditions and effects appropriate for different types of  $F$ , such as the requirements for the non-defective performance of an assertoric act. A related issue of interest from the viewpoint of *speech* act theories has to do with the relationships between

these force-types and linguistic forms, in particular so-called *illocutionary force indicating devices*, or *ifids* for short. So, given a content-bearing construct  $s$  and an *ifid*  $f$ , it is part of speech act theory's remit to determine the connections between uses of expressions of the form  $f(s)$  and the performance of speech acts of the form  $F(C)$ , such as the connections between the indicative mood and assertion.

Searle's argument against the DSA occupies a remarkably short space, consistently with his disclaimer that he 'shall not devote a great deal of space to demonstrating that [the DSA is] incorrect' (Searle 1975a, b: 323). Searle begins with the assumption of a particularly intimate relationship between forces and *ifids*:

we know ... that an utterance of the sentence 'John can run the mile' is a performance of one kind of illocutionary act, and that an utterance of the sentence 'can John run the mile?' is a performance of another kind of illocutionary act, because we know that the indicative sentence form means something different from the interrogative sentence form. (Searle 1975a: 324)

Searle's argument continues with an apparently unassailable premise: the superficial forms of the sentences occurring in fiction are indistinguishable from the forms of sentences occurring in non-fictional scenarios. For instance, occurrences of 'John can run the mile' in a work of fiction share the same form  $f(s)$  appropriate for occurrences of 'John can run the mile' in an everyday conversation, where  $s$  is devoted to the identification of a content (that John can run the mile), and  $f$  is an *ifid* (the indicative mood).<sup>1</sup>

These premises lead Searle to the conclusion that, if the DSA were correct, *ifids* would operate ambiguously in fictional and non-fictional discourse. The indicative mood in 'John can run the mile', for instance, would serve as an indicator of assertion in factual scenarios, but as a marker of some sort of 'storytelling' force in cases of fiction. This *Ambiguity Outcome*, Searle continues,

is at least *prima facie* an impossible view since if it were true it would be impossible for anyone to understand a work of fiction without learning a new set of meanings for all the ... elements contained in a work of fiction. (Searle 1975a: 324)

All parties in the debate grant that the Ambiguity Outcome is indeed 'impossible'. They do, furthermore, accept Searle's premise about formal indistinguishability. As a result, philosophers sympathetic to the DSA have focused on Searle's account of the relationship between sentential forms and *ifids* on the one hand, and illocutionary forces on the other.<sup>2</sup> In particular, they have argued that

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of mood, its relationships to semantics, and its role in speech act-theory see among many Karttunen (1977), Davidson (1979), Bach and Harnish (1979), Pendelbury (1986), and Harnish (1994). On the content-force distinction, see for instance Recanati (1987), Green (2000), and Hanks (2007). I speak of 'superficial forms' in order to signal my neutrality with respect to certain treatment of ambiguity—as in the idea that, say, an ambiguous use of the indicative mood may be regimented in terms of distinct *ifid*-representatives at some deeper level of analysis.

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, they have focused their attention on a principle constraining the relationships between linguistic forms and illocutionary force *types*, as in the idea that the indicative mood determines forces of the assertoric type (including otherwise different forces such as explanations, reports, or statements): 'it is a principle of determination thus broadly construed which is the target of my attack below' (Currie 1985: 392; see also Alston 1994).

Searle's argument rests on a controversial *Determination Principle*, namely the idea that 'the meaning of a sentence determines the kind of illocutionary act it is used to perform' (Currie 1985: 385).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, I refer to this reconstruction of Searle's considerations against the DSA as the *Determination Argument*.

The attribution to Searle of such a Determination Principle is uncharitably strong, since it suggests that, for Searle, uses of unambiguous sentences *determine* the occurrence of speech-acts of a particular kind—that, say, barring ambiguity, uses of an indicative sentence inevitably result in speech acts of the assertoric type. This idea is *blatantly* false, for reasons amply discussed by Searle himself in his previous work on speech acts: a wide variety of *ifid*-independent conditions are uncontroversially necessary for the performance of any illocutionary move, such as, in the case of assertion, conditions having to do with the speaker's beliefs and her evidential position.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, I continue my discussion of Searle's Determination Argument by taking on board a weaker understanding of the Determination Principle, more perspicuously expressible in terms of 'constraints' rather than 'determination': uses of expressions of the form  $f(s)$  are *candidates* for the successful performance of *exactly one* type of speech act  $F(C)$ , where  $F$  is the illocutionary force conventionally related to  $f$ .

