

COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE IN USE-THEORIES OF MEANING

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I. It has recently been argued by Katz (1981) that theories of meaning as use fail to observe the kind of competence/performance distinction a theory of meaning should. According to Katz, there is in the entire tradition of such theories (a tradition he glosses "Austinian") "an endemic conflation of matters of language with matters of language use" (Katz, 1981:218). Against this tradition, Katz insists that matters of language use are matters of performance, whereas the theory of meaning ought to be interested only in matters of competence. It is, on his view, semantic competence that must be captured by such a theory, and the only way this can be done is by abstracting from all aspects of context and use. The tradition Katz criticizes has emphasized the latter; its thrust has been that the context of the utterance of a sentence and the rules pertaining to its use are constitutive of that sentence's meaning in the language. It claims that without adverting to such rules and contexts we cannot say what meaning a sentence has, indeed, that it has no meaning in such a vacuum. On such a view, what Katz thinks semantic theory needs, namely, "a notion of an absolutely context-free sentence meaning," makes no sense.

Katz takes Searle's theory of speech acts as representative of this tradition and sets out to rebut the latter's recent challenges to this notion (Searle, 1978). In this paper I wish to show that while Searle and others roughly in the "meaning is use" tradition are indeed guilty of blurring an important performance/competence distinction, and to the extent to which they try to draw one, they do so in the wrong place, we should not draw the moral Katz does, namely, that use theories in principle cannot accommodate the kind of performance/competence distinction an adequate theory of meaning requires. I shall suggest a way of drawing that distinction which is immune to Katz's criticisms.

II. Katz characterizes a theory of speech acts as "an account of semantic performance, the way a language user employs semantic competence and information about a speech context to determine the meaning of sentence tokens in the context" (Katz, 1981:215). By contrast, a semantic theory proper yields semantic types "which are the compositional meanings of sentences in the language," distinct from a "pragmatic theory of how semantic competence is related to semantic performance" (ibid.). Katz cites with approval Chomsky's insistence that in the study of natural language we should not be interested in "... such grammatically

irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest and error" (Chomsky, 1965:3). These matters of performance should not be confused with the so-called performative aspects of natural language. The latter will come under a theory of semantic competence: the ideal speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language will include knowledge--context-free semantic knowledge--of these performative aspects, but it will not derive from the actual context and features of use. Katz thinks that in slicing things this way we will have given a complete context-free compositional semantics for a natural language without bringing in such concepts having to do with the use of natural language as linguistic act, linguistic behavior, context of utterance, background information, etc.

The trouble with this argument is that while it rightly insists that we distinguish between semantic types and semantic tokens and that only the former are properly the concern of semantic theory, it fails to allow for an analogous distinction in a theory of speech acts. Surely we can, and should, distinguish between act-types and act-tokens, context-types and context-tokens, even background-types and background-tokens. Once we do so, we can see that facts about the type-member of each of these pairs can and must play a role in a theory of competence concerning the use of natural language and that such a theory must indeed be part of a theory of natural language.

Let me elaborate on the kind of type/token distinction I am suggesting here in terms of speech acts; what I say will apply, mutatis mutandis, to contexts, backgrounds, and so on. With respect to any sentence of a natural language, there is a set of facts concerning the use of that sentence expressible in the following form:

- (A) The sentence type S in language L is (standardly) used in context-type C to perform speech-act type A.

Contrast this with facts of the sort that can be expressed as follows:

- (B) A token of S has been used in circumstances instantiating C to perform a token of A.

The former is a general rule; the latter the report of a particular speech event. Statements like (A) express rules the knowledge of which is partly constitutive of the ideal speaker-hearer's knowledge of L and must thus be part of an account of his linguistic competence. Statements like (B) have to do with particular performances and as such fall outside theories of competence. But note that the kinds of "grammatically irrelevant conditions" alluded to by Chomsky, such as memory limitations, etc., affect only facts of the type expressed by (B). Katz is

right in saying that these must be ignored in constructing a theory of competence. But he is wrong in concluding from this that no fact about language use is properly a part of competence. Facts of the type expressed by (A) are by any reasonable criterion both facts about the use of language and yet essential to any theory of linguistic competence. Even though there is a sense in which these facts are about performance, they are still relevant to competence. Knowing them amounts to knowing the correct rules of performance, and that knowledge should be distinguished from actually using those rules no less than should knowing semantic rules from actually following them. Failure to follow rules, whether semantic in Katz's narrower sense or pragmatic, is susceptible to explanation in terms of performance breakdowns due to the semantically irrelevant conditions Chomsky talks about. But ruling out reference to such conditions from a theory of competence does not mean ruling out reference to all facts about language use. The study of the conditions that typically affect facts such as those expressed by (B) is not of direct concern to the theorist of language. Psychology and, very likely, neurophysiology will have much more to say about such performance breakdowns than will the linguist or the philosopher of language. But theories of linguistic competence will not on this account exclude considerations of use; they must still include a theory of the rules of use.

