the Limits of Expressibility

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I. The determination view

A basic tenet of contemporary semantics is that *the meaning of a sentence determines its truth conditions*. That determination of truth conditions by linguistic meaning can be more or less direct. In non-indexical cases the meaning of the sentence directly determines (and can even be equated with) its truth conditions. The sentence 'Snow is white' means that, and is true if and only if, snow is white. To give the meaning of such a sentence is to give its truth conditions. When the sentence is indexical, the situation is more complex. The sentence has truth conditions only 'with respect to context'. The sentence 'I am English' uttered by John is true if and only if John is English; uttered by Paul, it is true if and only if Paul is English, etc. Still, the truth conditions, in each context, are determined by the meaning of the sentence (with respect to the context). The meaning of 'I am English' determines that, if that sentence is uttered by a, then it is true iff a is English.

The thesis that meaning determines truth conditions can be dubbed the 'Determination View'. It goes largely unquestioned in contemporary analytic philosophy (as it did in early analytic philosophy). Fifty years ago the situation was different. So-called 'ordinary language philosophers' rejected the Determination View.[1] But ordinary language philosophy has suffered a spectacular loss of influence over the last thirty years and is nowadays no more than an object of scorn and caricature. The interest

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[1] Amongst 'ordinary language philosophers' I include Wittgenstein and Waismann as well as Oxford philosophers (Austin, Strawson, etc.).

aroused by Wittgenstein and his work has not, paradoxically, ceased to grow even though the current of ideas from which he is inseparable has undergone the aforesaid decline. But Wittgenstein's more or less intentional obscurity, even if contributing to his impact and popularity, limits the effective dissemination of his ideas.

Among contemporary theorists, only a few resist the Determination View. John Searle is one of them. He holds that linguistic meaning *radically under-determines* truth conditions. According to Searle, even after the reference or semantic value of all the indexical expressions contained in a sentence, including tenses, has been contextually fixed, we still *cannot* specify a state of affairs s such that the sentence (with respect to those contextual assignments) is true if and only if s obtains. For every candidate, i.e. for every such state of affairs, Searle shows that we can imagine a context with respect to which the sentence would not, or not necessarily, be considered as true, even though the relevant state of affairs obtained. That is so because in specifying the state of affairs in question we take many things for granted. If we get rid of those tacit assumptions (by imagining a weird context in which they do not hold) the state of affairs we have specified no longer corresponds to the intuitive truth conditions of the utterance.

II. Background assumptions

There are many things that we take for granted both in speaking and in interpreting the utterances of others. Among those things we take for granted, some are articulated in the sentence itself: they are the 'presuppositions' of the sentence. Thus if I say that John has stopped smoking, I presuppose that John smoked before, in virtue of the appropriateness conditions of the verb 'to stop'. But there are also things we take for granted which are in no way articulated in the sentence itself. Searle calls them 'background assumptions'. For example,

> Suppose I go into the restaurant and order a meal. Suppose I say, speaking literally, 'Bring me a steak with fried potatoes.' (...) I take it for granted that they will not deliver the meal to my house, or to my place of work. I take it for granted that the steak will not be encased in concrete, or petrified. It will not be stuffed into my pockets or spread over my head. But none of these assumptions was made explicit in the literal utterance. (Searle 1992: 180)

Though unarticulated, those assumptions contribute to determining the intuitive conditions of satisfaction (obedience conditions, truth conditions, etc.) of the utterance. The order 'Bring me a steak with fried potatoes' does not count as satisfied if the steak is delivered, encased in concrete, to the customer's house. It is mutually manifest to both the hearer and the speaker that the speaker intends the ordered meal to be placed in front of him on the restaurant table he is sitting at, etc. Though not explicitly said, that is clearly part of what is meant. Yet one does not want to say that that aspect of utterance meaning is conveyed indirectly or nonliterally (as when one says something and means something else). The utterance 'Bring me a steak with fried potatoes' is fully literal. It is a property of literal and serious utterances that their conditions of satisfaction systematically depend upon unstated background assumptions.

Another example given by Searle involves the word 'cut' in (literal utterances of) sentences such as 'Bill cut the grass' and 'Sally cut the cake'. The word 'cut' is not ambiguous, Searle says, yet it makes quite different contributions to the truth conditions of the utterance in the two cases. That is because background assumptions play a role in fixing satisfaction-conditions, and different background assumptions underlie the use of 'cut' in connection with grass and cakes respectively. We assume that grass is cut in a certain way, and cakes in another way. The assumed way of cutting finds its way into the utterance's truth conditions:

> Though the occurrence of the word "cut" is literal in [both] utterances..., and though the word is not ambiguous, it determines different sets of truth conditions for the different sentences. The sort of thing that constitutes cutting the grass is quite different from, e.g., the sort of thing that constitutes cutting a cake. One way to see this is to imagine what constitutes obeying the order to cut something. If someone tells me to cut the grass and I rush out and stab it with a knife, or if I am ordered to cut the cake and I run over it with a lawnmower, in each case I will have failed to obey the order. That is not what the speaker meant by his literal and serious utterance of the sentence. (Searle 1980: 222-223)

Examples can be multiplied at will. Searle convincingly shows that background assumptions such as these have the following properties: (i) for every utterance, there is an indefinite number of them; (ii) if we manipulate

them by imagining weird situations in which they do not hold (e.g. a situation in which steaks are standardly encased in concrete, or a situation in which grass is sliced into strips and sold to customers who want a lawn in a hurry), the intuitive truth conditions of the utterance are affected; (iii) we cannot make them explicit in the sentence itself without bringing in further background assumptions involved in the interpretation of the extra descriptive material. These properties entail that the Determination View must be given up. Truth-conditions depend not only upon the meaning of the sentence and the contextual parameters relevant to the interpretation of indexicals, but also upon what Searle calls 'the Background'. Change the background, you change (or possibly destroy) the truth conditional content of the utterance.

