2
Meaning and Speech Acts

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1. Introduction

On 5 November 1969, Peter Strawson delivered 'Meaning and Truth', his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford. Although more than fifty years have since elapsed, we are only beginning to come to terms with the approach to the theoretical study of language which Strawson then proposed. In this chapter,* I try to make some progress along the lines he indicated.

Strawson begins 'Meaning and Truth' by raising three constitutive questions about meaning. 'What is it for anything to have a meaning at all, in the way, or in the sense, in which words or sentences or signals have meaning? What is it for a particular sentence to have the meaning or meanings it does have? What is it for a particular phrase, or a particular word, to have the meaning or meanings it does have?' (Strawson 1970, 171). These are foundational questions which any adequate philosophy of language must address, but in his lecture Strawson only sketches his preferred answers to them. His chief concern, rather, is with a conflict, or apparent conflict, between two schools which take rival approaches to the questions. On one side in this 'Homeric struggle' we have the 'theorists of communication-intention', who seek to elucidate the concept of meaning by reference to speakers' 'audience-directed intentions of a certain complex kind' (Strawson 1970, 171). On the other side are the 'theorists of formal semantics', who explicate meaning by reference to syntactic and semantic rules. More specifically, their 'general idea . . . is that the syntactic and semantic rules together determine the meanings of all the sentences of a language and do this [in the case of declarative sentences] by means, precisely, of determining their truth-conditions' (Strawson 1970, 177).[1]

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[1] According to Strawson, the only version of 'formal semantics' that 'has ever been seriously advanced or developed, or needs to be seriously considered, . . . rests on the notion of truth-conditions' (Strawson 1970, 176). One might wonder about semantic theories based on assertibility-conditions, which were being developed just up the Oxford High Street in All Souls College while Strawson was writing his lecture in Magdalen. However, I agree with Strawson that assertibility semantics—whatever its merits when applied to the languages of pure mathematics—does not in the end provide an adequate treatment of natural languages. See Rumfitt (2015, §5.4).

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Strawson's choice of the term 'Homeric struggle' may have been partly ironic. Rather as the eventual destruction of a civilization—'the broken wall, the burning roof and tower'—was a disproportionate reaction to a woman's leaving her husband for another man, it is far from clear that Strawson's warring parties had a proper *casus belli*. One might, after all, seek to elucidate the concept of meaning by reference *both* to audience-directed intentions *and* to semantic and syntactic rules.[2] For all that, Strawson comes down on the side of the first school. 'It is a generally harmless and salutary thing to say that to know the meaning of a [declarative] sentence is to know under what conditions one who utters it says something true. But if we wish for a philosophical elucidation of the concept of meaning, then the dictum represents, not the end, but the beginning of our task' (Strawson 1970, 188–9). This is because 'when we come to try to explain in general what it is to say something true, to express a true proposition, reference to belief or to assertion (and thereby to belief) is inescapable. . . . Someone propounds, in some mode or other, a true proposition if things are as anyone who believes what he propounds would thereby believe them to be. And here the reference to belief is explicit' (Strawson 1970, 189). Any adequate theory of meaning, then, must assign a central role to the notion of expressing a belief. Moreover, Strawson contends, in unfolding that notion we will have to bring in communicative linguistic acts. An account on which speech was primarily and essentially the expression of one's beliefs, but only secondarily and contingently a matter of communicating those beliefs to others, would be 'too perverse and arbitrary to satisfy the requirements of an acceptable theory' (Strawson 1970, 188). An account of meaning, then, ineluctably takes us to the communicative intentions on which theorists of the first school focus.

One of my goals in this chapter is to evaluate this argument—which, to anticipate, I think is far too quick. I begin, though, with a point on which Strawson seems to me to be correct. He concludes his lecture by warning his audience that, when we inquire into the nature of meaning, we are liable to 'forget what sentences are *for*. We connect meaning with truth, and truth, too simply, with sentences; and sentences belong to language. But, as theorists, we know nothing of human *language* unless we understand human *speech*' (Strawson 1970, 189). What I take from this is that words and sentences are *au fond* no more than tools which may be used to perform various speech acts, and that an account of their meanings must yield an explanation—in tandem, no doubt, with more general conversational principles, such as those of Grice—of how they assist in the performance of those acts. To accept so much is not to beg the question in favour of Strawson's theorist of communication-intention. Even if an account

[2] Thus Simon Blackburn: 'although there is much more to say about particular proposals for filling out each analysis, there is no reason to see them as essentially in opposition' (Blackburn 1984, 134). See also Rumfitt (1995).

of some of the diverse speech acts we perform needs to invoke speakers' audience-directed intentions, it does not follow that a description of how words and sentences contribute to the acts' performance must itself invoke such intentions. All the same, a theory which does not eventually connect the meanings of words and sentences to the speech acts they are used to perform is sterile. To quote Strawson again, it would be 'too perverse and arbitrary' to be of serious interest.

