Maciej Witek[*]
University of Zielona Góra

SCEPTICISM ABOUT
REFLEXIVE INTENTIONS REFUTED[α]

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to resist four arguments, originally developed by Mark Siebel, that seem to support scepticism about reflexive communicative intentions. I argue, first, that despite their complexity reflexive intentions are thinkable mental representations. To justify this claim, I offer an account of the cognitive mechanism that is capable of producing an intention whose content refers to the intention itself. Second, I claim that reflexive intentions can be individuated in terms of their contents. Third, I argue that the explanatory power of the theory of illocutionary reflexive intentions is not as limited as it would initially seem. Finally, I reject the suggestion that the conception of reflexive communicative intentions ascribes to a language user more cognitive abilities than he or she really has.

Keywords

Speech act theory, illocution, communicative intentions

[*] Institute of Philosophy
  University of Zielona Góra
  al. Wojska Polskiego 71A,
  65-762 Zielona Góra, Poland
  e-mail: mwitek@ifil.uz.zgora.pl

Maciej Witek
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Introduction

In their book *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish (1979) claim that to perform a communicative illocutionary act in uttering a sentence is to express an attitude. To express an attitude, in turn, is to have the intention that the hearer, by means of recognizing this intention, takes one's utterance as reason to think that one has that attitude.[1] In other words, performing communicative illocutionary acts necessarily involves having communicative *reflexive intentions*—or R-intentions for short—whose distinctive feature is that "their fulfilment consists in their recognition" (Bach and Harnish 1979: 13). For example, for speaker S to state that p is for him to R-intend hearer H to take S's utterance as reason to think that S has (*a*) the belief that p and (*b*) the intention that H forms the belief that p. H's recognizing S's R-intention consists in H's taking S's utterance as reason to think that S has attitudes (*a*) and (*b*).

The theory proposed by Bach and Harnish has certain explanatory merits. First, it allows for successful though insincere illocutionary acts. According to Bach and Harnish, to perform an illocutionary act of a certain type is to express the relevant attitude, no matter whether one has it or not.[2] In this respect, the theory in question has an advantage over the conception offered by Peter F. Strawson (1964), who assumes, for example, that the successful performance of every act of stating that p requires S's actually intending H to form the belief that p.[3] Second, it defines successful communication in terms of H's recognition of S's R-intention and thereby distinguishes S's communicative success from S's achieving his perlocutionary goals. For example, S succeeds in performing a communicative act of stating that p if H recognizes attitudes (*a*) and (*b*) S is expressing; H's forming the belief that p is not the illocutionary, but the perlocutionary effect of S's act. Third, it offers a theoretically based taxonomy of speech acts, since illocutionary acts can be defined and classified in terms of kinds of attitudes S is expressing.[4]

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[1] See Bach and Harnish 1979: 15, Farmer and Harnish 1987: 548-549, Harnish 1984: 21.

[2] The point is, namely, that the definition in question involves the so-called non-achievement use of "express." For a discussion of this topic see Harnish 2005: 16-17.

[3] See Strawson 1964: 449. Note that it is also an advantage over the theory developed by Searle, who fails to draw a clear distinction between (*i*) the successful and non-defective performance of an act and (*ii*) the merely successful performance of the act. For a discussion of this topic see Harnish 2009.

[4] See Chapter Three of Bach and Harnish 1979.

In "Illocutionary Acts and Attitude Expression" Mark Siebel (2003: 356-357) casts some doubts on whether the concept of an R-intention is explanatorily useful at all. He considers four arguments, two of which seem to support the claim that R-intentions can hardly be regarded as psychologically real objects. My aim in this paper is to resist Siebel's scepticism. In order to do that, I offer an account of the cognitive mechanism whose job is to produce and use R-intentions and thereby demonstrate that R-intentions can be conceived as psychologically real representations. I also argue that the explanatory power of the theory of illocutionary reflexive intentions is not as limited as Siebel suggests.