III. There is a kind of breakdown which is of concern in the study of linguistic competence: one that involves a violation of a rule of the sort expressed by (A). If such a violation does occur (that is, if a speaker on a particular occasion attempts to use sentence token S in context C to perform a token not of speech-act type A but of B), we regard the violator as having deviated from the standard of ideal competence laid down by the set of (A)-type rules that together define L. Since these rules define L, such a speaker cannot succeed in performing a speech act other than one (or one of the ones) specified by (A).¹

Now there is a sense in which Katz's own position shows a recognition that something like (A)-type rules must form part of any account of linguistic competence. It is only common sense that they should do so: what kind of linguistic competence would a theory that excluded a speaker's knowledge of how to use the sentences of his language describe? Indeed, one of the insights behind the arguments of use-theorists is the recognition that it doesn't make much sense to attribute to a speaker knowledge of meanings (even of the sort Katz thinks a semantic theory should be about) while withholding from him knowledge of rules of use. Could I really be said to know what the words (and assuming a compositionality principle, the sentences) of L mean, if I do not know how they are used? But to have the second kind of knowledge is to have knowledge of the sort (A) expresses, knowledge of rules

of use. Katz wants to allow performativeness as a legitimate part of semantic theory, but not considerations of language use. That is an incoherent position. Performativeness is a matter of rules of use, even though it is not a matter of acts of use, of performances.

Knowledge of rules of use is constitutive of being a speaker of L, even if following them on each and every occasion of speaking is not. My falling off my bicycle occasionally does not show that I don't know how to ride one, though if I always fell off, perhaps that would.² It would show that I lack bike-riding competence just as consistently violating the rules of use would show that I don't know L.

The analogy can be extended further. If the cause of my always falling off my bike were some physical limitation of mine (trouble with the inner ear, perhaps), rather than any unusually sustained sequence of such typical causes of occasionally falling off as drunkenness or sudden trucks or gusts of wind, we would, I think, say that I didn't know how to ride a bike. And this would be so even if I could state a correct theory of bike-riding. Analogously, my ability to state an entire semantic theory in Katz's sense (that is, to give a complete compositional account of the relations among all the semantic types of L) does not entail that I know L. We would not say that I knew L, if I could not use it correctly. A machine programmed only with a semantic theory in Katz's sense would be unable to simulate a speaker; one reason (though there may be others) for this would be the machine's lack of "knowledge" of rules of use.³

Consider another analogy, perhaps closer to the case of language: competence in playing some game, say, bridge. The rules of the game, including the rules of bidding, are analogous to the kind of rule I have argued a theory of meaning for a natural language must capture. They include rules like

- (C) The sentence 'Two clubs!' is used in bridge-bidding to assume the obligation, if the bid is passed, to make eight tricks with clubs as trump.

But they do not include rules constituting bidding conventions, such as

- (D) The utterance of 'Two clubs!' by a bidder [using the particular bidding convention] indicates the possession of a hand of a certain strength.

Someone who understood the meaning of the word 'two' and of the word 'clubs', but did not know rule (C), could not be said to know how to play bridge. On the other hand, someone who knew that, but failed to know what (D) expresses, should, strictly

speaking, be characterized as someone who knows how to play bridge, even if he does not know a particular bidding convention (he may, of course, know some other). Even if it is urged that knowing some bidding convention or another is part of knowing how to play bridge, or at least of how to play bridge reasonably well, it does not follow that knowing a particular convention is. The important thing to see is that rules of use are not like rules of particular bidding conventions. They are, rather, like the constitutive rules of the game of bridge, such as those expressed in (C). Rules like (A) are analogous to those like (C): the former are required for knowing L, as are the latter for knowing how to play bridge. Both are thus constitutive of the respective competences involved. (A)-type rules are, in fact, semantic rules par excellence. But whether we choose to use the terms 'semantic' and 'means' in such a way that 'semantic competence' includes knowledge of such rules (as I have done) or in such a way that it excludes it (as Katz seems to prefer) is trivial. What matters is that knowing such rules is an essential part of linguistic competence, and that the kind of breakdowns mentioned by Chomsky, which Katz rightly wishes to exclude from linguistic competence, do not bear on it. If this is right, then we have specified a sense in which a theory of meaning, in order to be a theory of competence, must make reference to matters of use, Katz's arguments notwithstanding.

