

Speech Act Theory and Scripture

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I. Speech Act Theory: An Introduction and Summary

This section provides an introduction and summary to some of the key ideas of speech act theory together with indications of ways in which speech act theory may be useful in understanding utterances.

Although he did not create it complete and *ex nihilo*¹, the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin is usually correctly credited with founding Speech Act theory with his 1955 William James Lectures, *How To Do Things With Words* delivered at Harvard University and posthumously published in 1962². Speech Act theory was further developed and systematized by John Searle³ and others and is now a well-established species of ordinary language philosophy⁴ which can be seen as a branch of pragmatics⁵.

Vanhoozer calls the speech-act “the great discovery of twentieth-century philosophy of language.”⁶

Whereas semiotics is characteristically focused on words (as signs), often in the abstract without much of a specific context, speech act theory deals much more at the level of sentences, or better, meaningful utterances, as they are used by speakers for particular purposes in certain situations.

Austin’s fundamental insight was that speakers “do things” with their words. He begins by contrasting making statements (“constating”) with other things that speakers do with words (other than merely speaking), rejecting the “descriptive fallacy” that speakers simply seek to make true propositions about the world⁷.

Austin thus makes what he calls a “preliminary isolation of the performative” by examining utterances which are not nonsense, and have the grammatical form of statements but which satisfy the following conditions:

they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and

the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of the action, which would not *normally* be described as saying something.⁸

Austin gives the following phrases as examples of performatives that do something in being said: the “I do”, in a marriage ceremony; “I name this ship...”, “I give & bequeath...”, “I bet you...”⁹. Austin rejects the common feeling that such utterances are “(merely) the outward and visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act”¹⁰. Rather, in these performative utterances, “the issuing of the utterance is the performance of the action.”¹¹

It is worth noting at this early stage that *How To Do Things With Words* is a series of lectures that has the character of an unfolding argument and a developing approach. Austin is trying out accounts of language use, as Briggs puts it: “essentially proposing a series of distinctions and then abandoning and / or replacing them by others”¹². For example, the contrast between describing and doing just mentioned is not absolute: Austin later recognises that describing the world by stating true propositions is itself something that we do with words¹³. Indeed, Searle argues that:

The main theme of Austin’s mature work, *How To Do Things With Words*, is that this distinction [between utterances that are “sayings”, such as making statements, and utterances which are “doings”, such as promising] collapses. Just as saying certain things

constitutes getting married (a “performative”) and saying certain things constitutes making a promise (another “performative”), so saying certain things constitutes making a statement (supposedly a “constative”). As Austin saw but as many philosophers still fail to see, the parallel is exact.¹⁴

Making a statement is just as much performing an action as other more obviously performative actions, such as marrying, promising or betting.

Even where Austin’s work has been challenged, rejected or revised, *How To Do Things With Words* continues to attract attention and has remained foundational and programmatic for speech act approaches to language use.

Austin's analysis of an utterance

Austin eventually analyses utterances into:

(1) Locution: the saying of an utterance (making noises conforming to certain vocabulary and grammar) that has a meaning (a particular sense and reference)¹⁵

(2) Illocution: the force of an utterance such as informing, warning or undertaking etc.

(3) Perlocution: the effect of an utterance, the action performed by speaking.¹⁶

Ted Cohen's approximate summary of these distinctions is widely accepted:

a locution is an act *of* saying something, an illocution is an act done *in* saying something, a perlocution is an act done *by* saying something.¹⁷

The locution / illocution distinction

Austin distinguished locution and illocution by pointing out that the same locution (e.g., “I am coming back”¹⁸) could be used to perform a number of different illocutions (e.g. stating, predicting, promising, encouraging, warning, questioning). When the form of an utterance coincides the force the speaker intends to convey, this is termed a direct speech act. Indirect speech acts have an illocutionary force which is not directly apparent from the form of the locution, for example, as when the statement, “it’s cold in here” is used as a request that the window might be closed or the heating turned up. Such indirect or multi-purpose speech acts are particularly interesting cases of interpretation since a greater degree of construal is required.

Searle rejected Austin’s division between locution and illocution¹⁹, rightly seeing that the meaning of an utterance is usually inextricably bound up with its force²⁰. For example, we might say that “please shut the door” means “I would like you to shut the door and request that you do so”. On this understanding the meaning contains the force of the request.

Searle suggested replacing Austin’s locution / illocution distinction with the alternative distinction of:

- (1) utterance acts, in which the speaker utters words
- (2) propositional acts, in which the speaker refers and predicates and
- (3) illocutionary acts, which have a particular force²¹.

For Searle, an illocutionary act is a function both of its propositional content and its illocutionary force and can be expressed using the notation $F(p)$, where F is the force and p is the propositional content of reference (R) and sense (S), $p=RS$.

Briggs comments that:

... Austin’s definitions of locution and illocution do not match up either to the examples he gives or his subsequent discussion. Without a doubt, Searle’s work in this area has superseded Austin’s exploratory discussion...²²

Performatives

Discussion of speech acts has sometimes focused on performative verbs that explicitly name the illocution being performed²³. The form of such explicit performatives is:

I (hereby) *performative verb*²⁴ you (that)...

Vanderveken lists 270 performative verbs according to their illocutionary point, though he notes that many speech act verbs can have several different uses, for example, one may “swear” that a proposition is true or that one will perform a future action²⁵.

A speech act analysis of a discourse may involve making the illocutions explicit, perhaps even rewriting them in this form. However, as has been demonstrated above, all illocutions are performative in the sense that they do something by being said.

As Briggs puts it: “... all speech acts are performative, but some are more performative than others.”²⁶ He suggests that:

it is helpful to consider illocutionary acts (or forces) in a spectrum ranging from strong to weak. In the weak sense we may say that almost any utterance is an illocutionary act.