First Sceptical Argument:
One cannot account for the mechanism whereby one aspect of the content of an R-intention refers to the intention itself; hence, R-intentions are unthinkable

Consider the following passage from "Illocutionary Acts and Attitude Expressions" by Siebel:

> (...) it is quite hard to get a grip on self-referential intentions. (...) I must confess that I have severe difficulties with grasping the definiens at issue because I cannot imagine myself having such an intention. Moreover, the content of it includes an element which refers to the intention itself. But what does the element look like (cf. Récanati 1987: 227-233)? How does it single out the intention and nothing but it? By identifying features, i.e., by properties which are exclusively possessed by the intention? But what could be these features? And do we have them in mind when we perform illocutionary acts? Or does the intention include a counterpart to the indexical expression 'this intention', i.e., something like a "mental demonstrative"? But what ensures that it refers to the intention, provided that it does not involve identifying features? The fact that it stands in an appropriate causal relationship to it? But how to spell out 'appropriate' without circularity? (Siebel 2003: 356)

Appearances to the contrary, this argument is not based on introspection. Our powers of imagination are not the issue here. The point, rather, is whether we can make sense of the idea of reflexive mental representations or, in other words, whether we can account for the cognitive mechanism whereby one element or aspect of the content of such a representation can refer to the representation itself. If we cannot, as Siebel suggests, R-

intentions are unthinkable representations; that is to say, since to think of a representation is to entertain a presentation of its content, real thinking agents are not able to entertain or grasp the content of R-intentions.

Responding to this line of argument Harnish has observed that there are many legitimate forms of self-referentiality that nobody is tempted to dispute, e.g.:

(...) imagine the sentence (E),

(E)   This sentence is in English,

tokened in thought, "running through someone's head." Contrary to Récanati, the thought sequence that tokens the first two words of (E) need not be replaced by (E) in the thought, such as in (E'):

(E') "This sentence is in English" is in English.

It would seem that having (E) running through one's head is all the display that is required, since (E) *is* the referent of (E) and the mental token of (E) is not an indefinitely complex thought. Analogously for reflexive intentions (cf. Harnish 1991: 298-299).

In other words, one can understand with ease the utterance of sentence (E). Why should it be more difficult for us to understand the content of an R-intention? The point is that the critics of the idea of R-intentions fail to provide a satisfactory answer to this question.

This response is correct as far as it goes. Nevertheless, we can go further and try to account for the cognitive mechanism whose job is to present the content of an R-intention or, in other words, to represent or think of the intention itself.

Siebel considers two possible mechanisms whereby one aspect of the content of an R-intention can refer to the intention itself. The first one consists in the intention's satisfying an appropriate mental description, where the description in question occurs in the presentation of the intention's content. The second mechanism exploits the fact that the intention stands in an appropriate existential relation to one aspect of the presentation of its content. In other words, the presentation in question contains a kind of mental demonstrative that refers directly to the intention.

In *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) have shown that the "descriptive" account faces a serious problem. It says that

what refers to the relevant R-intention—that is, the R-intention whose content is currently being grasped—is its mental definite description that occurs in the relevant presentation of its content. What is it for an agent to grasp a presentation in which such a description occurs? According to Sperber and Wilson, normally to understand a presentation that "contains a definite reference to a representation" is to replace the relevant description with "a mention of the representation referred to."[5] In other words, it is to entertain or present the relevant content-specifying description of the form "the representation that p."

With this idea in mind, let us consider what it is to *represent* or *think of* a given illocutionary intention, call it intention I, that H, by means of his recognizing intention I, takes S's utterance as reason to think that S has attitude A. Normally, to think of such an intention is to present or grasp its content. However, to grasp it adequately, Sperber and Wilson add, is to replace the definite description "I" with the relevant content-specifying description "the intention that H, by means of recognizing intention I, takes S's utterance as reason to think that S has attitude A." Note that the content-specifying description contains the very definite description "I" that calls for substitution. Therefore, Sperber and Wilson conclude, to represent or think of an R-intention is to present or entertain an infinitely long formula, which is psychologically implausible.

Sperber and Wilson's conclusion is general: they claim that the very idea of an R-intention lacks psychological reality. It turns out, however, that there is a way out for those who want to stick to the concept of R-intentions and use it in explaining communicative illocutionary acts. One can assume, namely, that presenting the content of a given R-intention involves entertaining a kind of mental demonstrative that refers to the intention itself in virtue of an appropriate existential relation.