IV. The question, what kind of connections obtain between semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning, is a complicated one. Continuing with our bridge analogy, a bidding convention in which there was no connection between the fact that whenever a partnership is left in two clubs it has to make eight tricks and the fact that 'Two clubs!' indicates a certain strength in the bidder's hand and invites a response dependent on the strength of his partner's, would admittedly not be very useful. But that is a fact about that convention, not about bridge as such. The conceptual connection of interest for understanding what bridge is is that between the meaning of the sentence type 'Two clubs!' and the rule that in bridge an utterance of a token of that sentence entails that if passed, the bidding partnership has to make eight tricks with clubs as trumps. Similarly, with a natural language, say English, the conceptual connection of interest to a theory of that language is that between the meaning of the sentence type 'I will meet you at eight o'clock' (a function of the meanings of the words 'I', 'promise', etc.) and the fact that in certain contexts its utterance constitutes the making of a promise. There are analogs of the (D)-type rules, too, in natural language: a performance of the act of marrying, for example (by the uttering of 'I will!' in the appropriate context), will have certain additional consequences, social, economic, practical, even emotional, and so will an act of stating, asserting, etc.⁴ Some of these consequences are matters of convention, others are not.

But none of them are constitutive of the act of marrying, any more than the details of a particular bidding convention are constitutive of the act of playing bridge. As noted before, there are any number of possible bidding conventions, just as there are any number of possible social conventions surrounding the institution of marriage. Some such set of conventions must always be present and there may even be some constraints they must meet in order to be conventions of the relevant kind. In the long run, these conventions -- we may call them perlocutionary conventions -- may even feed back into and alter the conceptual connections I have been discussing. Nevertheless, they must be sharply distinguished from the latter, which constitute the activity in question (be that speaking L, playing bridge or getting married), and knowledge of which constitutes competence in that activity.

V. Let me return to the claim I made earlier, that the theory of use, construed as a theory of competence, must deal with types not with tokens. One reason for being tempted by the sort of view Katz advocates (though I doubt if that is his reason) is that theories of use often violate this constraint. Most theories of speech acts, especially those partially inspired by a Gricean conception of meaning, build into the rules of use they propose conditions that make mention of the actual mental states-- intentions, beliefs, expectations, etc.--of particular speakers for whose performance of a particular speech-act token the rules are taken to provide necessary and sufficient conditions. Thus a rule in a theory of the sort we are familiar with from Searle (1970) and others typically has the form

- (E) The utterance of S in C, when uttered by a speaker with such and such intentions, etc., constitutes the performance of A.

(Sometimes C itself is specified in such a way as to include this additional condition; sometimes it is made a separate condition.) If such a rule is understood as requiring the actual presence of certain mental states such as intentions, beliefs, etc., on a particular occasion of utterance, it moves us immediately to the performance side of any interesting competence/performance distinction. It cannot be part of the meaning of S that some particular user of it be in some particular mental state. (Remember, on these theories, the meaning of S is partially constituted by what A can be performed by using it.) If a use-theory is committed to such a view, then Katz is right in rejecting it.

However, use-theories need not be so committed; even if we think that some condition mentioning mental states relevant to the meaning of utterances needs to be built into a theory of natural language and of linguistic competence, such a condition can be

stated in a way that does not commit us to any claim about the mental states of particular speakers. Rules of the sort

- (F) S when uttered in C by a speaker who can be reasonably presumed to have such and such intentions, etc. is used in L to perform speech-act type A.

will hold, even if for some idiosyncratic reason some actual speaker fails to have the intentions mentioned. 'Reasonably presumed' needs, of course, to be unpacked. But regardless of the details of such unpacking, what matters is that the actual presence in particular speakers of L of the mental states mentioned in the rule is not constitutive of what S means in L and that nothing in (F) is incompatible with the kinds of rules expressed by (A). Indeed, (F) can be seen as a further specification of (A)-type rules.⁵