However, we shall want to reserve most of our attention for ‘strong’ acts, where the illocutionary force plays a significant role in the utterance.²⁷

For Briggs this category is similar to Austin’s preliminary performative discussed above and is characterised by a reliance on a non-linguistic convention that certain words under certain circumstances can perform a certain function. Weak illocutions depend only or largely on the (conventional) linguistic meaning of the utterance such as “the lamp is on the table”, which made explicitly performative is, “I (herby) state (or inform you) that the lamp is on the table”²⁸.

Searle’s taxonomy of illocutionary acts

Briggs argues that “Searle’s work on classifying illocutionary acts... is a significant advance on” Austin’s and “has become the standard theory”²⁹.

In contrast to Wittgenstein, who imagined an infinite number of language uses, Searle argued that there are a limited number of types of thing that we can do with words³⁰ and that the illocutionary point or purpose of an utterance will allow it to be classified.

Searle introduced to speech act theory the analysis of the differences in direction of fit between words and the world in different utterances. This distinction considers whether a speaker attempts to conform his words to the world (a word to world fit, as in statements, descriptions, assertions or explanations) or the world to his words (a world to word fit, as in requests, commands, vows and promises)³¹. Though this is a useful distinction, it should be noted that every utterance affects the world by itself becoming a new fact in the world. Even if only the speaker hears his own word to world statement, he is changed by having made it.

Searle also described the psychological state in the speaker or sincerity condition which is required for each type of illocutionary act, and the propositional content involved.

This yields the following taxonomy³², though the categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive - one utterance may perform a number of illocutions:

(1) Assertives

illocutionary point: commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition

direction of fit: words to world

sincerity condition: the speaker believes the propositional content expressed

propositional content: the thing asserted

examples: statements, hypothesizing, boast, complain, conclude, deduce

(2) Directives

illocutionary point: attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something

direction of fit: world to words

sincerity condition: want (wish or desire)

propositional content: that the hearer does the future action specified

examples: ask, order, command, request, beg, plead, pray, entreat, invite, permit, advise, dare, defy, challenge

(3) Commissives

illocutionary point: commit the speaker to some future action
direction of fit: world to words
sincerity condition: intention
propositional content: that the speaker does some future action
examples: promise, vow, pledge, covenant, contract

(4) Expressives

illocutionary point: to express a psychological state
direction of fit: no direction of fit - presupposed
sincerity condition: the psychological state expressed
propositional content: the state of affairs / property specified related to
speaker or hearer
examples: thank, congratulate, apologize, condole, deplore, welcome

(5) Declaratives

illocutionary point: to bring about the of affairs specified
direction of fit: words to world and world to words
sincerity condition: none
propositional content: the thing declared
examples: I resign, you're fired, I excommunicate you, I christen, I
appoint you, War is hereby declared

(6) Assertive Declaratives

illocutionary point: to declare that a certain state of affairs is the case
direction of fit: assertive words to world and declarative world to words
and words to world
sincerity condition: belief in the propositional content being asserted
propositional content: the thing being asserted and declared
examples: you are out, you are guilty

Within a class of speech acts there may be different degrees of force or intensity. For example, directives may hint, suggest, request, order, demand or insist. Determining the degree of intensity in a speech act can be significant for the interpretation of an utterance.

The illocution / perlocution discussion

Illocutions focus on what the speaker is intending to do by what he says. Perlocutions focus on what the speaker actually does, the effect of what is said on the hearers. The analysis of utterances into illocution and perlocution can thus assist in making valuable distinctions between aims and results and clarify what is being intended and done. Often the illocution and the perlocution will be the same, at least in part (for example, someone may seek to convey an instruction and successfully do so) though the perlocution may be different from the illocution (if, for example, the intention is to convey an instruction but the hearer thinks that the speaker is joking the perlocution may be amusement rather than the receiving of the instruction and hence the performance of the action required). In other words, for an illocutionary act to be successful and achieve the perlocutionary effect the speaker desires, there must be illocutionary uptake: for example, Austin argues that it is normally necessary to be heard and understood by the promisee as promising if one is to effectively make a promise to someone³³. This may be contrasted with the conventions that citizens are bound by the laws of a state even if they are unaware of certain statutes. Speech Act theorists have sought an analyse the conditions required for illocution and perlocution as follows.

Felicity conditions, misfires and abuses

Austin considers utterances which are not so much true or false but more or less successfully performed. He outlines the following felicity conditions for the happiness of a performative utterance:

- (A1) convention that the words are performative;
- (A2) the persons and circumstances are appropriate;
- (B1) there is a correctly and
- (B2) completely executed procedure; and
- (Γ1) thoughts, feelings, intentions or
- (Γ2) subsequent actions may also be necessary.³⁴

If A and B are not in place then the speech act “misfires”: it is void and the purported action has not been achieved, though other things may have been done. If Γ is not the case then the speech act is an “abuse”: it has been achieved but insincerely or hollowly³⁵.

If the conditions in A are not in place there is a “misinvocation” of a procedure, specifically in A2 a “misapplication” of a procedure. If the conditions in B are not fulfilled there is a “misexecution”: “the purported act is vitiated by a flaw [B1] or hitch [B2] in the condition of the ceremony.”³⁶

Austin notes that:

... infelicity is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts: not indeed that every ritual is liable to every form of infelicity (but then nor is every performative utterance).³⁷

Written Texts as Speech Acts

Those who are interested in employing speech act theory to help interpret the Bible will especially want to consider the theory's applicability to written texts³⁸.