III. Contextualism

As I mentioned above, ordinary language philosophers, from Wittgenstein to Strawson, also rejected the Determination View. Their emphasis was on speech rather than language. As Searle writes,

> [Early analytic philosophers] treat the elements of language — words, sentences, propositions — as things that represent or things that are true or false, etc., apart from any actions or intentions of speakers and hearers. The elements of the language, not the actions and intentions of the speakers are what count. In the late thirties and especially after the Second world War these assumptions came to be vigourously challenged, especially by Wittgenstein. (Searle 1971: 6)

According to the alternative view put forward by Wittgenstein, Austin, and their followers, it is not natural language *sentences*, not even sentences 'with respect to context', which have truth conditions, but full-blooded speech acts — meaningful actions performed by rational agents. That view I call 'contextualism'.

Two purported refutations of contextualism were offered in the sixties, by Grice and Geach respectively. One of the reasons why contextualism has lost grounds is that those refutations have been generally considered as successful. Another reason for the demise of contextualism is the striking success of the intellectual entreprise known as formal semantics. Formal semantics is based on the Determination View, and its success seems to give the lie to contextualism.

In this chapter I will not deal with Grice's and Geach's arguments against contextualism;[2] nor will I consider whether or not it is possible to reconcile contextualism with the project of giving a systematic semantics for natural language. I will only be concerned with Searle's critique of the Determination View, and its relation (both historical and theoretical) to contextualism.

Even though he was trained in Oxford under Austin and Strawson, Searle himself was not a contextualist when he wrote *Speech Acts*. To be sure, he held that "the unit of communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, or even the token of the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the *production* or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (Searle 1965: 221-222; 1969: 16). At the same time, however, he issued warnings such as the following:

> A commonplace of recent philosophizing about language has been the distinction between sentences and the speech acts performed in the utterances of those sentences. Valuable as this distinction is, there has also been a tendency to overemphasize it. (Searle 1968: 153)

> It is possible to distinguish at least two strands in contemporary work in the philosophy of language — one which concentrates on the uses of expressions in speech situations and one which concentrates on the meaning of sentences. Practitioners of these two approaches sometimes talk as if they were inconsistent, and at least some encouragement is given to the view that they are inconsistent by the fact that historically they have been associated with inconsistent views about meaning. (...) But although historically there have been sharp disagreements between practitioners of these two approaches, it is important to realize that the two approaches... are complementary and not competing. (Searle 1969: 18)

The main reason why Searle kept his distances from the contextualism of his teachers was his acceptance of a basic principle he put forward under the name of 'Principle of Expressibility'.

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[2] For a critique of Grice's argument against contextualism, see Recanati 1994.

IV. The Principle of Expressibility

In general, the content of a speech act — what the speaker communicates and the hearer understands — cannot be equated with the content of the sentence uttered in performing that speech act. That is due to many factors. (i) The uttered sentence is often elliptical, indeterminate or ambiguous even though what the speaker communicates by uttering the sentence in context is perfectly determinate and univocal. (ii) The referring expressions used by the speaker do not, in general, uniquely determine what the speaker is referring to: appeal to speaker's intentions is necessary to fix the reference of, say, demonstratives pronouns etc. (iii) Beside what she says, there are many things that the speaker conveys implicitly or nonliterally by her utterance, as in indirect speech acts, irony and metaphor. The three factors result in a gap between literal sentence meaning and speaker's utterance meaning. But that gap can always be closed: that is the gist of the Principle of Expressibility, according to which *whatever can be meant can be said*. In principle if not in fact, it is always possible to utter a *fully explicit sentence*, that is, a sentence whose linguistic meaning exactly corresponds to, and uniquely determines, the force-and-content of the speech act one is performing. It follows that "a study of the meaning of sentences is not in principle distinct from a study of speech acts. Properly construed, they are the same study" (Searle 1969: 18).

Interpreted at face value, the Principle of Expressibility is incompatible with contextualism. According to contextualism, the sort of content which utterances have (in virtue of the speech acts they serve to perform) can never be fully encoded into a sentence; hence it will never be the case that the sentence itself expresses that content in virtue solely of the conventions of the language. Sentences, by themselves, do not have determinate contents. What gives them the determinate contents they have (in context) is the fact that they are used in performing meaningful actions. In brief, contextualism says that the gap between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning can never be closed; while the Principle of Expressibility says it can always be closed. A consequence of the Principle of Expressibility, Searle says, is that "cases where the speaker does not say exactly what he means — the principal kinds of cases of which are nonliteralness, vagueness, ambiguity, and incompleteness — are not theoretically essential to linguistic communication" (Searle 1969: 20). According to contextualism, however, the under-determination of

communicated content by linguistic meaning is an essential feature of linguistic communication.

Just as it is incompatible with contextualism, the Principle of Expressibility seems incompatible with Searle's findings about background-dependence. For Searle, as much as for Austin or Wittgenstein, linguistic meaning essentially under-determines communicated content. As we have seen, it is impossible to make the background assumptions against which an utterance is interpreted explicit, first because there is an indefinite number of such assumptions, and second because one cannot make them explicit without bringing in further background assumptions against which the extra descriptive material is interpreted. It follows that the content communicated by an utterance cannot be fully encoded into the sentence.

Yet Searle has explicitly *denied* that background phenomena threaten the Principle of Expressibility. In 'Literal Meaning', he writes: "There is nothing in the thesis of the relativity of literal meaning which is inconsistent with the Principle of Expressibility, the principle that whatever can be meant can be said" (Searle 1979: 134). How are we to make sense of that denial?

V. Expressibility and Effability

Searle's Principle is incompatible with contextualism and the thesis of background-dependence when interpreted at face-value. But Searle's formulations are vague, and it is possible, if somewhat strained, to distinguish several possible interpretations for the Principle.