Assume that the cognitive system whose job is to (1) produce R-intentions and (2) use them in planning speech acts consists of two elements: E_1 and E_2. These two subsystems cooperate with each other in accordance with evolutionary design. In other words, they co-evolved and, as a result, one cannot describe the proper function of E_1

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[5] Sperber and Wilson 1986: 256. Sperber and Wilson speak of understanding *representations* rather than *presentations*. In my view, however, to understand a representation is to entertain the presentation rather than representation of its content. Following John Perry, I take contents and propositions to be abstract entities we use to classify and represent concrete representations "by the requirements their truth (or some other forms of success) impose on the rest of the world" (Perry 2001: 20-21). In other words, to say that we represent a representation by presenting its content is not to say that we represent the representation's content; one should avoid confusing the representational devices we use with the item being represented.

without making reference to the proper function of E_2, and *vice versa*. The concepts of proper function and design come from Ruth G. Millikan (1989: 284)[6]. Roughly speaking, F is the proper function of item E if and only if F is E's property or effect that accounts for E's continued reproduction; in other words, E has been selected for having F as its property or effect ('selected for' in the course of evolution or learning). Assume that E_1's proper function is to produce certain representations R. Every representation R stands for a corresponding state of affairs whose structure can be described as follows: hearer H recognizes that speaker S R-intends that H takes S's utterance as reason to think that S has a certain attitude. In other words, representations R produced by E_1 are illocutionary R-intentions. Assume, next, that E_2 has been selected for planning S's utterances in accordance with representations delivered by E_1 or, in other words, for translating R-intentions into instructions readable by the speech producing system. In order to perform its proper function, E_2 represents the representation R that is currently being produced by E_1—or, what amounts to the same thing, presents or entertains its content—and then uses the resulting presentation in planning the relevant speech act. The crucial point is that the presentation in question contains demonstrative component D, which is a mental counterpart to the phrase "this intention" that occurs in the condition "by means of the recognition of this intention." Note that component D refers to the relevant representation R simply in virtue of the fact that this representation (*i*) is currently being produced by E_1 and (*ii*) is activating the operation of E_2. In other words, the mechanism by means of which component D refers to the relevant R-intention exploits the fact that the former stands in an appropriate existential relation to the latter. To think of a given R-intention is to present or entertain its content. The resulting presentation is a mental counterpart to the phrase "S's intention that H, by means of recognizing this intention, takes S's utterance as reason to think that S has attitude A." Contrary to what Sperber and Wilson assume, therefore, grasping the content of an R-intention does not involve entertaining a mental counterpart to the content-specifying description of the form "the R-intention that p." In short, R-intentions are thinkable objects.

One can object that the above account is question-begging. Note that in order to explain what it is for E_2 to *think of* R-intentions I assume that E_1's proper function is to *produce* R-intentions. But to produce an R-intention is to bring about a mental state whose content contains a self-referential element. Therefore, one can conclude, I fail to account for the mechanism whereby one aspect of the content of an R-intention refers to the intention itself.

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[6]   See also Chapter one in Millikan 2004.

This objection can be easily dismissed. It suffices to note that E_1 and E_2 cooperate with each other in accordance with evolutionary design. In this connection, one cannot define the proper function of E_1 without allowing for the fact that this subsystem was selected for producing whatever E_2 needs in order to operate properly. Considered in isolation, the function of E_1 could be described merely as producing mental states M. We could even characterise these states in neurological or phenomenal terms. Nevertheless, states M could not be called intentional representations, that is, could not be counted as contentful states equipped with satisfaction conditions. The point is, namely, that to call them representations R one has to allow for the fact that they are *proper* products of E_1. To say this, however, is to recognize that E_1 cooperates with E_2 in accordance with evolutionary design. What makes states M intentional representations are neither their neurological nor phenomenal properties but rather the fact that they are E_1's proper products. They are representations R or, more accurately, R-intentions only from E_2's point of view since the proper function of E_1 is to deliver whatever E_2 needs for its proper functioning.[7] Granted, to explain E_2's ability to *think of* R-intentions I assume that E_1's proper function is to *produce* R-intentions; but to assume this is to allow for the fact that E_1 produces what E_2 needs. In other words, in order to account for E_2's ability to *think of* R-intentions as well as for E_1's capacity to *produce* R-intentions one has to take into account that E_1 and E_2 cooperate with each other in accordance with design.