Austin states, without argumentation, that written words can also be regarded as speech acts: as with spoken words, writing / "saying" them, under the correct conditions, can also make it so³⁹. Searle also asserts that: "speaking or writing in a language consists in performing speech acts... called 'illocutionary acts'"⁴⁰, when considering the speech acts performed by fictional texts.

Paul Ricoeur speaks of texts as discourse fixed by writing and argues that: "to the extent that the illocutionary act can be exteriorised... it too can be inscribed."⁴¹

Thiselton also rejects the view that speech act theory should be restricted to oral discourse, arguing that: "Legal texts, for example, clearly embody commitments and set up transactions which potentially function as acts: acts of transferring property, acts of authorization, and so forth."⁴² Later he adds: legal wills, love letters, and written promises can also function as effective *acts* which change situations in the public domain."⁴³

Mary Louise Pratt has defended the usefulness of apply speech act understandings to literature. Pratt's summary is worth quoting at length:

speech act theory provides a way of talking about utterances not only in terms of their surface grammatical properties but also in terms of the context in which they are made, the intentions, attitudes, and expectations of the participants, the relationships existing between the participants, and generally, the unspoken rules and conventions that are understood to be in play when an utterance is made and received.

There are enormous advantages in talking about literature in this way, too, for literary works, like all our communicative activities, are context dependent. Literature itself is a speech context. And as with all utterance, the way people produce and understand literary works depends enormously on unspoken, culturally-shared knowledge of the rules, conventions, and expectations [such as the idea of genre] that are in play when language is used in that context. Just as a definition of explaining, thanking, or persuading must include the unspoken conventional information on which the participants are relying, so must a definition of literature.⁴⁴

Stanley Fish provides what Briggs calls "one of the clearest examples of how to use speech act theory in literary criticism"⁴⁵ in his 1976 article entitled 'How To Do Things With Austin and Searle'⁴⁶ which provides a "speech act 'reading'" of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Fish's conclusions (which are similar Briggs') are that "while a speech-act analysis of such texts will always be possible, it will also be trivial (a mere list of the occurrences or distribution of kinds of acts)..."⁴⁷. In Fish's view it is texts that are in some way about the conditions of intelligibility that will be the most fruitful for a speech act approach.

II. Speech Act Theory and Scripture: A Summary and Evaluation

Vanhoozer emphasizes the significance of speech act theory for theology:

The most fruitful recent development for the dialogue between philosophy and theology about language is undoubtedly the emphasis on language as a species of human action: speech acts.⁴⁸

If written and spoken words are speech-acts then the bible can be understood as speech acts. Indeed, Timothy Ward makes the bold claim that:

... a speech-act view of the Bible is the most appropriate overall description of the Bible's nature and function – especially so, if we want to encourage Bible-reading which seeks above all to encounter God through that reading.⁴⁹

Vanhoozer argues from an analysis of biblical covenants for seeing greater continuity between oral and written discourse than is sometimes allowed in contemporary philosophy and literary theory. He argues that it is clear from the book of Deuteronomy, for example, that the written covenant continues to have “determinative content and binding force” for the covenant community, showing that: “Written texts preserve the same illocutionary act potential as oral discourse”.⁵⁰

A major attraction of speech act theory as a model for reading the bible for evangelicals, especially in the face of challenges from postmodernism and deconstruction, is that it tends to think of meaning at least partly in terms of authorial intention (what speakers seek to do with their words) rather than an open play determined entirely by reader response.

The usefulness of speech act theory in biblical hermeneutics

Writing in 2005, Brevard Childs notes that:

Within the last decade there has been an explosion of interest in speech-act theory as a means of developing a new understanding of biblical hermeneutics.⁵¹

Speech Act theory may also be an asset in the interpretation and application of Scripture. Some of the general usefulness of the theory has already been suggested above.

Vanhoozer suggests that the diverse genres of Scripture may be seen as performing different illocutionary acts: they do different things by warning, greeting, stating, questioning etc.⁵².

Richard Briggs argues that:

... on reflection it is startling just how many highly significant speech acts there are [in the biblical narrative], and in fact how much of the biblical story turns on ‘things done with words’.⁵³

Similarly Thiselton writes:

In the case of the biblical writings, the persistence of the terms Old and New “Testament” serve to remind us of the covenantal context in which pledge and promise [for some, the paradigmatic speech act] feature prominently. The biblical writings abound in promises, invitations, verdicts, confessions, pronouncements of blessings, commands, namings, and declarations of love.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Briggs warns that “speech act theory cannot be a panacea for all one’s hermeneutical problems”⁵⁵. He insists that he is not calling for Speech Act Criticism as if this should be an exclusive or overarching approach. Briggs argues (like Fish) that while all texts should be susceptible

to a speech act analysis, the results will not always be especially insightful or interesting. It is “in texts which concern themselves with particular speech acts, especially performative acts and strong illocutions... [that] we may expect to find worthwhile insights from a speech act perspective.”⁵⁶ Briggs especially seeks to apply speech act theory to New Testament passages which involve confession of faith, forgiveness of sin and teaching⁵⁷.

Speech act theory may be used to analyse what is being said and done by participants in a narrative, by the narrator and by the human author of the biblical texts. Texts may also be regarded as God’s speech acts, both to their original recipients and to future generations of the church.