On the strongest, and most natural, interpretation — that which I took for granted so far — Searle's Principle of Expressibility is equivalent to Katz's Principle of Effability (Katz 1972: 18-24). Katz defines the (grammatical) meaning of a sentence as the meaning it has in the 'null context'; and he says that what the speaker means by uttering a sentence S in a context C (the 'utterance meaning' of S) can always be made explicit as the 'grammatical meaning' of an alternative sentence S' that the speaker might have uttered (Principle of Effability). Katz says his Principle "was propounded in somewhat different form by... Searle"[3] in passages such as the following:

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[3] Katz 1978: 209.

If you ask me "Are you going to the movies?" I may respond by saying "Yes" but, as is clear from the context, what I mean is "Yes, I am going to the movies", not "Yes, it is a fine day" or "Yes, we have no bananas". Similarly, I might say "I'll come" and mean it as a promise to come, i.e., mean it as I would mean "I promise that I will come", if I were uttering that sentence and meaning literally what I say. In such cases, even though I do not say exactly what I mean, it is always possible for me to do so — if there is any possibility that the hearer might not understand me, I may do so. (Searle 1969: 19)

One possible difference between Searle's and Katz's respective principle lies in Katz's appeal to the notion of 'null context' in characterizing grammatical meaning (a notion which Searle later criticized). Where Katz invokes the distinction between grammatical meaning thus characterized and utterance meaning, Searle appeals to a vaguer distinction between 'sentence meaning' and 'intended speaker meaning'. Not only is that distinction vague, it is ambiguous in Searle's writings (Recanati 1987: 255-6). In 'Austin on locutionary and Illocutionary Acts', Searle says that sense and reference are two "of the aspects... in which intended speaker-meaning may go beyond literal sentence-meaning" (Searle 1968: 149). Here Searle presumably identifies literal sentence meaning with the linguistic, 'determinable' meaning of the sentence-type, and intended speaker meaning with what the speaker says in uttering this sentence (cf. Forguson, 1973: 179). That is more or less the same distinction as Katz's distinction between grammatical meaning and utterance meaning, or Austin's distinction between 'phatic' meaning and 'rhetic' meaning. But in 'Indirect Speech Acts' (and again in 'Metaphor'), what Searle calls 'sentence meaning' is what the speaker literally says (by uttering the sentence in context), and what he calls 'speaker's utterance meaning' is what the speaker actually conveys or communicates (which may, and typically does, go beyond or otherwise diverge from what is said). Table 1 (from Recanati 1980: 206) summarizes Searle's ambiguous use of the sentence meaning/speaker's meaning distinction.

	Linguistic meaning of the sentence type	*what is literally said by uttering the sentence in context*	*what is thereby communicated*
Searle 1968	sentence meaning$_1$	speaker's meaning$_1$	
Searle 1975		sentence meaning$_2$	speaker's meaning$_2$

Table 1

Given that ambiguity, it is tempting to substantiate Searle's claim that the Principle of Expressibility is consistent with his later findings by interpreting the Principle as follows:

> The gap between sentence meaning$_2$ and speaker's meaning$_2$ can always be closed. In other words, what is implied or indirectly conveyed can always be said literally or directly conveyed. But what the sentence says — its literal content (sentence meaning$_2$) — can still be treated as context-relative and background-dependent.

On that interpretation of the Principle of Expressibility, it is no longer entailed that the content of every speech act can be fully encoded into the linguistic meaning of a sentence type.

That interpretation of the Principle of Expressibility is clearly *not* what Searle intended when he wrote the relevant passages in his early works, however. It is not only nonliteralness, but *all* cases of divergence between sentence meaning and speaker utterance meaning, including (inter alia) 'vagueness, ambiguity, and incompleteness', which he says are not theoretically essential to linguistic communication, in virtue of the Principle of Expressibility. There does not seem to be any significant difference between Searle's Principle of Expressibility and Katz's Principle of Effability in that respect. In particular, there is no reason to think that Searle would have disapproved of anything in the following passage in which Katz talks about the divergence between grammatical meaning and utterance meaning:

Given that the utterance meaning of a sentence S can be expressed as the grammatical meaning of another sentence S', why isn't our performance mechanism designed to use S' in the first place? What purpose is served by having it produce S and depend on information about the context to supply the hearers with part of the utterance meaning of S? One function performed by such a mechanism is to increase our repertoire of verbal behavior by permitting us to speak nonliterally. Its principal function, however, is that it allows speakers to make use of contextual features to speak far more concisely than otherwise. Imagine how lengthy utterances would be if everything we wanted to express had to be spelled out explicitly in the grammar of our sentences. Pragmatics saves us from this wasteful verbosity. Thus instead of using sentences like (1), we can, on occasion, use sentences like (2)

(1)   The man who just asked the stupid question about the relation betwen the mental and the physical has, thank God, left the room
(2)   Thank God, he's gone

<div align="right">(Katz 1977: 19-20)</div>

VI. Expressibility and indexicality

It is ironic that Katz used the 'Thank God' example, for many years before (in 1959) Arthur Prior had published an article entitled 'Thank Goodness that's over', in order to support the opposite conclusion: that there are sentences whose content *cannot*, even 'in principle', be made fully explicit in a context-independent manner:

> One says, e.g. 'Thank goodness that's over', and not only is this, when said, quite clear without any date appended, but *it says something which it is impossible that any use of a tenseless copula with a date should convey*. (Prior 1959: 84; emphasis mine)

In contrast to Prior, Katz insists that reliance on contextual clues *can* be dispensed with, in principle if not in fact. That follows from the Principle of Effability, and it seems to follow from the Principle of Expressibility as well. Yet Searle, contrary to Katz, does not say so explicitly. He expresses no firm views on these matters but seems to oscillate between two positions.