This more reasonable interpretation of Searle's Determination Principle may be taken on board without further ado, since it suffices for the establishment of Searle's Ambiguity Outcome. Searle's indistinguishability premise, as mentioned, goes without saying: 'John can run the mile' may occur in fictional and non-fictional scenarios alike. Yet, fiction writers do not satisfy many of the independent requirements for the performance of 'straightforward' illocutionary acts such as asserting, asking, or requesting: Miss Murdoch, to echo Searle's example, 'has no commitment whatever as regards [to] truth' and she is 'not committed to being able to provide evidence' of any sort (Searle 1975a: 323). As a result, a moderate version of the Determination Principle suffices for saddling the DSA with the following dilemma: either (i) fiction writing results (at best) in the performance of defective or non-felicitous acts, or (ii) sentential forms ambiguously operate as occasional indicators of some sort of dedicated illocutionary force. Given that (i) is clearly not an option for any theory grounded on the idea of a dedicated 'storytelling' acts, it follows that, as long as the Determination Principle is left in place, the DSA remains committed to a repellent Ambiguity Outcome.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, defenders of the DSA or of other similar views respond to Searle's challenge by rejecting any form of the Determination Principle leading to Searle's conclusion of ambiguity. Somewhat surprisingly, this refutation turns out to be a rather quick affair:

<sup>3</sup> Also known as the 'Functionality Principle' (Currie 1990: 14; Davies 2007: 3).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Searle (1969a, b). I deliberately employ the relatively vague ideas of a 'successful' or 'non-defective' performance, in order to maintain my neutrality with respect to scenarios in which these conditions fail to hold—with opportune modifications, anything ranging from misfiring (and hence, strictly speaking, lack of any illocutionary result whatsoever) to some sort of defectivity remains consistent with the lines I pursue in what follows.

<sup>5</sup> For an alternative take independent of speech act theories of fiction see Martinich (2001).

... the principle seems obviously false. The same sentence may, given the right context, be used to make an assertion, ask a question, or give a command (e.g., ‘you are going to the concert’). (Currie 1985: 386)<sup>6</sup>

In other words: the Determination Principle is ‘obviously false’ because there are independent examples of uses of particular *ifids* that result in different illocutionary forces on different occasions. As a consequence, that principle allegedly falters independently of the choice of any particular association between *ifids* and forces: for any *f* and *F*, the idea that the use of *f* qualifies at best as the performance of a speech-act with force *F* may be thwarted by noting that *f*-involving scenarios may result in the performance of a speech act with a force other than *F*. In the particular example cited above: the idea that utterances of an indicative sentence at best result in illocutionary outcomes of the assertoric type is refuted by noting that ‘you are going to the concert’ may be employed in the performance of, say, a commissive type of act.

This quick dismissal of the Determination Principle hardly suffices as a response to Searle’s Determination Argument. Crucially, what needs to be argued is that the phenomenon highlighted by non-assertoric uses of ‘you are going to the concert’ is *relevantly similar* to this or that characteristic of fictional discourse. In the absence of such an explanation, the general import of the Determination Principle may perhaps have been thwarted, but the DSA would not thereby be off the hook. Let *K* be whatever factor may be responsible for the commissive outcome allegedly engendered by some uses of ‘you are going to the concert’—some sort of ‘contextual influence’, or, for that matter, any other non linguistically encoded parameter. If *K* fails to be an inevitable feature of fictional discourse, an allegedly undesirable Ambiguity Outcome would still be obtainable from the principle that form constrains force *in all non-K scenarios*—that, say, barring *K*-type contexts, occurrences of ‘John can run the mile’ never contribute anything other than assertoric force, unless the superficial *ifid* in that sentence ambiguously relates to distinct illocutionary outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

The equivocation, if you prefer, trades on the aforementioned appeal to ‘the right context’. It may well be (indeed, according to Searle 1975b, it is) some sort of contextual background that allows arguably unambiguous *ifids* such as the indicative mood to be interpreted in terms of different forces, as in an assertion and in a command. Yet, the neutralization of Searle’s argument also requires an explanation of why the *same* sort of contextual factors could steer that sentential form towards an interpretation in terms of yet another force, as in a presumed instance of ‘telling a story’. It is, after all, ‘the right context’ that leads us to an interpretation of ‘the bank’ concerned with a particular institution (the Bank of

<sup>6</sup> See also Currie (1990: 15), where the example is ‘you will leave now’.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, the case of ‘you are going to the concert’ seems to be explainable in terms of what are commonly called *indirect speech acts* (see Searle 1975b). Appeals to indirectness are arguably not promising from the DSA’s viewpoint. In the case of ‘you are going to the concert’, indirect commissive outcomes may after all be obtainable from primarily assertive commitments; yet, the notion that occurrences of ‘John can run the mile’ in fiction are at best only derivatively ‘fiction making’ scenarios seems hardly compatible with a full-fledged commitment to the DSA (see for instance Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 75).