James Robson has recently drawn on speech act theory when employing the distinction between locution and illocution, what the bible says and what is done in saying it, when he examines “how the prophet Ezekiel’s oracles uttered against Jerusalem can function in the book that bears his name after Jerusalem itself has fallen.”⁵⁸

Other examples of the application of speech act theory to the understanding of the Bible can be found in *Semeia* 41 (1988), ‘Speech Act Theory and Biblical Criticism’; Botha, J. E., *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman* Novum Testamentum Supplements 45 (Brill, 1991); Berry, Donald K., *The Psalms and Their Readers: Interpretive Strategies for Psalm 18* JSOT Supp 153 (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1993); Neufeld, Dietmar, *Reconceiving Texts as Speech Acts: An Analysis of 1 John* (Leiden, Brill [Bib Int Ser 7], 1994); Reid, Stephen B., ‘Psalm 50: Prophetic Speech and God’s Performative Utterances’ in Reid (ed.) *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honour of Gene M. Tucker* JSOT Sup 229 (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) pp217-230 and a number of works by Thiselton⁵⁹. Briggs provides a survey in Briggs, Richard S., “The Uses of Speech-Act Theory in Biblical Interpretation” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 9 (2001) pp229-72.

An extra-biblical category or a biblical view of language?

On the opening page of *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic sketch*, John Webster criticizes Ward for depending too much on an extra-biblical “philosophical theory of communicative action” (speech acts) rather than properly dogmatic material⁶⁰.

Vanhoozer seems aware of this sort of danger. In his essay on speech acts and scripture acts, Vanhoozer wants to avoid speech act categories dominating and argues that:

On the contrary, we will see that Christian convictions concerning, say, divine authorship, the canon and the covenant will lead us both to modify and intensify the typical speech act analysis. My goal is to let the “discourse of the covenant” (Scripture) inform and transform our understanding of the “covenant of discourse” (ordinary language and literature).⁶¹

Rather than being an illegitimate alien element in theology, Vanhoozer claims that:

speech act philosophy commends itself as perhaps the most effective antidote to certain deconstructive toxins that threaten the very project of textual interpretation and hermeneutics.⁶²

Ward guards against a charge of selling out to speech act theory:

It is important to note that the use of ‘speech-act’ as a controlling concept for the Bible does not represent the illicit importation of a non-theological category into theological description. Instead, it gives us the conceptual apparatus to discern more clearly the view of language to which the Bible regularly bears witness.⁶³

As Vanhoozer says:

Of course the idea that humans do things in speaking was well known to the very earliest biblical authors, even without the analytic concepts of speech act philosophy.⁶⁴

Ward argues that:

... a strong case can be made from exegesis of numerous biblical texts that the Bible itself holds a clear speech-act view of language in general and of God’s speech in particular citing Gen 1; Jer 1:9-10 (where it seems Jeremiah is commissioned to break down and build by the words of the LORD); Is 55:10-11 and Rm 8:28-30 (on the efficacious call of God) so that:

A speech-act model of language is not imposed on the Bible, but is discerned, from a particular interpretive standpoint, already to be there.⁶⁵

In addition, when Isaac blesses Jacob in Genesis 27 it is clear that he has done something in or by speaking that cannot be undone. James 3 speaks of the power of the tongue. Acts demonstrates a dynamic view of the word of God growing (e.g. Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Hebrews 4:12 describes the word of God as living and active. Psalm 107:20 attributes the actions of healing and delivering to God’s word (c.f. Acts 10:36).

The Genesis account of God’s creating the world by his word (Genesis 1:3 etc.) is a particularly striking and foundational instance of a speech act. Man’s capacity for language and verbal communication are often seen as components of what it means for man to be in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Beginning to exercise his vicegerency, man performs the speech act of effectively naming the animals (“And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.”, Genesis 2:19).

In a sense the incarnation of the Word, his act of becoming flesh, (John 1:14) may be seen as a theological basis for speaking of revelation in terms of speech acts, at least to the extent that it is an act described in verbal categories. Jesus exercises the power of God by speaking when he commands the wind and the waves (Mark 4:39), casts out demons (Mark 1:25) and forgives sins and heals with a word (Mark 2:5-12).

Speech Act and Liturgy

Writing as an Evangelical, David Hilborn argues that:

... speech act theory has considerable potential for the analysis of liturgy. Its stress on language as a means to action; its sensitivity to performance, ritual and local 'rules' as components of linguistic meaning; its acceptance on these premises of 'empirically unverifiable' statements – these commend it for the study of religious discourse in general and sacral discourse in particular.⁶⁶

Some attempts have been made to apply speech act theory to the study of liturgy⁶⁷.

Ladriere sets out such a view:

It [liturgical language] is characterized in that it is a certain form of action; it puts something into practice: in short, it possesses an "operativity". It is not merely a verbal commentary on an action external to itself; in and of itself, it is action.... The enunciation of the sentence is a veritable action. In order, therefore, to express the operative (non-descriptive) nature of liturgical language, we may use the term "performativity", as proposed by Austin.⁶⁸

A speech act analysis of liturgical texts (e.g. such as the absolution) may aid clear thinking about exactly who is doing what to whom in the speech acts of the service.

Ladriere argues that liturgical language not only expresses certain attitudes but also acts as an "existential inductor" affecting and bringing them about. Thus verbs such as "to ask", "to pray" and "to give thanks":

express illocutionary acts presupposing certain attitudes: trust, veneration, gratitude, submission, contrition, and so on. These attitudes come into effect at the very moment when, by virtue of the enunciation of the sentence, the corresponding act takes place. The performative verb is not a description of the attitude which its enunciation presupposes; its function is not to indicate the existence of this attitude, but is, so to speak, the attitude itself: it makes it exist in an effective manner by virtue of the illocutionary act underlying its enunciation.⁶⁹

Ladriere also argues that liturgical language performs the speech act function of "instituting" the church:

The participants meet in a kind of objective space determined by their speech acts. The community is initiated in this meeting. Here one may speak of an induction effect. Language is not the expression of a community constituted before it and apart from it and is not the description of what the community would be, but the locution in which and the instrument by means of which the community is constituted. In so far as it gives to all participants – as co-locutors – the chance to take on the same acts, it establishes between them that operative reciprocity which constitutes the reality of a community.⁷⁰

Even if there may be overstatement here, and though the Reformed will want to insist that the church is constituted by faith⁷¹ in Christ and that entry to the visible church is marked by baptism, there is truth in what Ladriere says: the Lord's Day liturgy may be seen as an actualisation or manifestation of the local congregation. By their participation in the liturgy, the members of the church make their unity and fellowship apparent and strengthen them.