On the one hand Searle allows that one way of making explicit who one means by e.g. the pronoun 'he' is to *demonstrate* the referent — to point to him. The ability to provide a demonstrative identification of the referent in context counts as satisfying the Principle of Expressibility, he says, just as much as the ability to provide a description such as 'The man who just asked the stupid question about the relation betwen the mental and the physical'.

> Applied to the present case of definite reference, [the Principle of Expressibility] amounts to saying that whenever it is true that a speaker *means* a particular object... it must also be true that he can say exactly which object it is that he means. (...) A limiting case of *saying* is *saying* which involves *showing*; that is, a limiting case of satisfying... the principle of expressibility is indexical presentation of the object referred to. (Searle 1969: 88)

On the other hand, Searle also speaks as if the contextual demonstration itself was a way of 'communicating', without making fully explicit, a sense that *could* be made fully explicit by replacing the demonstration by linguistic symbols. Since the pointing gesture is not part of the linguistic 'expression' but part of the 'context', the ability to articulate the sense of the pointing gesture *in words* is part and parcel of what the Principle of Expressibility requires. Thus, a sentence such as 'The man (or: that man) is a foreigner' (accompanied by a glance or a pointing gesture) could be rephrased more explicitly as 'There is one and only one man on the speaker's left by the window in the field of vision of the speaker and the hearer, and he is a foreigner' (Searle 1969: 92).

Be that as it may, the Principle of Expressibility can and should be weakened so as not to entail that indexicality is eliminable. One way of doing so is to broaden the notion of 'sentence meaning' so as to admit among determinants of sentence meaning contextual assignments of semantic values to indexical expressions. Thus interpreted the principle of Expressibility is no longer equivalent to the Principle of Effability; it does not say that the content of the speech act can always be fully encoded into the linguistic meaning of a sentence type, but that it can be literally expressed by a sentence type 'with respect to context', where context consists of a time of utterance, a place of utterance, a speaker, a hearer, a sequence of demonstrated objects, etc. (That is the 'context' in the narrow sense in which formal semanticists use the notion.)

Thus weakened, the Principle of Expressibility is still incompatible with Searle's later findings about the background. What those findings show is that, however explicit the sentence, its linguistic meaning does not determine a set of truth conditions even 'with respect to context'. To account for the phenomena adduced by Searle in his later writings, we would have not only to relativize sentence-meaning to context but *also* to broaden the notion of context so as to include the total 'background'. If we broaden the notion of context that way, however, we fall back on the interpretation of the Principle of which I said that it is obviously not what Searle intended. An utterance is not explicit, by Searle's early standards, if it is an utterance of a vague or ambiguous sentence. But if the 'context', in the richest possible sense, is allowed to compensate for the lack of determinacy of the sentence, then even the utterance of a vague or ambiguous sentence will count as explicit. That is clearly not what Searle originally meant when he talked of an utterance being explicit (or not).

VII. Local expressibility, global inexpressibility

Let us go back to the passage in which Searle says that the Principle of Expressibility is compatible with background phenomena:

> There is nothing in the thesis of the relativity of literal meaning which is inconsistent with the Principle of Expressibility, the principle that whatever can be meant can be said. It is not part of, nor a consequence of, my argument for the relativity of literal meaning that there are meanings that are inherently inexpressible. (Searle 1979: 134)

The last sentence suggests another possible weakening of the Principle of Expressibility. The principle could be understood as saying *simply* that whatever is meant can be made explicit. That entails that every background assumption relied upon in interpreting an utterance can be made explicit, but this is compatible with the fact that (i) they cannot be *all* be made explicit at the same time, and (ii) whenever we make one assumption explicit by adding more descriptive material, further background assumptions are implicitly called upon for the interpretation of that extra material. The Principle of Expressibility thus weakened becomes a Principle of *Local* Expressibility. In one passage in *Speech Acts* Searle seems to have had such a weak version in mind:

Another application of this law [the Principle of Expressibility] is that whatever can be implied can be said, *though if my account of preparatory conditions is correct, it cannot be said without implying other things*. (Searle 1969: 68-69; emphasis mine)

Even that weakening is not satisfactory, however. The Principle of Expressibility, thus weakened, no longer supports the claim that "the study of sentence meanings and the study of speech acts are one and the same study". If expressibility can only be local, then a principle of global *in*expressibility also holds, according to which what is said explicitly is always said against a background of unarticulated assumptions. That is sufficient to justify the contextualist claim that there is more to the content of a speech act than can be encoded into the meaning of a sentence. But Searle used the Principle of Expressibility precisely to argue against such a view.

Before concluding that Searle was mistaken when he said that the phenomenon of background-dependence does not refute the Principle of Expressibility, there is a last option that should be tried. I think it may well be what Searle had in mind.

VIII. The generalization of background-dependence to all Intentional states

Searle says that what is true of linguistic meaning is true of all Intentional states: thoughts, perceptions, intentions, etc. In all cases the Intentional content of the state determines satisfaction-conditions only relative to background assumptions which cannot be realized as further aspects of that content. If this is right, then there is a sense in which there may well be a perfect fit between the meaning of the sentence (which determines conditions of satisfaction only against a background of assumptions) and what the speaker means by uttering the sentence (since the speaker's meaning intentions *themselves* are background-relative in just the same way). In other words a sentence can be explicit, in the sense that it corresponds exactly to what the speaker means, without ceasing to under-determine the conditions of satisfaction of the speech act. On that view the content of the speech act *is* the content of the sentence; *both* under-determine the conditions of satisfaction. The Principle of Expressibility is therefore satisfied despite the phenomenon of background-dependence. Absolute explicitness is impossible since background-dependence is

ineliminable, but relative explicitness can be achieved, consistently with the Principle of Expressibility. By 'relative' explicitness I mean a perfect fit between (i) the semantic content of the sentence, (ii) the content of the speech act performed by uttering the sentence, and (iii) the content of the Intentional states expressed by the utterance.[4] Thus when I say 'The cat is on the mat', the literal meaning of the sentence (with respect to a contextual assignment of values to the incomplete descriptions 'the cat' and 'the mat') is the same thing as the content of the assertion that the cat is on the mat, and that is identical to the content of the expressed belief that the cat is on the mat. Background-dependence applies in all three cases; and it applies to the perception that the cat is on the mat as well:

> In my present experience I assume that I am perceiving the cat and the mat from a certain point of view where my body is located; I assume that these visual experiences are causally dependent on the state of affairs that I perceive; I assume that I am not standing on my head and seing cat and mat upside down, etc.; and all these assumptions are in addition to such general assumptions as that I am in a gravitional field, there are no wires attaching to cat and mat, etc. Now, the Intentionality of the visual experience will determine a set of conditions of satisfaction. But the purely visual aspects of the experience will produce a set of conditions of satisfaction only against a set of background assumptions which are not themselves part of the visual experience... In this case as in the literal meaning case, the Intentionality of the visual perception only has an application, only determines a set of conditions of satisfaction, against some system of background assumptions. (Searle 1979: 136)

To sum up: what one literally says depends upon the Background, but what one believes and what one perceives also depend upon the Background. In all cases the content of the representation — be it linguistic or mental — only determines conditions of satisfaction against a background of unarticulated assumptions. The question, whether the beliefs one communicates can be exactly expressed by the sentences one utters, can therefore be answered affirmatively, in accord with the Principle of

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4 As far as (ii) and (iii) are concerned, Searle points out that, in virtue of the theory of speech acts, the content of the speech act always corresponds to the content of the Intentional state it expresses.

Expressibility, even though the uttered sentence can't be fully explicit in the *absolute* sense.

That view, which it is reasonable to ascribe to Searle, stands in sharp contrast to an alternative position, deriving from Wittgenstein. The alternative position sets linguistic meaning *apart from* Intentional states: It says that words are special in being inert and (as Searle himself insists) devoid of 'intrinsic Intentionality'. What gives them 'life' is the use that is made of them. There is no such thing for Intentional contents. In contrast to words and sentences, thoughts and concepts are not 'tools', and they are not 'used'. Accordingly they lack the semantic indeterminacy which characterizes sentences and linguistic material generally. While sentences are semantically indeterminate except in the context of a speech act,[5] thoughts are semantically determinate. Hence it is a category mistake to generalize, as Searle does, the sort of contextual dependency exhibited by linguistic meaning to Intentional states in general.

In the remainder of this paper, I will, first, scrutinize the view I have (tentatively) ascribed to Searle: that which generalizes the phenomenon of background-dependence to all Intentional states and is thereby able to protect the Principle of Expressibility. I will show that the attempted generalization fails. I will then elaborate the Wittgensteinian position and show that it can accommodate the phenomena adduced by Searle in his critique of the Determination View.

IX. Literal meaning vs. Intentional content

Searle's view rests on the following equation:

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[5] According to James Conant, this Wittgensteinian principle is a generalization of Frege's celebrated Context principle: "[Wittgenstein] seeks to genralize Frege's context-principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within the context of circumstances of significant use)" (Conant 1998: 233).

$$\frac{\text{sentence meaning}}{\text{conditions of satisfaction of utterance}} = \frac{\text{content of speech act}}{\text{conditions of satisfaction of speech act}} = \frac{\text{content of Intentional state}}{\text{conditions of satisfaction of Int. state}}$$

Table 2

If that equation could be maintained, it would indeed be possible to conciliate the Principle of Expressibility and the phenomenon of background-dependence. But I do not think the equation can be maintained, for the following reason.

Even if 'sentence meaning' is understood as the meaning of the sentence with respect to contextual assignments of values to indexicals, it is still much *more* indeterminate, much *more* susceptible to background phenomena, than the content of the speech act or the content of the expressed psychological state. There is this basic difference between the two sorts of case: If we change the background while keeping the meaning of the sentence constant, we change the truth conditions — that is what Searle's examples show; but we simply cannot, by manipulating the background, change the conditions of satisfaction of the speech act or of the Intentional state while leaving its content unchanged. The content of the speech act (or of the Intentional state) lacks the form of 'indeterminacy' which the meaning of the sentence possesses, and which makes it possible to keep it constant while varying the conditions of satisfaction.

Searle's formulations are misleading in that respect. For he repeatedly says that the content of a speech act, or the content of an Intentional state, only determines conditions of satisfaction against a background of unarticulated assumptions, just as the meaning of the sentence only determines conditions of satisfaction against the Background. But in the case of speech acts and Intentional states, the relevant 'contents' are *not* separable from the conditions of satisfaction they determine. The order to cut the grass is not the same order when 'cut' is understood as 'slice' and when it is understood as 'mow'. That is so because you can't change the conditions of satisfaction (by manipulating the background) without eo ipso changing the content and therefore (since the

act/state is individuated in part by its content) without changing the state or the act itself.