It turns out, therefore, that R-intentions are thinkable representations. The speaker's cognitive system, provided it consists of subsystems E_1 and E_2, is capable of both producing R-intentions and using them in planning utterances. Obviously, much more work needs to be done to explain how E_2 engenders the presentation of an R-intention's content and how it uses the resulting presentation in planning the relevant speech act. What I have offered is merely a sketchy account of the mechanism whereby one aspect of such a presentation can refer to the intention whose content is currently being presented. But it suffices to dismiss Siebel's first sceptical argument.[8]

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[7] As Millikan puts it, the representation producer proper function "is only to produce for their consumers what the consumers need" (Millikan 2004: 76). Following Millikan, we can call subsystems E_1 and E_2 the 'R-intention producer' and the 'R-intention consumer', respectively (see Millikan 1989: 286 and Chapter Six of Millikan 2004).

[8] Friedrich C. Doerge has pointed out that Siebel's first sceptical argument can be read as *at least additionally* saying that (a) Bach and Harnish's definition suffers from the technical fault of circularity and that (b) the scholar reading it fails to get any definite conception of the term defined. I think, however, that such a 'circularity' objection can be easily answered by saying

Second Sceptical Argument:
R-intentions cannot exist because their identity conditions
cannot be satisfied.

Consider the next passage from "Illocutionary Acts and Attitude Expression":

[R-intentions] give rise to a mereological difficulty. Let us abbreviate the content of a particular reflexive intention by 'X': S expresses the attitude A iff S intends X. This intention is supposed to be identical with the intention that an addressee H, by means of recognizing that S intends X, takes the utterance as a reason to think S has A. Intentions, however, are individuated by their content. That is, intending p is identical with intending q only if 'p' and 'q' specify the same content. Hence, the content given by 'X' should be identical with the content given by 'H, by means of recognizing that S intends X, takes the utterance as a reason to think that S has A'. But how could they be identical? After all, the former content seems to be a proper part of the latter because the sentence specifying the latter contains 'S intends X' as a proper and semantically relevant part (Siebel 2003: 356).

Siebel assumes—call it assumption$_{IC}$—that the necessary condition under which two intentions can be counted as identical is that they have the identical content. Consider, therefore, two content descriptions:

D$_1$ X
D$_2$ H, by means of recognizing that S intends (that) X, takes S's utterance as reason to think that S has A.

According to Siebel, descriptions D$_1$ and D$_2$ specify two different contents, since the former is "a proper and semantically relevant part" of the latter. Therefore, in accordance with assumption$_{IC}$, the necessary condition under which two intentions can be counted as identical is not fulfilled. However, according to the theory developed by

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that the purpose of Bach and Harnish's formula is not to *define* in a non-circular way the content of a reflexive illocutionary intention, but to *show* how it functions in determining its own satisfaction conditions or in specifying "the means for its own fulfilment" (Bach 1987: 148). One way to show this is to assume that a reflexive intention is an interface between two cooperating systems: intention producer E_1 and intention consumer E_2.

Bach and Harnish, D_1 and D_2 are supposed to be alternative presentations of the content of one and the same R-intention. Hence, R-intentions cannot exist.

One way to resist this objection would be to dismiss the assumption Siebel implicitly makes, that D_1 and D_2 cannot be regarded as specifying the same content, since the former is "a proper and semantically relevant part" of the latter. I must say that I do not see any reason for which this assumption should be made: in D_1 "X" is directly used, whereas in D_2 it forms part of the relevant that-clause "that X." Note, however, that in order to respond to Siebel's argument one can simply reformulate description D_2 as follows:

> D_2' *H*, by means of recognizing *this* intention, takes *S*'s utterance as reason to think that *S* has *A*.

The point is, namely, that formulating D_2 Siebel uses the content specifying description of the form "intention that p" or "intention (that) X." Recall that, according to Sperber and Wilson, any attempt to interpret D_2 leads to an infinitely long formula. That is why it is better to replace the locution "intention (that) X" with a less problematic demonstrative phrase "this intention." What justifies this substitution is the "demonstrative" account of R-intentions, that is, the account according to which one aspect of the presentation of an R-intention's content refers to the intention itself in virtue of an appropriate existential relation.