2. Acts of Telling and Their Centrality

Strawson focuses on *communicative* speech actions, utterances or inscriptions which are directed at particular audiences or readers. I follow him in this too, in part to give his thesis the fairest possible wind before criticizing it, but mainly because communicative actions do occupy a central place in our speech and writing.

This is especially clear with interrogative and imperatival sentences. When I utter an interrogative sentence, I am almost always asking *someone* something; when I utter an imperative, I am almost always telling *someone* to do something. The range of acts that may be performed by uttering a declarative sentence is wider: such utterances may convey thanks, advice, warnings, encouragement, legal verdicts, etc. Most acts in this wide range, though, are directed towards particular hearers. In fact, instances of speech or writing which are entirely free from any communicative purpose are rarer than one might at first suppose. There are, to be sure, expostulations where it is a matter of indifference to the speaker whether anyone hears him or not. However, those who keep private diaries write, in part, for the benefit of their future selves, and authors who treat of theoretical matters still do well to keep an intended reader in mind. Setting aside its status as a dramatic device, even Macbeth's soliloquy, 'If it were done when 'tis done', is an attempt by the moral, or at least prudent, parts of his soul to communicate with his ego, and hence to restrain its 'vaulting ambition'.

More relevantly for a theorist of meaning, there are words whose meanings can be explained only by reference to communicative speech acts; second person pronouns are examples. *Per contra*, I know of no expression which may only be used in uncommunicative speech. (Frege postulated an 'I' of soliloquy (Frege 1918, 66), but even sympathetic commentators have struggled to give a coherent account of its purported sense.[3]) As Strawson says, our words and sentences are

[3] 'This reinforces our previous conclusion, that there is no distinction such as Frege supposed between the "I" of soliloquy and the "I" of communication'. 'For Frege, the "I" of soliloquy, as used by Dr Lauben, must be associated with the unique manner in which Dr Lauben is given to himself… It is dubious whether such a conception is even coherent' (Dummett 1981, 126, 490).

tools. A tool shaped for communicative purposes may be used in private soliloquy, but it is the shaping purpose which determines its meaning.

A theory of meaning must, in the end, say how sentences and words contribute to the performance of the entire gamut of speech acts. However, to quote Strawson once more, 'that is not a task for one lecture; or for one man' (Strawson 1970, 171). To limit the field to something manageable, I shall focus here on what I call *tellings*—utterances and inscriptions in which the speaker or writer, *S*, tells or informs an audience or reader, *H*, that such-and-such is the case.

Why take tellings to be a paradigm case of communicative speech? The best reason rests on two premises. The first is that communicative acts are of value to us primarily—not exclusively, but primarily—because they enable us to share knowledge with others. The second is that the speech act of telling is the main vehicle for this sort of sharing of knowledge. If a speaker *S* knows that *p*, and tells an audience *H* that *p*, then, if *H* understands what she has been told, she is, in the normal course, in a position herself to come to know that *p*. To be sure, there are many cases in which a telling that *p* does not result in *H*'s knowing that *p*: *S* may not himself know that *p*; *H* may misunderstand the telling; *H* may be unable to bring herself to believe that *p*. On the other side, it must also be conceded that an audience can come to know things which the speaker is not telling her. An interrogator who already knows that not *p* will not credit a speaker who tells her that *p*, but she may still gain valuable knowledge (e.g. about what the speaker is most anxious to conceal) from the fact that he chooses to tell her that. These caveats are important, for an account of telling must distinguish cases in which someone is told that *p* from others in which they come to learn that *p* as a result of hearing something a speaker says. The caveats do not, though, compromise the claim that acts of telling are central to the sharing of knowledge.

3. Strawson's Account of Telling

What is it for *S* to tell *H* that *p*?