America, say), rather than with a physical building (its branch on High Street). Yet, this (correct but vague) conclusion is surely compatible with the uncontroversial fact that, in another sense, ‘bank’ is ambiguous—that is, with the fact that, ‘in different conversational contexts’, it has to do with rivers rather than with money.

As it stands, then, the allusion to independent associations of one unambiguous *ifid* with multiple forces hardly suffices as a neutralization of Searle’s employment of the Determination Principle. This much, of course, does not amount to a proof of the Determination Argument’s soundness: insufficient objections may after all be directed against strategies that remain independently unsatisfactory. Still, the problems with speech-act theories of fiction would anyway not disappear even if a more adequate refutation of the Determination Principle could be provided. This is so because, as I argue in the next sections, Searle’s discussion of the Determination Argument and the Ambiguity Outcome also hints in the direction of a related *Uniformity Argument*, which remains utterly independent of the Determination Principle. As a result, for reasons that I explain in section three, the Uniformity Argument generalizes, and affects the GSA to no lesser extent than its DSA counterpart.

## 2 Searle’s Uniformity Argument

As testified by their fixation with the Determination Principle, defenders of the DSA indirectly grant Searle’s attitude towards one of its presumed consequences, namely the notion that ‘the sentences in a work of fiction would have some other meaning’ from the meaning of indistinguishable sentences in non-fictional scenarios. As already mentioned, Searle’s declared reason for finding this Ambiguity Outcome ‘impossible’ is that

it would be impossible for anyone to understand a work of fiction without learning a new set of meanings for all the words and other elements contained in the work of fiction. (Searle 1975a: 324)

But would that be *that* bad? Surely, Searle overstates his case when he speaks of a new set of meanings for ‘all the words’, since nothing in his argument intimates that, say, ‘run’ or ‘mile’ would have to take on a new meaning, once the DSA is taken on board. In fact, at first sight, Searle’s Ambiguity Outcome seems to be of a relatively limited import: *ifids* such as the indicative mood would ambiguously bear the responsibility for assertive or fictional illocutionary results, ‘depending on context’. The conclusion that novices would need to ‘learn a new set of meanings’ for a few *ifids* may perhaps not be an outcome that everyone is likely to embrace with enthusiasm, but it hardly appears to be a disastrous result.

Yet, Searle’s allusion to allegedly implausible learning requirements underplays the strength of the ambiguity-based strategy he overtly pursued with the Determination Argument. In fact, a different understanding of the Ambiguity Outcome is strongly suggested by certain aspects of Searle’s own alternative to the Dedicated Speech Act theory of fiction, namely his idea that what is at issue in fiction is the *pretence* to perform illocutionary acts. Accordingly, this section

proceeds towards an argument independent of Searle's 'learning' red-herring, and more immediately related to some aspects of his positive pretence-based account.

Take my assertion *A* that John can run the mile—for instance, but not necessarily, as in my use of 'John can run the mile' under appropriate conditions. And take my question *Q* whether John can run the mile—for instance, but not necessarily, as in an utterance of 'can John run the mile?' against a suitable background. There are *significant* relationships between *A* and *Q*. In particular, the conditions for the successful performance of these illocutionary acts interact in interesting ways: for instance, *A* demands that I possess adequate evidence about John's athletic achievements, but the requirements for *Q* apparently insist on an opposite criterion, namely that I do not know whether John can run the mile. This tension is at least *prima facie* detectable at the level of linguistic form: the discourse fragment

(1) John can run the mile. Yet, can John run the mile?

is, in some sense, anomalous. This anomaly may well not result in uninterpretability: typically, when exposed to the second sentence in (1), we backtrack and reassess its first element, until charitable or otherwise more acceptable results are achieved. This reassessment may in turn yield a variety of payoffs: an echoic or ironical interpretation of 'John can run the mile', say, or some sort of demotion of its apparent assertoric import to the status of mere supposition. The dynamic mechanisms for such adjustments are of independent interest, but need not detain me at this stage. What matters is that, one way or another, the urge for re-interpretation is motivated by the relationships between the *prima facie* speech acts at issue in that fragment: not everything fits at a first pass, since assertions and questions may not felicitously co-exist when their contents are the same.

