An Exploration of Writing Acts

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Biographical note

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I am a user research engineer in the Hardware division at Microsoft Corporation. My role is to understand how consumers use, perceive, and understand computer hardware products. As a member of product development teams, I use this research to help design and build better products for users' needs.

Prior to joining Microsoft in 2000, I was a clinical psychology resident and then a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Washington Medical Center. My postdoctoral work focused on artificial intelligence and complex systems research applied to the psychophysiology of pain. I hold an MA and PhD in clinical psychology and an MA in philosophy.

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Introduction

Until recent decades, philosophy and linguistics viewed writing as subordinate to speech historically, practically, and essentially. Historically, writing was seen to have evolved later than spoken language. Practically and essentially, spoken language was considered to be the model of all language usage, and writing was considered to be little more than a representation of speech. For example, in de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* we find the claim that "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first." (1915 (1959), p. 23).

In some cases, writing was considered to be not only subordinate but even deviant because it is removed from the immediate "truth" of spoken language. For instance, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates famously argued that written discourse is inferior to speech in providing access to wisdom:

> a written discourse on any subject is bound to contain much that is fanciful … nothing that has ever been written whether in verse or prose merits much serious attention … such expositions are, at the best, a means of reminding those who know the truth (*Phaedrus* 277e, tr. Hamilton & Cairns, 1961, p. 523).

In recent decades, this view of written language as subordinate to speech has been persuasively criticized and a new view of writing has emerged. The historical precedence of speech is accepted, but writing is now understood as a form of language that is somewhat distinct from speech. Speech and writing use different vocabularies, different syntactical rules, different social rules, and serve different goals.

A simple demonstration of difference is useful. Brennan & Ohaeri (1999) set up experimental conditions to compare face to face, spoken discussion of a movie to

online, typed discussion. Consider the following excerpt from group discussion of a movie scene:

> A: […] yeah, and that the kid was like talking, something
> L: yeah he was talking that's why he got in trouble he was whispering in some kid's ear about something?
> A: yeah
> L: urn... then he gets punished or whatever?
> D: what was that, a wreath or
> L: yeah it was some kind of browny
> A: yeah it was some kind of straw thing or something
> L: mhm
> D: around his neck
> L: so that everybody knew what he did or something?
> A: straw wreath
> D: yeah
> A: and then
> L: and then they went outside, right
> A & D: yeah
> L: and all the kids were like taunting him and stuff?
> D: yeah... and then he saw the teacher and he just went after him
> L: he first took the thing off?
> D: mm... did he punch him in the face?
> L: yeah he was punching him and he was cursing at him as well
> D: yeah
> (laughter) (Brennan & Ohaeri, 1999, pp. 231-232)

This kind of discussion is clearly quite different than a typical written text. It is also quite different than the kinds of propositional statements that are so frequently analyzed in traditional philosophy of language.

In the philosophical literature, this distinction has been reflected in several disciplines: among continental philosophers in the attacks of J. Derrida on the tendency of philosophy to regard speech and vision as canonical behaviors and metaphors (e.g., Derrida, 1967); among cognitive scientists who recognize that spoken and written language differ both in form and in brain function; and among philosophers of language,

especially those concerned with speech acts, who sometimes note that rules of written language vary from those of spoken language (Searle, 1975; Stubbs, 1983).

This is not to say that the older view of writing as subordinate and purely derivative has been supplanted; unfortunately, specious claims about speech and writing persist. For instance, a recent article in the premier psychology journal, *Psychological Bulletin*, opened with the sentence, “Reading is the process of understanding speech written down.” (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005).

More importantly, even theories that recognize some differences between speech and writing fail properly to distinguish them in other areas. Theories may note differences between purportedly normative and peripheral (or “parasitic”) uses of language, such as the difference between fictional and expositive writing (cf. Searle, 1975). However, they still view speech and writing as being more closely related than is warranted. Stubbs (1983) criticized this tendency and argued for attention to the ways that different media present linguistic interaction by distancing the speaker from the hearer. However, the tendency remains prevalent.