Note that descriptions D_1 and D_2' specify the same content given the stipulation Siebel makes; the former is an abbreviated form of the latter. Hence, the necessary condition under which two intentions can be counted as identical is satisfied.

Third Sceptical Argument:
The theory of illocutionary R-intentions has
serious explanatory limitations.

Unlike the two arguments discussed above, the third argument has nothing to do with the fact that illocutionary R-intentions are self-referential. Consistently, its conclusion is not that R-intentions are unthinkable or non-existent. Formulating it, Siebel focuses on the idea to the effect that communicative illocutionary R-intentions are audience-directed:

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> I think we can perform illocutionary acts by talking to ourselves. If the speaker directs the illocution towards himself, he must, according to Bach and Harnish, have the intention to provide *himself* a reason to believe he has the attitude in question. But this sounds rather odd. (Siebel 2003: 356)

I agree that this sounds odd. However, I do not accept the conclusion Siebel suggests that Bach and Harnish fail to explain a number of illocutionary acts. The point is that the acts performed "by talking to ourselves" are not illocutionary at all. They are, rather, locutionary acts in François Récanati's sense, that is, merely indicated, though not actually performed illocutionary acts:

> (...) the speaker's utterance may indicate the performance of a certain illocutionary act without the latter being actually performed. It follows that we can use the expression "locutionary act" for indicated illocutionary acts *qua* indicated illocutionary acts (...). (...) to say that a speaker performs some locutionary act *x* is to say that, in virtue of the meaning of his utterance, he *presents himself as performing* the illocutionary act *x*. But, of course, this does not imply that he actually performs this illocutionary act; this does not even imply that there is an illocutionary act that he performs. (Récanati 1987: 259)

According to Récanati, a locutionary act is an indicated illocutionary act, where the word "indicated" functions as "an intentional predicate" (Récanati 1987: 259). In my opinion, the adjective "indicated" functions here as an adjuster-word in John L. Austin's sense[9] or, as Kazimierz Twardowski would put it, we use this adjective in a modifying way[10]. To say of an illocutionary act *F* that it is *merely indicated* is to say

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[9] In his *Sense and Sensibilia* Austin (1964) introduced the concept of adjuster-words "by the use of which other words are adjusted to meet the innumerable and unforeseeable demands of the world upon language" (Austin 1964: 73). Examples of adjuster-words are "be similar to," "be like" "be of a type," "false," "artificial," "true" and "genuine." Note that a false friend is not a friend and artificial diamonds are not diamonds. By analogy, an indicated illocutionary act in not an illocutionary act. For a detailed reconstruction and discussion of Austin's theory of adjuster-words see Szymura 1982: 96-101.

[10] Kazimierz Twardowski, a Polish philosopher, in his habilitation thesis *Zur Lehre vom Inhalt und Gegenstand der Vorstellungen* (1894, English translation: Twardowski 1977) defined the distinction between the modifying and determining use of an adjective. For example, by saying that *X* is a painted landscape we can mean either that *X* is a piece of art (the modifying use of "painted") or that *X* is a fragment of our physical environment that happened to be painted (the determining use of "painted"). In its modifying use, the adjective "painted" modifies the semantic function of the noun "landscape," whereas in its determining use it merely determines

that the meaning of the words uttered indicates illocutionary force *F*. But to say that speaker *S actually performs* illocutionary act *F* is to attribute an appropriate communicative illocutionary R-intention to him. Note, therefore, that to present oneself as performing illocutionary act *F* is not necessarily to perform it. As Bach and Harnish (1979: 10) put it, "the slogan 'meaning determines force' is generally false". In other words, what determines the illocutionary force of an utterances is *S*'s communicative illocutionary R-intention rather than the meaning of *S*' utterance.

With this distinction in mind consider John who says to himself "John, please do not drink too much this evening." Undoubtedly, John's utterance conventionally indicates the illocutionary act of asking. Note, however, that John cannot be counted as performing the illocutionary act he presents himself as performing, since he does not R-intend himself to take his utterance as reason to think that he has a certain attitude towards his drinking tonight. In the absence of any communicative illocutionary R-intention, John cannot be counted as performing an illocutionary act. But he does perform the locutionary act of asking himself for not drinking too much this evening.