Two points are worthy of note. Firstly, my informal discussion of (1) did not proceed on the assumption of the Determination Principle. In fact, at least according to some developments of my deliberately neutral hints, my outcomes may well be *in tension* with that principle. At the end of the day, for instance, the sentence at the beginning of (1) may well fail to yield assertoric force, in contrast with the simple-minded assumption that, if anything ensues from the employment of the indicative mood, it must be assertion. Of course, *ifids* may perhaps continue to be responsible for initial, albeit defeasible indications. Yet, it is not simply the contrast between linguistic forms that highlights the *prima facie* peculiarity of (1), but rather the initial conjecture that what is at issue with uses of (1) is the performance of assertoric and non-assertoric acts with one and the same content.

Secondly, and more importantly, the situation with (1) is reproducible, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of fictional discourse. This is so because occurrences of those sentences in a fictional narrative initially engender a sense of illocutionary tension parallel to that ensuing in everyday conversation. For instance, the presence of 'John can run the mile' in a fictional narrative hardly warrants the conclusion that, according to the fiction, John runs the mile, as long as a subsequent occurrence 'can John run the mile?' casts its interpretive shadow upon the fragment in which it occurs. Yet, as I am about to explain, the DSA (and, later, the GSA) remain in an explanatorily unsatisfactory position in this respect: given their theoretical

resources, they must appeal to ad hoc manoeuvres unable to reflect the parallelisms between fictional and non-fictional scenarios.<sup>8</sup>

Take the DSA's characteristic claim that the occurrences of certain sentences in works of fiction result in a dedicated force  $F$ —that, say, at least some occurrences of 'John can run the mile' are responsible for some sort of 'storytelling' illocutionary outcome. Of course, on any decent version of the DSA, this storytelling result may not indiscriminately be applied across the board: at least some occurrences of, say, 'can John run the mile?' must be associated with a force of a type other than  $F$ , lest they inappropriately be interpreted as attaching storytelling force to the content that John can run the mile. Let then  $F^*$  be the force which the DSA takes to be appropriate on these occasions, say, some kind of 'fiction-wondering' illocutionary outcome. The mere distinction between  $F$  and  $F^*$ , of course, hardly suffices for an explanation of the phenomenon at issue—for instance, for the explanation of the peculiarity of occurrences of (1) in a work of fiction, or, more generally, for the explanation of the *prima facie* anomaly of allegedly storytelling and fiction-wondering acts with one and the same content. Indeed, what is required for such an explanation is not simply the assumption that  $F$  and  $F^*$  are two. What is also needed is a theory according to which they are illocutionary forces of a particular sort—in particular, illocutionary forces such that the non-defective performance of a speech-act  $F(C)$  must take place in scenarios that prevent the non-defective performance of a speech-act  $F^*(C)$ .

The problem with the DSA is not simply that such a theory is nowhere to be found, or that no versions of the DSA currently on the market confront the diversity of forces apparently at issue in fictional and non-fictional scenarios. The problem is rather of a more fundamental methodological nature: any satisfactory theory of fiction must inevitably account for inter-force relationships that are *parallel* to the relationships between straightforward speech acts such as assertions or requests. Shifting for variety's sake from (1) to an example more directly inspired by Searle: if assertives and expressives are distinct speech-act types in everyday speech, at least two illocutionary types ought *thereby* to be at issue also in fictional scenarios: one, say, for Miss Murdoch's tokens of 'Lieutenant Chase-White potted in an Irish garden', and another for her 'ten more glorious days without horses!' And if, say, assertives and expressives do peacefully co-exist in the presence of an identical content, as in my utterance of

- (2) they were ten more glorious days without horses; ten more glorious days without horses!,

then Murdoch's allegedly chosen forces will have to co-exist as well, since a similar compatibility is in place when (2) occurs in a work of fiction.

<sup>8</sup> Here and elsewhere in this essay, incidentally, I assume the unproblematic status of 'content' in fictional scenarios—as in the idea that, say, fictional occurrences of 'John can run the mile' and 'can John run the mile?' typically engender different forces, but share their content. This notion is notoriously *not* unproblematic, and the uncritical appeal to content in speech-act theories of fiction is independently worthy of closer scrutiny (Searle's pretense approach in Searle (1975a) includes intriguing, though underdeveloped and not widely noted hints in this respect). This possible further difficulty with speech act theories of fiction may however safely be left aside for my purposes in this essay.