Similarly, Briggs comments that the New Testament confession that Jesus is Lord (Rm 10:9; Phil 2:11) and creeds in the church today are performative speech acts which creates (or recreate, sustain, or modify) "the world in which the speaker stands under the lordship of Christ."⁷²

Some speech act accounts of liturgy have focused especially on the Lord's Supper⁷³ and these are discussed further in chapter 4 which considers

the Lord's Supper in the light of the Scriptures, since speech act theory is primarily a linguistic approach.

The contribution of speech act theory to the doctrine of Scripture

Words and deeds of God

Some theologians have attempted to privilege God's saving acts over his word, relegating God's word to a witness to revelation rather than revelation itself. Since it maintains that words are deeds, speech act theory helps to relate more adequately the words and deeds of God.

As Briggs points out: "As long ago as 1932 Karl Barth wrote of "The Speech of God as the Act of God"⁷⁴.

In this vein, Kevin Vanhoozer has argued that viewing the Bible is God's mighty speech-act:

allows us to transcend the debilitating dichotomy between revelation as 'God saying' and 'God doing'. For the category speech-act acknowledges that saying too is a doing, and that persons can do many things by 'saying'.... Scripture is neither simply the recital of the acts of God nor merely a book of inert propositions. Scripture is rather composed of divine-human speech-acts which, through what they say, accomplish several authoritative cognitive, spiritual and social functions.... I propose the model of communicative action for the Scriptures as the revelatory Word of God. The Bible... is a diverse collection of God's mighty speech-acts which communicate the saving Word of God.⁷⁵

As Vanhoozer says: "An evangelical theology need not choose between God speaking and acting."⁷⁶ The Bible is not merely testimony to God's saving acts but rather is "*itself one of those redemptive acts*"⁷⁷. Such an account of the Bible helpfully emphasises its salvation-oriented purposes.

Objective and Subjective Revelation

Vanhoozer suggests that speech act categories can be helpful in preserving the distinction between objective revelation in Scripture by the Spirit's inspiration and its subjective appropriation by the illumination of the Spirit. In contrast to a Barthian doctrine of Scripture, Vanhoozer argues that:

... given the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions, there is no reason why one could not speak of divine discourse *simpliciter* to refer to what God is doing in speaking (illocutions), whether or not it is received and understood (perlocutions).⁷⁸

In contrast to a Barthian doctrine of scripture, Vanhoozer maintains that: the Bible *is* the Word of God (in the sense of its illocutionary acts) and to say that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God (in the sense of achieving its perlocutionary effects).⁷⁹

The Bible is God's words whether or not there is illocutionary uptake on the part of the readers. Though the perlocutions will depend on whether or not God's word is received with faith, leading to salvation or rejected, leading to judgment, God's word will never be without effect.

The Propositional and the Personal

As Vanhoozer also notes, he notion of Scripture as God's speech-act helpfully preserves its propositional content, its effect and its personal nature⁸⁰. Indeed, Vanhoozer suggests that: "Speech-acts are arguably the main currency of personal relationships."⁸¹

As Ward puts it: "In the Bible, God himself, his actions and his words are intimately related."⁸². God establishes relationships with people by speaking his Word to them and responding to the Word is responding to God himself.

As Ward points out, Jesus' words and Jesus seem to be used interchangeably in John 15:1-12 as practical synonyms: "The words of both the Father and Jesus, then, are a kind of extension of themselves."⁸³

Paul Ricoeur suggested supplementing a standard speech act analysis by considering what he calls the "interlocutionary act" which focuses on the utterance as an act of communication addressed by someone to someone else⁸⁴. Vanhoozer has taken up this category of interlocutionary acts to capture the fact that "communicative action is essentially an interpersonal affair". The interpersonal relationships that speech acts produce between speaker and hearers mean that "an interlocutor – either an agent or a recipient of communicative action – [can be called] a *communicant*."⁸⁵

The Personal Presence of God by his word

Vanhoozer speaks of God as present with his people by his word:

The principal mode in which God is 'with' his people is through speech-acts. I find it difficult to conceive how one could discern God's presence, or know anything whatsoever about God, without a communication on God's part.⁸⁶

Self-involvement and transformative reading

Just as God is thus personally involved in his word, Thiselton⁸⁷ and Briggs⁸⁸ have developed Donald Evans'⁸⁹ argument that speech acts are also self-involving for readers. The biblical texts confront readers with claims that God is the creator and that Jesus is Lord in ways that are not merely descriptions of fact but which require dispositions, commitments and consequent actions on the part of readers to live in God's world in God's way with Jesus as ruler. Thiselton and Briggs call for a "a hermeneutic of self-involvement" in which "we invest ourselves in the text and in the process we are changed; acted upon by its speech acts"⁹⁰ such that Bible reading is transforming.

God's efficacious word

Secular speech act theorist Vanderveken and Susumu comment that: "Because of His supernatural powers, God can use performatively many more verbs than we can."⁹¹

Searle speaks of a special category of supernatural declarations: "When, e.g., God says "Let there be light" there is a declaration."⁹² Unlike other declarations, this requires no extra-linguistic institution or convention to make it affective. Simply by saying, God is able to make it so.