Beyond distinguishing writing and speech, I argue here that there are important distinctions between kinds of writing that have also been overlooked in the literature, specifically in speech acts theory. Speech act theory claims that “the reason for concentrating on the study of speech acts is simply this: all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts” (Searle, 1969, p. 16). A close correlate, surely, is that the most relevant and important linguistic acts must be studied. I believe that has not occurred. The distinctions I shall discuss have significant implications both for philosophy of language and for technologies that interact with language.

Writing as Expression vs. Writing as Process

The first distinction to make is between writing whose primary content is the expression of some propositions (wrapped in some kind of illocutionary act), and writing that has little definite content but serves to further some other purpose. Good examples of the former kinds of statements are provided by classic speech acts texts:

> Sam smokes habitually.
> A man came.
> I promise not to come.
> I am a German soldier.
> If they have a son, he will inherit the money.
> Sam is drunk.
> The rose is the color of the book.
> The system of voluntary military recruitment is a total failure in California.
> Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
> (Searle, 1969, pp. 22, 27, 32, 44, 73, 97, 115, 145, 177, respectively.)

What is, perhaps, most remarkable about these statements is not that they are simple and very dull, but that they are contrived and obviously deviate from ordinary speech. They are sentences that are seen as common language by some theorists but, I would guess, by few other people. Principles derived from them are suspect. For example, Stubbs (1983) paraphrases Gazdar (1981), commenting on the principle of expressibility (that every illocutionary act can, in principle, be made explicit such that the expression properly reflects the intended meaning): “just try talking with someone who is not either a linguist or a philosopher, and spelling out the illocutionary force of every utterance, and you will see immediately that the expressibility principle fails.” (p. 490).

I would go farther and suggest that these statements are not only unrepresentative of most speech, but also unrepresentative of most writing. What are the most common writing acts for adults? Writing exemplary propositional sentences?

Writing essays? Writing novels? Writing contracts? I am not aware of data on the prevalence of such writing, but I believe we may safely assume that formal documents are less common than brief written notes: things such as telephone numbers jotted on loose pieces of paper, grocery lists on the back of envelopes, and schedule reminders such as “Heather 5:45,” which help one to remember to go to the salon.

The interesting thing about these brief notes is that they are relatively sparse in content. A piece of paper that reads, “spinach, milk, fr. bread" could perhaps be expanded into an illocutionary act of requesting, such as:

> Go to Larry’s Market this evening on the way home from work. Purchase a 5 oz. box of washed organic baby spinach leaves, one gallon of BGH-free milk, and a loaf of fresh bread, preferably from Macrina Bakery. Ensure that they are all in good condition with at least several days before their expiration dates, and bring them home.

But is that really what it says? Of course not. In fact, such a note cannot even be persuasively categorized as illocutionary (expressing an intent to buy things or to remind myself to buy things) or perlocutionary (getting myself to do those things).

The important, overlooked feature is that such notes only make sense in the context of a larger sequence of behavior, much of which may be non-linguistic. The notes serve as prompts to action, as reminders, and in other regulatory functions. Thus, it is sometimes preferable to consider these notes as mere tokens in a larger process that is primarily extra-linguistic (e.g., getting a haircut). If these are, as I claim, very routine language usage, then it follows that we might be well-served to devote more attention to the workings of such extra-linguistic processes and less to the functioning of specific kinds of propositions and semantic structures. Still, because they have linguistic content and occur in a regular behavioral context, these kinds of writings

could, of course, be subsumed under a speech act theory. They could, that is, if they were not ignored.

Writing for Public Display vs. Writing for Private Use

A second distinction that philosophy of language often overlooks (or dismisses) is language addressed to oneself. Philosophy of language typically considers linguistic acts in the context of communicating some sort of information to another, or in a degenerate case, to oneself. For instance, Fotion (2003) presents a list of linguistic acts that he rightly takes to show a rather large degree of diversity in type that has been overlooked in speech act theory:

> brief friendly meeting in the morning while going to work
> a debate (as against an argument)
> a departmental meeting (business or academic)
> a discussion of a dramatic news event (e.g., what happened on September 11, 2001)
> editorial writing
> gossiping
> an interview of a politician (on television)
> praying
> preaching
> a sales phone conversation (Fotion, 2003, p. 42)

This is an interesting list, but all of the activities are directed to another speaker, reader, or (in the case of prayer, presumed) observer. This misses many kinds of private linguistic acts.