Outcomes of this kind may of course be reached by sufficiently well-developed versions of the DSA: storytelling, fiction-wondering, and fiction-expression, to coin a few terms of art on behalf of the DSA, may well *independently* be designed so as to obtain the right results for (1) or (2), as they occur in fiction. Yet, such an independently designed structure will need to be constructed on an ad hoc basis, with no regard for the mutual relationships holding between what, from the DSA's viewpoint, remain distinct illocutionary acts: asserting, requesting, and expressing. Any reasonable defender of the DSA may do worse than to look at plain vanilla assertions, questions, or exclamations as her inspiration. Yet, no justification for the ensuing parallelism is to be found from the DSA's viewpoint: if, say, storytelling and fiction-wondering relate along the lines appropriate for saying and asking, they do so only by virtue of a remarkable coincidence.

The Uniformity Argument that emerges from these considerations appeals to resources already at work in the Determination Argument, but achieves importantly different results. What is now at issue is not a *reductio* strategy, according to which the DSA and the Determination Principle lead to undesirable ambiguities and 'impossible' learning requirements. What is at issue is rather an argument from *best explanation*, which highlights the explanatory poverty of the DSA independently of the Determination Principle and of issues of learnability. Questions of ambiguity, here as in the Determination Argument, continue to be paramount. Yet, what now matters is not a proliferation of meanings, and the presumably steep demands it imposes on first-time consumers of fiction. What matters is rather the *systematic* nature of the ambiguities engendered by the DSA, side by side with this theory's inability to yield anything other than a mere accidental similarity between run-of-the-mill and fiction-specialized illocutionary forces.

In the next section, I continue with my presentation and discussion of the Uniformity Argument, shifting my focus from the Dedicated Speech Act approach to the General Speech Act theory of fiction. A few words are however in order before I conclude my discussion of Searle and the DSA, having to do with the relationships between the Uniformity Argument and Searle's own positive contribution, the pretense theory of fiction.

Metaphorically speaking, the problem highlighted by the Uniformity Argument must be explained in terms of an *orthogonal* regularity, that is, in terms of some sort of underlying phenomenon that affects illocutionary acts of certain types 'all at once'. Less metaphorically: if  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  (say, plain assertives and interrogatives) and  $F_3$  and  $F_4$  (say, alleged 'storytelling' and 'fiction-wondering' force-types) interact with each other in a parallel fashion, this must be so because  $F_3$  and  $F_4$  are analysable respectively as  $p(F_1)$  and  $p(F_2)$ , for some background regularity  $p$  able to preserve the mutual relationships between  $F_1$  and  $F_2$ . For Searle, this 'background regularity' is *pretence*: 'Miss Murdoch is pretending to make an assertion' (Searle 1975a: 324) when she writes that Lieutenant Chase-White potted in an Irish garden, and, by the same token, she is pretending to perform an expressive illocutionary act when she begins her work with 'ten more glorious days without horses!'

Pretense, at least in our common understanding of the word, may well carry connotations that are not immediately relevant for Searle's project. Tellingly, he sets aside any complaint from the start:

[Miss Murdoch] is pretending ... to make an assertion, or acting as if she were making an assertion, or going through the motions of making an assertion, or imitating the making of an assertion. I place no great store by any of these verb phrases ... (Searle 1975a: 324)

Searle's lack of interest in the nitty-gritty of pretense (or imitation, or acting-as-if, or, one may add, make-believe) indirectly highlights his concern for merely *structural* properties of the phenomenon under discussion. In particular, pretended assertions are such that, according to the pretence, they *are* assertions—that is, they are such that, according to the pretence, they are non-defectively performed only by a speaker who, according to the pretence, believes the content is question, is in the position of providing evidence for it, and the like. Similarly, pretended questions are such that, according to the pretense, they are questions, and, *a fortiori*, are suitably performed only by someone who, according to the pretence, lacks evidential support for their contents, and is interested in further information. As a result, pretended assertions and questions with one and the same content unsurprisingly clash to no lesser extent than real life assertions and question, and for utterly parallel reasons: even in the pretence, so we assume, anyone who possesses adequate evidence for a content *C* does not felicitously ask whether *C* is true.

I remain neutral with respect to the exegetic question whether Searle's pretence view is indeed consciously designed as (possibly among other things) an explanation of the phenomena discussed in this section. My topic, after all, is neither Searle nor pretence-based analyses of fiction. It is, rather, the discussion of speech-act theories of fiction from the viewpoint of Searlean counter-arguments, namely his most explicit Determination Argument and the related Uniformity Argument. In particular, the Uniformity Argument plays a prominent role in this respect: as I am about to argue, it provides an important challenge not only against the Dedicated Speech Act approach, but also against more recent embodiments of speech-act analyses of fiction, the General Speech Act theory included.