The inseparability of content from conditions of satisfaction shows up everywhere in Searle's writings. Here are a few quotations from *Intentionality*:

> An Intentional state only determines its conditions of satisfaction — and thus only is the state that it is — given its position in a Network of other Intentional states and against a Background of practices and preintentional assumptions that are neither themselves Intentional states nor are they parts of the conditions of satisfaction of Intentional states. (Searle 1983: 19)

> The Intentional content which determines the conditions of satisfaction is internal to the Intentional state: there is no way the agent can have a belief or a desire without it having its conditions of satisfaction. (Searle 1983: 22)

> Intentional contents in general and experiences in particular are internally related in a holistic way to other Intentional contents (the Network) and to nonrepresentational capacities (the Background). They are internally related in the sense that they could not have the conditions of satisfaction that they do except in relation to the rest of the Network and the Background. (Searle 1983: 66)

> Intentional states only have the conditions of satisfaction that they do, and thus only are the states that they are, against a Background of abilities that are not themselves Intentional states. (Searle 1983: 143)

The following passage is particularly interesting:

> It would... be incorrect to think of the Background as forming a bridge between Intentional content and the determination of conditions of satisfaction, as if the Intentional content itself could not reach up to the conditions of satisfaction. (Searle 1983: 158)

What is interesting here is the *contrast* with literal meaning. For in the case of literal meaning, there *is* a clear sense in which the meaning of the sentence itself 'does not reach up to the conditions of satisfaction'. Searle

says so in many places. For example: "If somebody instructs me to cut the sand, I do not know what I am supposed to do. For each [such] case ['cut the sand', 'cut the mountain', etc.] I can imagine a context in which I would be able to determine a set of truth conditions; but *by themselves, without the addition of a context, the sentences do not do that*." (Searle 1980: 225-6.) The sentence, with its meaning, can easily be separated from the conditions of satisfaction which, in context, it determines. No so with Intentional states (or speech acts) and their contents.

In general, to convince ourselves that the above equation can't be maintained, there is a very simple procedure: one has only to consider what happens if we replace 'sentence' by 'Intentional state' (or 'speech act') and 'literal meaning' by 'content' in one of the numerous passages in which Searle describes the under-determination of truth conditions by literal meaning. The results are instructing. Here is one example:

Original passage
The literal meaning of a sentence or expression only determines a set of truth conditions given a set of background assumptions and practices. Given one set of these a sentence or expression may determine one set of truth conditions and given another set of assumptions and practices the same sentence or expression with the same meaning can determine a different set of truth conditions. (Searle 1980: 227)

Same passage after substitution:
The content of a speech act or Intentional state only determines a set of truth conditions given a set of background assumptions and practices. Given one set of these a speech act or Intentional state may determine one set of truth conditions and given another set of assumptions and practices the same speech act or Intentional state with the same content can determine a different set of truth conditions.

In view of the inseparability thesis, the claim that 'the same speech act or Intentional state with the same content can determine different sets of truth conditions' is nonsense. Again, if you change the conditions of satisfaction, the content does not stay constant. So the content of the speech act or Intentional state does not play the same role, and does not have the same properties, as the meaning of the sentence; for it is crucial to Searle's argument in 'Literal meaning' and elsewhere that the meaning of the

sentence stays constant when the truth conditions are made to vary by manipulating the background.

X. Literal meaning, sensory content, and the brain

When he stresses the analogy between literal meaning and Intentional content, Searle often appeals to the example of perception. The following passage is characteristic:

> All of the arguments for the context dependency of the sentences "Bill cut the grass" , "4 + 5 = 9" and "Snow is white" are also arguments for the context dependency of the *beliefs* that Bill cut the grass, that 4 + 5 = 9 and that snow is white. The content of those beliefs determines the conditions of satisfaction that they do determine only against a background. "Well", we might imagine our objector saying, "if so that is because those beliefs would naturally come to us in words. But how about worldless Intentional states, and how about the primary form of Intentionality, perception?" If anything the contextual dependency of perceptual contents is even or more striking [*sic*] than the contextual dependency of semantic contents. Suppose I am standing in front of a house looking at it; in so doing I will have a certain visual experience with a certain Intentional content, i.e. certain conditions of satisfaction; but suppose now as part of the background assumptions I assume I am on a Hollywood movie set and all of the buildings are just papier maché façades. This assumption would not only give us different conditions of satisfaction; it would even alter the way the façade of the house looks to us, in the same way that the sentence "Cut the grass!" would be interpreted differently if we thought that the background was such that we were supposed to slice the grass rather than mow it. (Searle 1980: 231)

Perception indeed supports the analogy to some extent. Even in that case, however, Searle acknowledges that *the content of the visual experience* changes when the background is altered:

> It is part of the content of my visual experience when I look at a whole house that I *expect* the rest of the house to be there if, for example, I enter the house or go around to the back. In these sorts of cases the character of the visual experience and its conditions of satisfaction

will be affected by the content of the beliefs that one has about the perceptual situation. I am not going beyond the content of my visual experience when I say, "I see a house" instead of "I see the façade of a house", for, though the optical stimuli may be the same, the conditions of satisfaction in the former case are that there should be a whole house there. (Searle 1983: 54-55)

If the content of the visual experience changes when the conditions of satisfaction are manipulated by altering the background, is there something that stays constant and can be compared to the constant meaning of the sentence? Searle names two candidates: 'the purely visual aspects of the experience' and 'the optical stimuli'. Now the optical stimuli are not a good candidate. To use a contrast made famous by John McDowell (1984: 103n), they may be a *bearer* of content, but they are not an *aspect* of content. What we need, for the analogy with literal meaning to hold, is an aspect of semantic content that stays invariant when background assumptions are manipulated. The 'purely visual aspects of the experience' seem to fit the bill. It is common to distinguish two forms of, or two levels in, perception. *Cognitive* perception is higher-level perception, and it presupposes a lower level of *sensory* perception. Sensory perception is modular and unaffected by background knowledge; cognitive perception, is nonmodular and background-dependent (see e.g. Dretske 1990: 138-146). If the distinction is sound, the content of sensory perception corresponds to what Searle calls the 'purely visual aspects of the experience', and that is indeed analogous to the linguistic meaning of the sentence.

The problem is that the distinction between the aspects of visual content which are modular and those which are cognitive and background-dependent cannot be generalized to all Intentional states. There is no such contrast for beliefs, desires or intentions. Nor is there such a contrast for thought in general. The distinction seems to be limited to perceptual states and processes. It is indeed similar to the distinction we find in the language case, but that similarity itself does not provide an explanation of the phenomenon of background-dependence in the language case; it rather constitutes a further fact in need of explanation (a fact which I will leave aside in this chapter).