Spoken words to oneself are perhaps rightly dismissed as derivative of interpersonal dialog, but the same cannot be said for writing for oneself. For the kinds of notes discussed above, there would be little or no meaning for another person. The entire goal of the note is to serve as a placeholder in an action, which is frequently a

private action. Ironically, theories that assume that language acts serve primarily as communication explain these kinds of notes by reverting back to the sort of Platonic explanation we saw above in Phaedrus: such writing can only serve to remind those who already know the truth. An action-based theory, however, places emphasis outside the linguistic content and has no such difficulty.

Whereas speech is principally public, writing cannot be neatly divided into either public or private. Consider the case of note taking by a sales person during a meeting with a client (or a psychotherapist meeting with a patient). When the client speaks, the sales person jots down notes to serve as reminders of important information. He may note important facts, which could range from specific details about a sales proposal to more peripheral information, such as an expected childbirth or a previously unknown project that is mentioned off-hand. Or perhaps he notes questions that he would like to ask later in the meeting – or perhaps he doodles or writes a grocery list or writes nothing at all. Are those notes public or private linguistic acts?

On the one hand, they are intended for personal usage and are not shared with the client; on the other hand, they are clearly taken in the course of a shared discussion and are not explicitly hidden. The proper answer, I believe, is that they fall into a penumbra, where there is a continuum between absolute privacy and absolute publicity (which are limits, in the calculus sense, rather than fixed points). What happens as the client speaks is that his important statements are punctuated and emphasized by the sales person's writing (or deemphasized by lack of writing). He notices when notes are taken or not taken; those actions are a part of the dialog. The conversation quickly establishes expectations for quantity and tempo of note-taking, and the notes are

sufficiently observable to permit the client to gauge whether those expectations are met. Thus, it largely does not matter what the content of the notes is, as long as the act of taking them matches the appropriate interpersonal ritual. However, the degree of disclosure may change during the course of discussion. If something becomes unclear, the writer may show the notes to the client to validate what is written; or if the conversation becomes more sensitive (e.g., concerning pricing or a therapist's diagnosis), then the notebook may be tilted up to permit less inspection.

The structure of such note taking varies by context. An interesting discussion of cultural differences of note taking between Western cultures and Japan appears in Neustupny (1987):

> In Japan, to take notes in most situations when someone else is providing an explanation is common. If there is a visitor from Japan who gives a talk, and all foreign participants sit there, looking straight into his eyes, with arms crossed, he may feel rejected and frustrated. It is polite to take notes. All those who travel to Japan … should take a course in the systematic taking of notes. What you do with the notes afterward is completely a matter of your own choice. (p. 79).

The linguistic content of the notes may be irrelevant. Notes may be discarded once the demands of polity are satisfied.

I argued above that such notes are perhaps better considered as part of a broader type of action than communication. They are part of a social context in which their linguistic character is significant but necessarily determinative of their importance.

Implications for Speech Act Theory

The fundamental implication for speech act theory is this: if these are important and frequent linguistic acts, and if their conditions are rather different than those commonly analyzed in philosophical texts, then they deserve study. It might be possible

to argue that they are subsumed under other kinds of acts that have received sufficient study. However, I am unaware of anyone who has made such a claim, and justification for it would be far from obvious.

Consider the differences between the examples presented here and those in Searle's *Speech Acts* (1969), pp. 64-71, where he "extends" the analysis of promising to other kinds of speech acts. First, he gives a table listing various kinds of speech acts: requesting, asserting, questioning, expressing thanks, advising, warning, greeting, and congratulating (pp. 66-67). Every one of those acts involves both a speaker ("S") and a hearer ("H"). Thus, without further explanation, they do not account for the kinds of self-directed writing we have examined. Part of the confusion, I believe, arises from an underlying supposition that linguistic acts are essentially equivalent in speech and writing; this leads Searle and others to ignore the areas of difference.