### 3 From DSA to GSA

According to the General Speech Act theory of fiction, fiction may be defined (at least in part) in terms of the concept of *fictive utterance*. This concept is in turn explained along lines allegedly parallel to Paul Grice's intention-based approach to assertion, *modulo* a substitution of make-belief for belief (Davies 2007: 42). In a nutshell, in cases of fiction,

I want you to make believe some proposition *P*; I utter a sentence that means *P*, intending that you shall recognize this is what the sentence means, and to recognize that I intend to produce a sentence that means *P*; and I intend you to infer from this that I intend you to make believe that *P*; and, finally, I intend

that you shall, partly as a result of this recognition, come to make believe that *P*. (Currie 1990: 31)

A few initial *caveats* are in order. Firstly, this sort of approach is occasionally presented as a solution to problems other than those explicitly at issue with the Dedicated Speech Act theory. For one thing, what now often comes to the foreground is the project of a *definition* of the concept of fiction—a project rather distant from the DSA's more immediate concerns, and, as far as I can tell, from anything Searle wished to discuss in his essay.<sup>9</sup> As a result, defenders of the GSA distance themselves from appeals to 'illocutionary acts of uttering fiction' (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 74), in favour of a vaguer and more conciliatory approach:

the idea is not, of course, that the author intends that the reader makes-believe *each sentence* uttered in constructing the narrative—some sentences, after all, may be interrogative, or may issue from a deceived narrator—but that the reader makes-believe the fictive content of the narrative articulated by the text. (Davies 2015: 39)

It is not my aim here to assess these relatively generic allusions to speech-act theory, and to discuss whether the resulting appeal to make-believe does indeed play a role within a satisfactory definition of fiction. Regardless of any intimation to use them with restraint, the ideas put forth in these passages still unequivocally address phenomena having to do with the use of language, with the psychological profile of speakers and authors, and with their effects on their audiences. As a result, the GSA's main interlocutors unsurprisingly continue to include speech-act theorists and philosophers of language—primarily, as mentioned, Paul Grice among the alleged inspirers, and, most tellingly, John Searle among the dissenters:

Searle's [argument] is important because the theory he contrasts with his own is, roughly speaking, the theory I want to defend in this chapter. (Currie 1990: 14)

Mention of Searle is indeed appropriate: as I argue in what follows, the GSA may well overtly abandon the idea of a dedicated fiction-telling force, but it remains committed to an approach to illocutionary matters that continues to be pay to

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<sup>9</sup> Searle is occasionally criticized as a defender of the idea that illocutionary pretence is necessary and sufficient for fictionality (see for instance Currie 1990, Davies 2007 and, from a perspective unsympathetic to speech-act approaches, Walton 1983). After repeated readings of Searle (1975a), I could not identify any overt, or for that matter indirect commitment to that thesis: when it comes to issues in the proximity of definitional questions, Searle remains explicitly casual, as in the idea that 'the criterion for whether or not a text is a work of fiction must lie in the illocutionary intentions of the author' (Searle 1975a: 325), which in turn appeal to an unspecified 'set of extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions' (Searle 1975a: 326). Be that as it may, here as before, Searlian exegesis is not what matters here: if Searle did indeed defend the (spectacularly inadequate) idea that all and only pretend speech is fictional, so much the worse for that aspect of his views, independently of the evaluation of his attacks against this or that 'speech act theory' of fiction.

Searle's attacks, first and foremost the Uniformity Argument put forth in section two.<sup>10</sup>

Although the defenders of the GSA explicitly mention Grice's 'general theory of communication' as their inspiration, the presentation of their view takes as its model assertoric instances, such as when, in non-fictional scenarios, you say 'it is raining' with the intention that 'I shall believe that it is raining' (Currie 1990: 24-5). As it stands, of course, this account remains spectacularly ill-equipped when it comes to communication at large: it is hardly a paradigm of a successful linguistic interaction that you end up believing that it is raining on the basis of my use of, say, 'is it raining?', or for that matter, on the basis of a variety of other non-assertoric illocutionary acts.

Uncontroversially, in other words, 'speaker meaning encompasses not just content but also force' (Green 2015), so that, regardless of Grice's choice of pedagogical exemplars, his theory of communication and speaker meaning must inevitably apply also to cases less straightforward than allegedly belief-inviting uses of 'it is raining'. The details in this respect may well be controversial, but the general shape for a Gricean theory of communication seems clear enough: in the case of, say, a directive communicative contribution, 'we can say that a man who issues an order typically intends his utterance to secure a certain response, that he intends this intention to be recognized, and its recognition to be a reason for the response, ...' (Strawson 1964: 455). More generally and schematically: a speaker engaged in the performance of an illocutionary act  $F(C)$  typically intends (in the peculiarly Gricean sense of 'intention') her utterance to secure a response  $R$  directed towards  $C$  and of a type appropriate for  $F$ .