Fourth Sceptical Argument:
The conception of R-intentions ascribes to a language user more cognitive abilities (and conceptual resources) than he or she really has; hence, performing illocutionary acts does not involve having R-intentions.

Siebel claims that the content of an R-intention is so complex that it is hard to imagine how some agents, who are good at issuing and interpreting illocutionary acts, would be able to grasp it. He concludes, therefore, that the ability to form R-intentions is not necessary for performing illocutionary acts:

> I doubt that young children are capable of having intentions of such an enormous complexity, whereas there is no bar to let them perform illocutionary acts. Bach and Harnish seem to make demands too great on the psychological abilities of persons who perform such acts. (Siebel 2003: 357)

One can even strengthen this objection by adding that the enormously complex content

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what property the referent of the noun has. (For a brief characteristics of Twardowski's philosophy see the Wikipedia article "Kazimierz Twardowski.")

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of an R-intention involves technical concepts such as *intention*, *reason* and *attitude*. It can hardly be supposed that young children, who are able to issue and understand illocutionary acts, possess these highly sophisticated concepts. To conclude, even if R-intentions were thinkable, the ability to formulate them could hardly be regarded as a necessary component of the illocutionary competence.

In my view, this argument rests on a confusion about what is the aim of the theory of R-intentions. The theory is supposed to describe the satisfaction conditions of mental states underlying the performance of illocutionary acts. It is not its aim to account for the cognitive abilities and conceptual resources the competent language user must have. To make things clear, consider the following two questions:

Q_1 What are the adequate conceptual resources and description techniques we should employ in representing the satisfaction conditions of illocutionary intentions?

Q_2 What are the conceptual resources and representational capacities that underlie an agent's ability to issue and understand illocutionary acts?

Question Q_1 is semantic, whereas question Q_2 is psychological or, more adequately, belongs to the area of cognitive science. Formulating his fourth objection Siebel wrongly assumes that the aim of the theory of R-intentions is to answer these two questions at one go. As a matter of fact, the theory is designed to answer Q_1 only. Therefore, one cannot criticize it for providing an inadequate answer to the problem it is not supposed to solve.[11]

Note, however, that the way we answer semantic question Q_1 usually provides some clues as to how we should account for the psychological problem raised in question Q_2. For example, responding to Siebel's first argument, I assume that the psychological process by means of which subsystem E_2 presents the content of an R-intention produced by E_1 involves engendering a certain mental demonstrative token. The token, in turn, is a counterpart to the demonstrative phrase "this intention" that occurs in the specification of the intention's satisfaction conditions. It is worth stressing, however, that the demonstrative expression in question and its mental counterpart are not the

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[11] Note that a similar confusion seems to underlie Tyler Burge's objection against John R. Searle's account of the satisfaction conditions of perceptual experiences. In his "Vision and Intentional Content," Burge claims that "a theory of Intentional content is not just a theory of satisfaction conditions," but also "a theory of mental states—mental abilities and cognitive point of view" (Burge 1991: 203); see Witek 2004 for a discussion of this topic.

same thing. We use the former to answer question Q_1, whereas we refer to the latter to account for problem Q_2. To say that the adequate account of Q_1 provides clues as to how to answer Q_2 is not to say that the semantic and psychological tasks amount to the same thing.

Conclusions

More needs to be done to justify Siebel's scepticism about R-intentions. First, there are serious reasons to maintain that illocutionary reflexive intentions are thinkable mental representations. Second, their conditions of identity can indeed be satisfied. Third, the explanatory power of the theory of R-intentions is not as limited as Siebel assumes. Fourth, psychological considerations as such do not speak against the idea that the ability to form R-intentions is a necessary component of the illocutionary competence.

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About the author

 Maciej Witek is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Zielona Góra, Poland. His research interests are in epistemology, cognitive pragmatics, philosophy of perception and philosophy of language. He has published on speech acts, the semantics/pragmatics interface and theories of truth and meaning. His recent publications include „Naturalizing Illocutionary Rules" (forthcoming in M. Miłkowski and K. Talmont-Kaminski, eds., *Beyond Description: Naturalism and Normativity*, London: College Publications) and „A Contextualist Account of the Linguistic Reality" (in J. Odrowąż-

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