Next, all of the examples except for "greet" involve specific propositional content. That is, they presume some kind of significant content, and they fall under the principle of expressibility. If we accept the kind of action-based analysis I suggested above, this emphasis on propositional content is misplaced.

Finally, each example presents an "essential" element. For instance, the analysis of "request" notes as essential that, "[the utterance] Counts as an attempt to get H [hearer] to do A [some act]." (p. 66). Consider the case of note taking, where the notes serve as social display and may then be used in various ways from studying them, to filing them, to destroying them without reading again. What is the essential element? One could say little more than, "it is essential that the writings count as 'note

taking'." That is barely more than a tautology. A better analysis would be to discuss the broader context and the role they play as extra-linguistic behavior.

What should speech acts theorists do? First, we would be well served to take a much broader inventory of linguistic acts and the extra-linguistic sets of behavior in which they are embedded. Second, we should pay renewed attention to distinctions among language media (cf. Stubbs, 1983). I have shown some differences in speech vs. writing, and it is likely that other media (such as broadcast media or computerized media) would bear other important distinctions. Third, from these inventories of behavior, it is likely that we could derive many dimensions of linguistic behavior that have been ignored. I have suggested two such distinctions here: between expressive and action-based acts, and differences along a continuum of disclosure that runs from private to public. With detailed investigation of real language usage, rather than toy problems, we could ground a more persuasive theory.

Implications for Linguistic Technology

Finally, I would like briefly to address practical ramifications of the distinctions here, in the realm of computer language processing. Computer systems are increasingly handling a larger proportion of our language interactions (e.g., email, instant messaging, blogging) and richer forms of language (e.g., converting spoken words to text, and handwriting to text). Current computers are grounded in metaphors that are rather similar to analytic philosophy of language: they emphasize propositional statements (programming languages, binary states) and discrete representations and categorizations of data (ASCII text, file-based content, directory-based file systems).

As computer systems evolve to handle new types of input, it is natural that they coerce it into their default format. Thus, handwriting systems such as TabletPCs present the ability to handle written information as if it had been typed. They can convert the written characters to text and are then able to search handwritten notes. However, this rests on an assumption quite similar to the assumption in speech act theory that spoken & written language have minor differences: it assumes that one uses handwritten text similarly to how one uses typed text.

Consider the act of searching for information. If I have typed a text, say a paper about "speech acts," it is likely that the text contains sufficient linguistic markers to enable efficient searching. For instance, I could assume that such a paper is likely to contain phrases such as "speech act," "John Searle," or "illocutionary act." If I search my computer system for such a phrase, I will reliably locate the typed paper.

Now consider the content of a handwritten text, such as notes for a course lecture on speech acts theory. What are the contents of such a text? If the notes are purely for my own reference in delivering a lecture, there may be no definitive content. I do not need to write "John Searle," for instance, as the name is firmly embedded in my memory. If I need to remind myself, I may simply write something like "S" or "JS" that is sufficient in context. Likewise, I can outline other material to deliver with statements such as "Ch room: + D" – this would be a reminder that I should mention both the Chinese Room argument and Dennett's criticism of it. Even with perfect handwriting recognition, searching my system for a phrase such as "John Searle," "Dennett," or "Chinese Room" will fail to find those notes. Notice that the goals of the writings differ: a

suitable goal for lecture notes might be to compress contents so they fit on a single page, but that is rarely a goal for a typed philosophical paper.

The key here is that, although current computer systems may represent the literal content of such notes effectively, they fail to account for the broader behavioral context in which it is embedded (reminding myself, boosting my memory, upholding my commitments in a lecture, and so forth). To be more useful, computer systems will need to give increasing attention to the socially constructive operation of language in such real-world contexts.

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