As Ward argues from Isaiah 55:11, it is particularly appropriate to speak of God's effectual word as speech acts:

God promises that his word will infallibly perform the purposes for which he sent it. This verse reveals something to which the whole Bible bears witness: God's words fundamentally perform actions.⁹³

Similarly, Vanhoozer argues that God's divine speech acts are infallible in this sense: "Scripture's diverse illocutionary forces will inevitably achieve their respective purposes."⁹⁴

The Bible as God's covenant promise

As Vanhoozer points out, Searle and Alston see the promise as the paradigmatic speech act and he concurs with Thiselton and Wolterstorff others in emphasizing its central importance in Christian theology⁹⁵.

Austin identified making a covenant as an example of a speech act with commissive⁹⁶ illocutionary force.

Vanhoozer suggests that all language as communicative action between sender and receiver is inherently covenantal⁹⁷.

Whilst the polygeneric nature of the Bible must not be lost sight of, a speech act account of the Bible as covenantal promise may give an insight into Scripture as a whole. Vanhoozer comments:

God appears to his people as an agent who performs promissory speech-acts which commit him to continuous activity.... According to speech-act philosophy, an agent signals an intention by invoking the appropriate linguistic and literary conventions.... The Bible is God's covenant "deed", in both senses of the term. It is an act and a testament: a performative promise wherein certain unilateral promises are spoken, and a written document that seals the promise. The canon is a collection of diverse speech-acts that together 'render' the covenantal God.⁹⁸

A Trinitarian speech act account of revelation

Vanhoozer argues for a Trinitarian speech act account of revelation⁹⁹ in which “the Father’s activity is locution”¹⁰⁰. “The Logos corresponds to the speaker’s act or illocution, to what one does in saying”¹⁰¹, the content and intent of the revelation. The perlocution is the effect on recipients of the revelation.

Or again:

... the Father initiates communication; the Son is the content of the communication; the Spirit is the efficacy of the communication. [Footnote 29:] In what we may call “the analogy of speech-acts,” the Father (“who spoke [*est locutus*] by the prophets”) locutes; the Son is the illocution, the promise of God; the Spirit is the “perlocution,” the effect achieved through (*per*) the speech-act.¹⁰²

Vanhoozer argues that:

The great benefit of this analysis is that it enables us clearly to relate the Spirit’s relation to the Word of God. First, the Spirit illumines the reader and so enables the reader to grasp the illocutionary point, to recognise what the Scriptures may be doing. Second, the Spirit convicts the reader that the illocutionary point of the biblical text deserves the appropriate response.¹⁰³

The Spirit’s work of illumination may helpfully be described in speech act terms. The Spirit does not alter the words but: “The Spirit is nothing less than the effective presence of the illocutionary force.”¹⁰⁴

Thus:

When the Spirit speaks in Scripture today he is not speaking another word but ministering the written words: “[The Spirit] will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears” (John 16:13). The Spirit is active not in producing new illocutions but rather in ministering the illocutions that are already in the text, making them efficacious.¹⁰⁵

Austin’s model of speech acts is obviously triadic¹⁰⁶ but it is debatable how useful a Trinitarian version of it applied to revelation in general and / or scripture in particular is. Speaking of the nature of language and communication, Vanhoozer says that:

While I certainly do not think that everything in our world is a “vestige of the Trinity,” I do think that in this case there is more than an interesting analogy. The doctrine of the Trinity... stands not as an analogy but as a paradigm for human communication.¹⁰⁷

The limitations of Vanhoozer’s account must also be recognised. Whilst the Father may be said to locute Scripture, it should not be maintained that the words of the Bible are not also the words of the Son and the Spirit. The point of Scripture (its illocutionary force) is certainly to render Christ as the object of saving faith, but Scripture also reveals the triune God (admittedly principally through Christ) and may be said to perform many allied purposes.

Though it is not captured by the speech act model he states, Vanhoozer himself speaks of the Spirit’s work of inspiration as well as illumination¹⁰⁸. The Spirit is active in the locution of Scripture as well as in its subsequent perlocution (its interpretation, application and affective power). Indeed, the illocutions of Scripture are the illocutions of the Spirit.

Conclusions

This chapter has further shown that far from necessarily undermining the Reformed Evangelical doctrine of Scripture, speech act theory can enrich the Reformed Evangelical doctrine of scripture. Though speech act theory might not say anything that Reformed Evangelicals ought not already to have known from reflection on God and the bible, it provides conceptual frameworks, analytical tools and technical vocabularies that can be fruitfully and judiciously employed by biblical scholars and systematic theologians, with no loss and with a number of potential gains.

This chapter also provides some of the necessary groundwork for considering the Lord's Supper, which is a visible word, from a speech act perspective.

Endnotes

1 Briggs, Words in Action, pp2-3, 32, 35-36 suggests that antecedents might be seen in Brentano, Hussrel, Anton Marty, Adolf Reinach, the later Wittgenstein.

2 Austin, J. L., How To Do Things With Words: the William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962) ed. Urmoson, J. O.

3 In such works as Searle, John R., *The Construction of Social Reality* (London, Penguin, 1995), *Expression and meaning: studies in the theory of speech acts* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), *Speech acts: an essay in the philosophy of language* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969) and the volume he edited: *The Philosophy of Language* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971). Vanhoozer comments "If Austin is the Luther of speech act philosophy, John Searle may be considered its Melanchton – its systematic theologian.", *Is There A Meaning?* p209

4 See e.g. Hanfling, Oswald, *Philosophy and Ordinary Language: The Bent and Genius of Our Tongue*, (Routledge, 2003); Graham, Keith, *J. L. Austin: A Critique of Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Harvester Press, Hassocks, 1977)

5 See Yule, George, *Pragmatics* Oxford Introductions to Language Study (Oxford, OUP, 1996), Leech, Geoffrey, *Principles of Pragmatics* (Longman, 1983)

6 Vanhoozer, Drama, p63

7 Austin, HTDTWW, pp2-3

8 Austin, HTDTWW, p5. See also p20 where he speaks of "the *performative* utterance, which was 'defined' (if we may call it so much) mainly by contrast to the supposedly familiar 'statement'."