While Strawson does not directly answer this question in 'Meaning and Truth', we can reconstruct his preferred account. A speaker engaged in an attempt to communicate, he says,

> might have, as one of his intentions in executing his utterance, that of bringing his audience to think that he, the utterer, believes some proposition, say the proposition that *p*; and he might intend this intention to be wholly overt, to be clearly recognized by the audience. Or again, he might have the intention of bringing his audience to think that he, the utterer, wants his audience to perform some action, say *a*; and he might intend this intention to be wholly overt, to be clearly recognized by the audience. Then, provided certain other conditions on

> utterer's intentions are fulfilled, the utterer may be said, in the relevant sense, to mean something by his utterance: specifically, to mean that *p*, in the declarative mode, in the first case and to mean, in the imperative mode, that the audience is to perform action *a* in the second case. Grice, for one, has given us reason to think that, with sufficient care, and far greater refinement than I have indicated, it is possible to expound such a concept of communication-intention or, as he calls it, utterer's meaning, which is proof against objection and which does not presuppose the notion of linguistic meaning. (Strawson 1970, 172–3)

In his first paper on 'Meaning', Grice contrasted Herod's presenting Salome with the head of John the Baptist on a charger with the sort of meaningful act he was concerned with, and wrote that 'what we want to find is the difference between "deliberately and openly letting someone know" and "telling" and between "getting someone to think" and "telling"' (Grice 1957, 382). In the case of declarative utterances, then, there is good reason to equate Grice's official target notion of 'non-natural meaning' with 'telling'. At any rate, in a paper of 1964 in which he proposed a refinement to Grice's analysis, Strawson expressly presented the *analysandum* as 'telling him "something"' (Strawson 1964, 156). We may, then, read Strawson as proposing an analysis of '*S* tells *H* that *p*' whereby it means:

S intends *H*

(1) to come to believe that he, *S*, believes that *p*;

(2) to recognize intention (1);

(3) to come to believe that he, *S*, believes that *p* in part because *H* recognizes intention (1); and

(4) to recognize his intention to get *H* to recognize intention (1).

(Condition (4) is not to be found in Grice's original paper but was added by Strawson (1964, 157) in an attempt to capture an aspect of the 'overtness' of communicative utterance which he thought Grice had missed.) In the terms of the Inaugural Lecture, then, '*S* tells *H* that *p*' is to be analysed as a species of 'Audience Directed Belief Expression' (ADBE; Strawson 1970, 185).

Strawson is well aware that many speech acts—indeed, many communicative speech acts which are performed by uttering declarative sentences—do not even purport to express the speaker's beliefs. He mentions (Strawson 1970, 180–1) *expressly supposing*, which I take to be the act of putting forward some proposition for consideration or investigation, as when a mathematician proposes a hypothesis for either proof or refutation, but not necessarily as something he believes. For Strawson, though, even this sort of case depends on the assertoric mode of speech and thereby involves the notion of belief. For an express supposition must have a *content*—it must be a supposition *that p*—and, when a philosopher comes to elucidate the notion of content, 'it is reasonable to regard [the acts] of statement or

assertion as having an especially central position' (Strawson 1970, 181). A merely suppositional use of a declarative sentence, Strawson thinks, inherits its content from the corresponding assertion, which in turn gets its content from the belief thereby expressed. In the 'fundamental case of stating or asserting', the 'rules determining the conventional meaning of the sentence join with the contextual conditions of its utterance to determine what the belief in question *is*... And in determining what the belief in question is in such a case, the rules determine what statement is made in such a case. To determine the former *is* to determine the latter' (Strawson 1970, 181). We can now see why, in the master argument against the truth-conditional semantic theorist which I sketched at the outset, Strawson maintains that 'when we come to try to explain in general what it is to say something true, to express a true proposition, reference to belief or to assertion (and thereby to belief) is inescapable' (Strawson 1970, 189). One can begin the task of explaining truth as it applies to a supposition by saying: 'one who expresses a supposition expresses a true supposition if and only if things are as, in expressing that supposition, the way he expressly supposes them to be' (Strawson 1970, 180). But this can only be a beginning. For when we further ask—as ask we must—what is the way the speaker expressly supposes things to be, we shall be referred first to the way a speaker who made the corresponding assertion would thereby *state* things to be, and then to the belief that such a statement would be understood to express.