VI. Katz takes Searle to task for conflating truth-conditions and truth-values when arguing that context-free compositional meaning has the untoward consequence of determining "... for every context whether or not an utterance of that sentence in that context is literally true or false." Katz is right that his theory, properly understood, does not commit him to such a consequence; what it says about the meaning of 'The cat is on the mat' is (a) that it is a compositional function of the meanings of 'the', 'cat', etc., and (b) that it is true if and only if the cat is on the mat. That is as it should be. Searle apparently thinks that this is not sufficient as a specification of the sentence's literal meaning, since in situations where the natural background assumptions about cats, mats, gravity, up-down orientation, etc., fail, "the notion of the literal meaning of the sentence ... does not have a clear application" (Searle, 1978:211). He appears to think that unless these assumptions do hold, the sentence cannot have "a clear set of truth conditions" (Searle, 1978:212). But if this is Searle's view, he is surely mistaken. It may be that only against the background of such assumptions can we decide whether some utterance of 'The cat is on the mat' is in fact true. But it does not follow that we must make those assumptions to understand the sentence. But then neither does the absurdity Searle accuses Katz of, namely, that knowledge of the meaning of the sentence involves knowledge that the relevant set of background assumptions hold, and hence knowledge that the sentence itself is true.

But Katz in turn is wrong in claiming that "... as a use theorist Searle is committed to this way of thinking" (Katz, 1981:220, my emphasis). If I am right in what I've argued above, namely, that the performance/competence distinction can be drawn in such a way that general rules concerning use are part of competence, even if particular facts about performances are not, it will be seen that such a theory of competence is at one with

Katz in specifying meaning without making it part of the specification that certain background facts actually obtain. Katz is right in complaining that Searle conflates truth-conditions and truth-values. But not every use theorist needs to do so.

I have argued that the specification of what Katz calls the context-free literal meaning of the sentence does not require mention of conditions affecting performance, either like those Chomsky and Katz wish to exclude from semantic theory, or like those Searle wishes to include. But it does require the statement of rules concerning the connection between sentence types, context types and speech-act types. Thus, on the position I have been advocating, we can avoid the Scylla of Katz's too narrow conception of linguistic competence, as well as the Charybdis of Searle's too broad a one. We can also avoid Katz's artificially sharp separation of matters of language and matters of use. Then, the separation between semantic competence and pragmatic competence can be seen as artificial, too. They are really only abstractions from the overarching notion of linguistic competence. And, insofar as linguistic competence surely includes competence in use, a theory of language must include a theory of use.⁶

NOTES

¹Strictly speaking, this is true only of illocutionary acts. The matter is somewhat more complicated with respect to perlocutionary acts. However, it is plausible to think that only the former are relevant to a theory of meaning (Biro, 1978).

²Only perhaps, since accidental factors may be responsible even for such constant failure.

³This shows up in the well-known problems of machine translation: when the machine yields Chinese-laundry translations, it is often because information of the sort expressed in statements of type (A) is not available to it. I am not suggesting that a machine could not be programmed with these additional rules. I see no reason in principle why it could not. What I am insisting on here is that it would have to be, before it could be said to have linguistic competence.

⁴It is only in Austin's early theory of performatives that these were sharply contrasted with constatives (Austin, 1963). In the later, more general, theory (Austin, 1962), performativeness is an aspect of all language use and a component of all meaning.

⁵There are actually two possible lines to take here, with importantly different theoretical consequences. The first concedes that the actual presence of certain mental states is constitutive of the performance of a token of the speech-act type

in question, but insists that all that is relevant to S's "speech-act potential" (the expression comes from Alston, 1964) and thus to its meaning is the sort of correlation expressed in (F) among sentences, contexts, mental states and speech acts, all considered at the type level. The second line maintains that even the identity of speech-act tokens is independent of the actual mental states of speakers, being governed rather by what inferences about such states are warranted by publically observable features of the speech-act and its context. Thus the first, but not the second, of these positions involves accepting (E) in its present form. Both, however, deny that (E) is what an analysis of the meaning of S in L requires, while yet insisting that programmatic rules of the sort expressed in (F) are essential to that analysis. Thus both positions steer a middle course between the extremes espoused by Katz and Searle.

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