Searle mentions a third candidate for the analogy with literal meaning; a candidate that has the relevant degree of generality. The neural configuration in the brain which realizes a given Intentional state can stay constant even though we radically alter the Background. For example, take

Carter's desire to run for the Presidency of the US and the corresponding neural configuration in Carter's brain. We can suppose that "exactly these same type-identical realizations of the mental state occurred in the mind and brain of a Pleistocene man living in a hunter-gatherer society of thousands of years ago" (Searle 1983: 20). Because of the dependence of Intentional contents on Network and Background, "however type-identical the two realizations might be, the Pleistocene man's mental state could not have been the desire to run for the Presidency of the United States" (*id*.). Granted. It is well known that content, in general, is not an intrinsic but a relational property of the content-bearing state. That is the lesson of Externalism. Had the environment been sufficiently different, the same neural state which realizes a given Intentional content would realize a different content (or no content at all). But this is not the same phenomenon as background-dependence. The neural state which realizes a given Intentional content is not an aspect or level of content; it is, again, a vehicle, a bearer of content. As such it is analogous to the sentence *qua* syntactic object, rather than to the linguistic meaning of the sentence. What corresponds to Externalism in the linguistic case is therefore the fact that the sentence (type) could mean something different from what it actually means: it would do so if the conventions of the language had been different. This has nothing to do with the under-determination of semantic content (*given* a fixed linguistic meaning). Similarly, the fact that a neural state realizes a given Intentional content only in a certain context does not show that in thought, as in language, there is a level of content that under-determines conditions of satisfaction.

I conclude that the analogy between the background-dependence of Intentional content and the background-dependence of semantic content breaks down at crucial points and does not, as it stands, provide an explanation for the facts adduced by Searle in his critique of the Determination View. I therefore suggest that, getting rid of the Principle of Expressibility, we turn to the contextualist approach and see what can be done within that framework.

XI. A contextualist perspective

The account of the phenomenon of background-dependence I am about to provide takes its inspiration from Austin's theory of truth (cf. the paper 'Truth' in Austin 1971) and, above all, from the remarks of Waismann (1951) on the open texture of empirical predicates; which remarks

themselves presumably echo Wittgenstein's views (see, in particular, sections §§66*sq.* of *Philosophical Investigations*). The central idea is that words are not primitively associated with abstract 'conditions of application', constituting their conventional meaning (as on the Fregean picture). Rather, they are associated with *particular applications.*

Consider what it is to learn a predicate P. The learner, who I'll call Tom, observes the application of P in a particular situation S; he associates P and S. At this stage, the 'meaning' — or, as I prefer to say, semantic potential — of P for Tom is the fact that P is applicable to S. In a new situation S', Tom will judge that P applies only if he finds that S' sufficiently resembles S. To be sure, it is possible that S' resembles S in a way which is not pertinent for the application of P. The application of P to S' will then be judged faulty by the community, who will correct Tom. The learning phase for Tom consists in noting a sufficient number of situations which, like S, legitimate the application of P, as opposed to those, like S', which do not legitimate it. The semantic potential of P for Tom at the end of his learning phase can thus be thought of as *a collection of legitimate situations of application*; that is, a collection of situations such that the members of the community agree that P applies to those situations. Let's call the situations in question *source-situations.* The future applications of P will be underpinned, in Tom's usage, by the judgement that the situation of application (or *target-situation*) is similar to the source-situations.

In this theory the semantic potential of P is *a collection of source-situations*, and the conditions of application of P in a given use, involving a given target-situation S'', are *a set of features which S'' must possess to be similar to the source-situations*. The set of features in question, and so the conditions of application for P, will not be the same for all uses; it is going to depend, amongst other things, on the target-situation. One target-situation can be similar to the source-situations in certain respects and another target-situation can be similar to them in different respects. But the contextual variability of the conditions of application does not end there. Even once the target-situation is fixed, the relevant dimensions for evaluating the similarity between that situation and the source-situations remain under-determined: those dimensions will vary as a function of the subject of conversation, the concerns of the speech participants, etc.

One particularly important factor in the contextual variation is the relevant 'contrast set'. As Tversky (1977) has pointed out, judgements of similarity are very much affected by variations along that dimension. If we ask which country, Sweden or Hungary, most resembles Austria (without

specifying the relevant dimension of similarity), the answer will depend on the set of countries considered. If that set includes not just Sweden, Hungary and Austria but also Poland, then Sweden will be judged more like Austria than Hungary; but if the last of the four countries considered is Norway and not Poland, then it is Hungary which will be judged more like Austria than Sweden. The explanation for that fact is simple. Poland and Hungary have certain salient geopolitical features in common which can serve as basis for the classification: Hungary and Poland are then put together and opposed to Austria and Sweden. If we replace Poland by Norway in the contrast set a new principle of classification emerges, based on the salient features shared by Norway and Sweden: in this new classification Hungary and Austria are back together. Tversky concludes that judgements of similarity appeal to features having a high 'diagnostic value' (or classificatory significance), and that the diagnostic value of features itself depends on the available contrast set.