9 Austin, HTDTWW, pp5-6

10 Austin, HTDTWW, p9

11 Austin, HTDTWW, p6

12 Briggs, Words in Action, p38.

13 Austin, HTDTWW, pp132-146

14 Searle, Expression and Meaning, p17f

15 Austin further divided the locutionary acts into phonetic acts, uttering certain noises, phatic acts, uttering certain vocables or words conforming to a certain grammar, and rhetoric acts, using these vocables with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference. HTDTWW, p95

16 Austin, HTDTWW, pp100-101. See also pp108, 120

17 "Illocutions and Perlocutions", *Foundations of Language* 9 (1973) Cohen points out that this is inadequate because the "'in'/'by' distinction... will not underwrite the illocution/perlocution distinction... for it does not unfailingly mark a distinction between what is conventional and what is not." (p493). Cited in Robson, James, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel* (London, T& T Clark, 2006) Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 447, p12

18 These example is mine, not Austin's (or below, Searle's).

19 Searle, Speech Acts, p23

20 Thus also Briggs, Words in Action, p45. According to Vanhoozer, First Theology, p173, in *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning*, William P. "Alston has produced what is probably the single most complete apology for viewing meaning in terms of illocutionary acts. To be precise, he defines sentence meaning in terms of illocutionary *potential*. A sentence having a certain meaning consists in its being useable to play a certain role (to do certain things) in communication."

21 Searle, Speech Acts, p24

22 Briggs, Words in Action, p42

23 See e.g. Wierzbicka, Anna, *English Speech Act Verbs: A semantic dictionary* (Marrickville, Academic Press Australia, 1987). She argues that English has about 300 speech act verbs that she places in 37 categories.

24 Most of the examples in Searle's taxonomy below on p6 are or could be easily transformed into performative verbs.

- 25 Vanderveken, *Meaning and Speech Acts*, volume 1, p168 discussed in Briggs, *Words*, p99
- 26 Briggs, *Getting Involved*, p28
- 27 Briggs, *Words in Action*, p63
- 28 Briggs, *Words in Action*, pp64f
- 29 Briggs, *Words in Action*, p50
- 30 Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p29, referring to Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 23
- 31 Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p4
- 32 drawn from Searle, *Meaning and Expression*, pp12-20. See the tabulated summary in Briggs, *Words in Action*, p51.
- 33 Austin, *HTDTWW*, p22
- 34 Austin, *HTDTWW*, pp14-15
- 35 Austin, *HTDTWW*, p16
- 36 Austin, *HTDTWW*, p17
- 37 Austin, *HTDTWW*, pp18-19
- 38 See Briggs' treatment of 'Speech Acts and Texts' chapter 3, pp73-103 in *Words* which especially treats the exchange between Derrida and Searle e.g. in Derrida, *Limited Inc* and Searle, 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph 1* (1977) pp198-208. In common with other deconstructionists, Derrida is negative about written texts communicating authorial intent in the absence of the author.
- 39 Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p8.
- 40 Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p58
- 41 Ricoeur, Paul, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas, Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p27.
- 42 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p2
- 43 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p17
- 44 Pratt, Mary Louise, *Towards A Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (London, Indiana University Press, 1977), p86. See also Lanser, Susan Sniader, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981), who argues that: "In speech act theory I found a philosophical basis for understanding literature as communicative act and text as message-in-context, as well as exciting new tools for analyzing discourse." (p7)
- 45 Briggs, *Words*, p87
- 46 in Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class?* Pp197-245
- 47 Fish, *Text?*, p245
- 48 Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p161
- 49 Ward, *The Bible*, p33
- 50 Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p191 citing Dt 28:58; 27 and the responses to the book of the law in 2 Kings 22:11 and Nehemiah 8
- 51 Childs, Brevard S., 'Speech-act theory and biblical interpretation' *Scottish Journal of Theology* volume 58, no. 4, (2005) pp375-392
- 52 Vanhoozer, *God's Mighty Speech Acts*, p173.
- 53 Briggs, Richard S., 'Getting Involved: Speech Acts and Biblical Interpretation' (*Anvil* volume 20, No. 1, 2003), p32.
- 54 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p32
- 55 Briggs, *Words in Action*, p91. Likewise, Thiselton: "Nevertheless speech-act theory does not offer a comprehensive paradigm for all biblical texts, let alone all non-biblical texts." *New Horizons*, p32.
- 56 Briggs, *Words*, p91
- 57 Briggs, *Words in Action*, chapters 5-8
- 58 Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, p12
- 59 Thiselton, A. C., 'Christology in Luke, Speech-Act Theory and the Problem of Dualism in Christology after Kant' in Green and Turner (ed.s) *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids / Carlisle, Eerdmans / Paternoster, 1994) pp453-72; *The Parables as Language-Event: Some Comments on Fuch's Hermeneutics in the Light of Linguistic*

Philosophy' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970) pp437-68; 'The Supposed Power of Words in Biblical Writings', *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974) pp283-99; Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NIGTC (Cambridge / Carlisle, Eerdmans / Paternoster, 2000) especially pp41-52, 146, 455, 1188

60 Webster, John, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Current Issues in Theology) (CUP, 2003), pp5-6. Brevard Childs also warns against Nicholas Wolterstorff's use of speech act theory in 'Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation' *Scottish Journal of Theology* vol 58, no 4, 2005, pp375-392, though he is more sympathetic to Thiselton's use of it.