Not unlike any theory of communication worthy of attention, then, the Gricean standpoint inevitably confronts the wider taxonomy of illocutionary acts, in this particular case in terms of the relationships between illocutionary forces and intended responses of the kind mentioned above. Among other things, then, any satisfactory development of the Gricean take must be in the position of explaining the mutual relationships between illocutionary contributions of different types. Returning to the examples from section two: it must be in the position of assigning patterns of recognitions and responses for statements, questions, and expressives, which reflect the sort of differences and partial similarities highlighted by typical instances of (1) and (2).

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the GSA holds that *fictional* occurrences of, say, 'it is raining' may be explained along the lines appropriate for your everyday utterance of that sentence, except that the attitude of belief is now substituted with an attitude of make-believe. Yet, for reasons utterly parallel to

<sup>10</sup> According to Lamarque and Olsen, 'the appeal to Gricean intentions does not commit [the GSA] to postulating a special illocutionary act' since 'irony, metaphor, conversational implicature, joke-telling ... might usefully be illuminated by Gricean intentions, though without supposing that each case involves a distinct illocutionary act' (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 74). Perhaps. But the fact that allegedly illocution-independent phenomena may be explained in terms of a theory  $T$  does surely not entail that issues of illocutionary force may be accounted by  $T$  along lines independent of 'special' illocutionary moves. In a sense that will become clearer as I proceed, such a commitment is indeed inevitable from the viewpoint of the GSA, even though along more sophisticated lines than in the case of the DSA.

those noted with respect to non-fictional discourse, not all instances may fall prey to that very same analysis. So, Eliot's inscription of

(3) is it perfume from a dress that makes me so digress?

is not properly understood by making believe that a certain scent is the cause of a digression, and Baudelaire's line

(4) in order not to feel time's horrid fardel ... get drunk and stay that way!

is simply misunderstood by anyone who thereby makes-believe anything about her long lasting inebriations.<sup>11</sup> Given the Gricean resources mobilized by the GSA, the explanation of these cases must, one again, appeal to a manifold of commitments and responses, over and above the make-believe results allegedly appropriate for assertoric instances.

The details in such commitments and responses may safely be left aside here. This is so because, on any appropriate account, these must be in the position of reflecting the differences between, say, fictional occurrences of 'it is raining' and the excerpts in (3) and (4), and, most crucially, of accounting for their mutual relationships. There is no a priori reason why a generalized version of the GSA ought not to be in the position of identifying reactions  $R_1$ ,  $R_2$ , and  $R_3$  allegedly targeted by the reflexive intention of the anonymous author of 'it is raining', of Eliot, and of Baudelaire. Yet, there is every reason to believe that any such appeal, if at all adequate, will yield results utterly parallel to those appropriate for everyday assertoric scenario, for non-fictional questions, and for run-of-the-mill commissives, *modulo* whatever independent adjustment is needed in order to account for the presumed peculiarities of fiction.

Searle's Uniformity Argument, which I initially put forth against the Dedicated Speech Act theories, may then profitably be directed against the General Speech Act theory of fiction. In the best case scenario, as mentioned, the GSA may perhaps provide a Gricean explanation of the instances discussed above, which appeals (among other things) to suitably different epistemic profiles—make-believe in some cases, but other types of attitudes or responses in others. In this respect, the GSA may do worse than to take as its initial inspiration the sort of recognitions and responses at issue for non-fictional scenarios: whatever is appropriate for, say, (3), shall relate to straightforward wondering in the way in which, when it comes to fictional occurrences of, say, 'it is raining', make-belief relates to plain vanilla belief. Yet, a procedure of this type remains utterly ad hoc: in principle, whatever reactions, commitments, and reflexive-intentions may be at issue in different fictional cases may well proceed on the basis of fiction's own, independently established taxonomy.

The similarities between this application of the Uniformity Argument against the GSA and its use against the DSA in section two should not come as a surprise. Here

<sup>11</sup> I take on board, for the example's sake, an approach to the content of (4) as indistinguishable from that for the indicative 'you get drunk and stay that way'—modify the examples if this much strikes you as inappropriate.

as before, the details in one's favourite theory of language-use remain of lesser importance. What matters is that, regardless of one's sympathy for Searle-style regularities or Gricean reflexive intentions, any decent analysis will be in the position of coping with the indisputable *explanandum* that saying, asking, ordering, or expressing achieve different communicative results. By the same token, regardless of one's commitments to dedicated illocutionary forces or to specific recognitions and responses, it is an equally indisputable fact that a plurality of outcomes must be recognizable in the fictional domain. As a result, if, as I have argued, the diversity displayed by everyday conversation is reflected *mutatis mutandis* within the language of fiction, no piecemeal approach to authorial utterances will do, regardless of one's preference for make-belief responses over story-telling forces.