XII. Accounting for background-dependence

Within that simple contextualist framework, let us reconsider the phenomenon of background-dependence. It goes along with the *global* character of the similarity between target-situation and source-situations. The source-situations are concrete situations with an indefinite number of features. Some of these features are ubiquitous and their diagnostic value in a normal situation is vanishing.[6] They belong to the most general and immutable aspects of our experience of the world: gravity, the fact that food is ingested via the mouth, etc. When we specify the truth conditions of a sentence (for example the sentence 'The cat is on the mat'), or the conditions of application of a predicate (for example the predicate 'on' in that sentence), we only mention a small number of features — the 'foreground' features — because we take most of the others for granted; so we do not mention gravity, we presuppose it. Nevertheless, gravity is one of the features possessed by the situations which are at the source of the predicate 'on'; and there is an indefinite number of such features. These background features of the source-situations can be ignored inasmuch as

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[6] Cf. Tversky 1977: 342: "The feature 'real' has no diagnostic value in the set of actual animals since it is shared by all actual animals and hence cannot be used to classify them. This feature, however, aquires considerable diagnostic value if the object set is extended to include legendary animals, such as a centaur, a mermaid or a phoenix."

they are shared by the situations of which we can want to speak when we utter the sentence; but if we imagine a target-situation where the normal conditions of experience are suspended, and where certain background features of the source-situations are not present, then we shatter the global similarity between the target-situation and the source-situations. *Even if the target-situation has all the foreground features which seem to enter into the 'definition' of a predicate P, it suffices to suspend a certain number of background features in order to jeopard the application of P to the target-situation.* That shows that the semantic potential of P is not, as in Fregean semantics, a set of conditions of application determined once and for all, but a collection of source-situations such that P applies to a target-situation if and only if it is relevantly similar to the source-situations.

A caveat: as Searle himself emphasizes, the fact that the target-situation does *not* possess certain background features of the source-situations does not automatically entail the non-applicability of the predicate P. It can be that the background features which the target-situation does not possess (for example gravity) are contextually irrelevant and do not affect the application conditions of the predicate. For the same sort of reason, the possession by the target-situation of what I have called the foreground features of the source-situations is no more a necessary condition for the application of the predicate than it is a sufficient condition. For a predicate (or a sentence) to apply to a target-situation that situation must resemble the source-situations under the contextually relevant aspects. So a predicate can apply even if the target-situation differs markedly from the source-situations, as long as, in the context and taking into account the contrast set, the similarities are more significant than the differences. Thus, in certain contexts, the predicate 'lemon' will apply to plastic lemons, or the word 'water' to XYZ. Putnam himself, in 'The Meaning of Meaning', recognizes the legitimacy of such uses, made possible by the contextual variability of the relevant dimensions of similarity (Putnam 1975: 238-9).

XIII. Conclusion

I take the phenomenon of background-dependence to reveal quite fundamental features of natural language. Searle must be credited for having drawn attention to that phenomenon and for having appreciated its importance. I have criticized Searle's *explanation* of the phenomenon, however. According to Searle, the under-determination of semantic content

is a special case of a more general phenomenon which affects all representations, whether linguistic or mental. To determine whether or not a representation is 'satisfied', that representation must be *interpreted*. Searle cites the Wittgensteinian example of an image showing a man climbing a slope: the man could just as well be seen as going backwards down the slope — the image itself does not tell us which interpretation is right (Searle 1992: 177). For Searle, the under-determination of satisfaction-conditions derives from the fact that representations, whether linguistic or mental, are not 'self-interpretive' or 'self-applicative'. From that follows the non-representational character of the Background which bridges the gap between the representation and its application. To add a second representation to the first in order to interpret it does no more than postpone the problem, for the second representation would also need interpreting. Ultimately, a representation can only be applied if it is inserted in a nonrepresentational milieu — if it plays a role in a *practice*. Whence Searle's insistence on the fact that the Background consists largely in behavioural dispositions and know-how. "Intentionality occurs in a coordinated flow of action and perception, and the Background is the condition of possibility of the forms taken by the flow" (Searle 1992: 195). What we assume we assume in virtue of the way we act and navigate through the world. We assume gravity, the solidity of objects, and the existence of other minds, in virtue of the way we act; we do not, or need not, entertain thoughts about these things.

I take Searle to be right both concerning the need for interpretation and the importance of the 'practical' dimension of cognition. But I doubt the two things are related in the way Searle makes them appear to be. Moreover, I do not think we can simply *invoke* the non-self-interpretive (or non-self-applicative) character of representations; we must explain it. *Why* do the representations conveyed by words only apply to the world via a process of interpretation? Why aren't they self-applicative? They ought to be, if linguistic meaning conformed to the Fregean image, that is, if it consisted in conditions of application. If, in virtue of the conventions of the language, a predicate P possesses definite conditions of application, as the Fregean thinks it does, then either the reality of which we speak satisfies those conditions and the predicate applies, or it does not satisfy them and the predicate does not apply. I grant the non-self-applicative character of linguistic representations as an empirical datum, attested by Searle's examples, but to give an account of that feature an alternative must be

proposed to the traditional view of meaning inherited from Frege. In section XI, I sketched such an alternative.

Searle's generalization of background-dependence to all Intentional states enables him to save the Principle of Expressibility which is the heart of his earlier theory of speech acts. That move I do not find very convincing, for I have always been struck by the tension between the earlier philosophy, based on the Principle of Expressibility, and the later views which pull in the opposite direction. Be that as it may, I have shown that the attempted generalization fails. It follows that the Principle of Expressibility cannot be saved. More important, we are left without an explanation of the phenomenon of background-dependence. Where does it come from?

Impressed by the similarity between Searle's background-dependence and Waismann's 'open texture', I have offered a contextualist account of background-dependence. On this view the content or sense of words — their contributions to the truth conditions of utterances — must be contextually constructed in an active process of interpretation; it is not ready-made. What is given as part of the language is not the sense of words, which must be constructed, but only what I have called their semantic potential. To construct the (context-dependent) sense of a word out its (context-independent) semantic potential, nothing short of the full situation of utterance will do. An impoverished 'context' consisting only of values for a given set of parameters does not provide the sort of input which is needed for the process of sense construction to get off the ground; for that process relies on a global assessment of similarity between situations possessing, in principle, an indefinite number of features.

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