61 Vanhoozer, First Theology, p161

62 Vanhoozer, First Theology, p164

63 Ward, The Bible, note 32, p41.

64 Vanhoozer, First Theology, p161

65 Ward, Ward, Timothy, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), p304f.

66 Hilborn, Performativity, p173

67 Arthur Brookes for example provides a "discourse analysis with an emphasis on speech act theory of the section in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* service of Evening Prayer beginning 'Dearly beloved brethren'" in Hodgson, T. R. Burnham, *Saying The Services* (Worthing, Churchman Publishing, 1989) (p62) See also e.g. Kelleher, M. M., 'Hermeneutics in the Study of Liturgical Performance', *Worship* 67.4: 292-318 (1993); Schaller, J. J., 'Performative Language Theory: An Exercise in the Analysis of Ritual', *Worship* 62 (1988), pp415-32; Ware, J. H., *Not with Words of Wisdom: Performative Language and Liturgy* (Washington, University Press of America, 1981)

68 Ladriere, Jean, 'The Performativity of Liturgical Language', *Concilium*, vol 2, no 9 (1973), 50-62, pp51-52

69 Ladriere, Performativity, p57

70 Ladriere, Performativity, p59

71 Note that Ladriere says that "liturgical language receives from faith its characteristic performativity", p62.

72 Briggs, Getting Involved, p29

73 See e.g. Crystal, David, 'Liturgical Language in Sociolinguistic Perspective' pp120-146 in Jasper, David and Jasper, R. C. D., (ed.s) *Language and the Worship of the Church* (London, Macmillan Press, 1990); Martinich, A. P., 'Sacraments and Speech Acts I' and II, *Heythrop Journal* 16.1:289-303; 16.2: 405-17 (1975)

74 Briggs, 'Speech Act Theory' in Dictionary for Theological Interpretation p765, citing Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics* volume 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God, part 1 (1932, reprint, T&T Clark, 1975) pp143-62

75 Vanhoozer, Kevin, *God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today* Chapter 6, pp143-181 in Satterthwaite, Philip E. & Wright, David F. (ed.s), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994), pp 147f. = First p130f. Vanhoozer points to this sort of dichotomy in the work of G. E. Wright, in the biblical theology movement which "attended to the "act of God" in salvation history behind the text" and in Wolfhart Pannenberg.

76 Vanhoozer, Drama, p63

77 Vanhoozer, First Theology, p158

78 Vanhoozer, Drama, p66

79 Vanhoozer, First Theology, p195

80 Vanhoozer, Drama, p63

81 Vanhoozer, Drama, p67

82 Ward, The Bible, p35

83 Ward, The Bible, p36

84 Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, p14

85 Vanhoozer, First Theology, p174. Similarly, Drama, p67.

86 Vanhoozer, Ibid., p170-1.

- 87 See Thiselton, *New Horizons*, especially Ch VIII: 'The Hermeneutics of Self Involvement: From Existentialist Models to Speech Act Theory' (pp272-312)
- 88 Briggs, *Words in Action*, especially Ch 5: 'Exploring a Hermeneutic of Self-Involvement: The Work of Donald Evans' (pp147-182)
- 89 Evans, Donald, *The Logic of Self-Involvement. A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (London, SCM, 1963)
- 90 Briggs, *Getting Involved*, p30
- 91 Vanderveken, Daniel and Kubo, Susumu, (ed.s) *Essays in Speech Act Theory* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam / Philadelphia, 2002), p8
- 92 Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p18
- 93 Ward, Timothy, 'The Bible, Its Truth and How It Works' (pp17-42) in Gardner, Paul, Wright, Chris & Green, Chris (ed.s), *Fanning The Flame: Bible, Cross & Mission – meeting the challenge in a changing world, NEAC 4 2003*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2003), p29. Ward comments that Searle "has rightly been taken to task for treating the massive complexities of interpersonal linguistic communication as too susceptible to analytic-philosophical analysis. However, speech-act theory can equally easily be developed in a direction more interested in the social and moral dimensions of speech." (e.g. by Wolterstorff & Vanhoozer) note 18, p40.
- 94 Vanhoozer, *Semantics*, p94
- 95 Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, pp 164, 173, 188 and *Drama* p64 citing Searle, *Speech Acts*. See also Austin, *HTDTWW*, pp9-11 for a discussion of promising
- 96 Austin describes commissives as promising, undertaking, committing, declarations or announcements of intent, espousals, the assuming of an obligation. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, Op. Cit., p150..
- 97 Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p167
- 98 Vanhoozer, *God's Mighty Speech Acts*, p176.
- 99 In the background of this discussion is Barth's scheme of God as revealer-revelation-revealedness (*Church Dogmatics I/1*) and the reflection that: "In terms of communication theory, the triune God is communicative agent (Father/author), communicative action (Son/Word) and communicative result (Spirit/power of reception.)", Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, pp162-163. See also Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, pp455-9.
- 100 Vanhoozer, *God's Mighty Speech Acts*, p178
- 101 Vanhoozer, *God's Mighty Speech Acts*, p178
- 102 Vanhoozer, *Drama*, p65. Vanhoozer also uses Searle's taxonomy of speech acts from *Expression and Meaning*, to describe five different illocutions performed by the cross, *Drama* p65f.
- 103 Vanhoozer, *God's Mighty Speech Acts*, p177
- 104 Vanhoozer, *God's Mighty Speech Acts*, p177
- 105 Vanhoozer, *Drama*, p67
- 106 Frame notes locution, illocution and perlocution as one of five language triads in *The Doctrine of God*, Appendix A: 'More Triads', p747
- 107 Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p168
- 108 Vanhoozer, *Drama*, p66, n31