Two points deserve to be stressed, having to do with the Uniformity Argument's effectiveness against the GSA and the DSA alike. Firstly, here as in section two, the Determination Principle, and for that matter any hypothesis about *ifids* and forces, remain in the background. Of course, indicative or interrogative forms served my purpose as exemplars of assertions or questions in the everyday domain, and as alleged instances of different outcomes in the case of fiction. But they did so only for the purpose of pedagogical perspicuity: the Uniformity Argument is an argument about the mutual relationships between illocutionary forces and/or their related intentional backgrounds, independently of their grammatical manifestations.

A second point worthy of notice is the proximity of the Uniformity Argument to the positive outcomes briefly mentioned at the end of section two. There is after all only a short step from the methodological considerations of Uniformity to the conclusion that, whatever is at issue with fiction and language, it must be a *general* regularity. It must, in particular, be the sort of phenomenon that encompasses a wide variety of linguistic and communicative aspects 'all at once', and that is in turn in the position of maintaining their original relationships. Searle's pretense, for one, seems clearly designed with that methodological warning in mind: pretended assertions and exclamations are, in the pretense, assertions and exclamations, with their usual relationships to matters of force and communicative intentions. Pretense is, clearly, not the only option: familiar 'representationalist' approaches, for instance, may well be in the position of recognizing that, according to the representation, assertions and exclamations behave as assertions and exclamation really behave.<sup>12</sup> It also goes without saying that, in the end, both of these stabs at an analysis of the fictional stance may turn out to be inadequate, for (semantic, psychological, or what have you) reasons independent of anything I have discussed thus far. Being analyses of fiction, as opposed to appeals to specialized illocutionary and communicative commitments, these proposals must nevertheless be given preference over any inevitably inadequate version of a 'speech act' approach.

<sup>12</sup> What I have in mind are theories grounded on the notion that authors of fiction merely represent the performance of illocutionary acts (see for instance Beardsley 1981; see also Ohmann's appeal to an 'imaginary illocutionary acts' in Ohmann 1971).

## 4 Conclusion

According to the conciliatory approach quoted at the beginning of section three, the GSA's commitments may be reduced to the idea that 'the reader makes-believe the fictive content of the narrative articulated by the text' (Davies 2015: 39). According to the spirit of this passage, the study of such 'fictive content' may profitably be relegated to an antecedent *theory of interpretation*, or may at any rate be expunged from the remit of a General Speech Act theory of fiction. Interpretation, so one may hope, will be in the position of identifying and keeping at bay a variety of problematic instances, including interrogative sentences, the ravings of an unreliable narrator, and, one may be tempted to add, a few seriously assertive interpolations.<sup>13</sup>

I do not have any qualms with a picture of this sort: the notion that, if a 'fictive content' is at all identifiable, it is an appropriate target of make-believe, strikes me as at least initially uncontentious. I doubt that this harmless truism is all that anybody operating under the label of a 'speech act theory of fiction' may wish to put forth. More importantly for my purposes in this essay, it is surely not the sole content of the most popular version of speech act theories of fiction, namely the GSA. As evidenced by its presentations, including those quoted above, this theory is crucially committed to the idea of 'fictive utterance', in turn analysed as in a modified Gricean picture grounded on make-believe.

As such, the General Speech Act theory of fiction, not unlike its predecessor, the Dedicated Speech Act theory of fiction, falls prey to an argument inspired by the considerations in Searle (1975a). As I have argued in the first two sections of this paper, the argument that I have in mind is related to, but different from the Determination Argument typically attributed to Searle. In both cases, Searle's appeal to the perils of ambiguity plays a central role. Yet, the Uniformity Argument proceeds independently of the Determination Principle, and addresses the explanatory poverty of the approaches put forth by different versions of speech act oriented theories of fiction. Given the influential position currently occupied by the GSA within the current debate, the Uniformity Argument provides a challenge that nobody working on fiction, literature, and the use of language may afford to ignore.

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<sup>13</sup> The allusion here is to a debate tangential to the issues discussed in this essay, having to do with the possibility that fictional works include straightforwardly assertoric instances, as in 'the description of the bombing of Dresden in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*' (Davies 2015: 41); see for instance Gibson (2007) and Friend (2008).



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