The idea that a declarative sentence's meaning derives from its assertive uses has been oddly popular in the philosophy of language. (For all his differences with Strawson, Michael Dummett accepted a version of the same idea.[4]) I say 'oddly' because there are many declarative sentences whose meaning we can readily grasp but assertive uses of which make no sense: examples include variants of Moore's Paradox such as 'It is raining but no one is asserting that it is raining'. I shall return to this (in §8), but first I want to challenge Strawson's key claim about telling—namely that it is to be analysed as a species of ADBE.

We need not trouble ourselves over the niceties of the various attempts to capture the relevant form of 'overtness', for Strawson's claim falls at the first

[4] (1) From the 1970s onwards—although perhaps not earlier—Dummett held that 'under any theory of meaning whatever—at least, any theory of meaning which admits a distinction like that Frege drew between *sense* and *force*—we can represent the meaning (sense) of a sentence as given by the condition for it to be true, on some appropriate way of construing "true": the problem is not whether meaning is to be explained in terms of truth-conditions, but of what notion of truth is admissible' (Dummett 1978, xxii). It was on this basis that Dummett argued against realist notions of truth: if truth were to transcend what we can verify, he contended, then stating the conditions under which a sentence is true could not specify its sense. The requirement that truth-conditions should specify senses, then, imposes substantial and unexpected constraints on the notion of truth itself. (2) Dummett also held, though, that the notion of truth was itself a refinement of a concept which is applicable only to assertions: 'Any workable account of assertion must recognize that an assertion is judged by objective standards of correctness... It is from these primitive conceptions of the correctness or incorrectness of an assertion that the notions of truth and falsity take their origin' (Dummett 1976, 83). For Dummett too, then, albeit less directly, the notion (sc. of a truth-condition) which is needed to specify a declarative sentence's content derives from a concept (sc. of correctness) which applies only to assertive uses of such sentences.

hurdle. Condition (1) in his analysis implies that a necessary condition for *S* to tell *H* that *p* is that *S* should intend *H* to come to believe that he, *S*, believes that *p*. However, *S* can tell *H* that *p* when this condition is not met. I cited a case of this kind more than twenty-five years ago, as part of my first published attempt to come to terms with Strawson's Inaugural Lecture (Rumfitt 1995). The 'Birmingham Six' were Irishmen who were arrested on suspicion of murder, and later convicted, following the bombing of two public houses in Birmingham in November 1974. Two of the Six had tested positive on the Griess Test, which the West Midlands Police then took to show conclusively that they had handled explosives. (It was later established that the positive result was due to their having touched laminated playing cards.) Consider, then, an utterance by one of the suspects, *S*, during his interrogation by the police: 'I played no part in planting the bombs.' In the circumstances, it would soon have become clear to *S* that there was absolutely no chance of bringing it about that the audience, *H*, would come to believe that he, *S*, believed that he had played no part in planting the bombs. However, a plausible principle about intention says that one cannot intend to do something unless one sees some chance of success. If that is right, then *S* could not, at the time of his interrogation, have intended that *H* should come to believe that he, *S*, believed that he had played no part in planting the bombs. That is, condition (1) of Strawson's analysis was not, and could not have been, fulfilled. For all that, it seems clear that in making his utterance, *S told H* that he had played no part in planting the bombs. Although he failed to *persuade H* of his sincerity, *S* succeeded in telling him. *S* could truly say at the subsequent trial that he had protested his innocence when interviewed by the police.

The principle about intention on which this argument rests is due to Grice: 'it is in general true that one cannot have intentions to achieve results which one sees no chance of achieving' (Grice 1969, 158). I still find this principle compelling: it is part of what distinguishes intending that *p* from merely wishing that *p*. The force of the counterexample to Strawson's analysis of telling, though, does not depend upon it. The key point is simply this. On Strawson's account, the primary intention of someone who tells *H* that *p* is to get *H* to believe that he, the speaker, believes that *p*. It follows from this that the speaker cannot succeed in telling *H* that *p* unless that intention is fulfilled. The case shows, though, that a speaker can succeed in telling *H* that *p* even when *H* is not brought to believe that the speaker believes that *p*. So Strawson's analysis of telling is wrong.

4. McDowell's Account of Telling

What might a correct account be?

In 'Meaning, Communication, and Knowledge', his commentary on Strawson's Inaugural Lecture, John McDowell objects that 'the primary point of making

assertions is not to instil into others beliefs about one's own beliefs, but to inform others—to let them know—about the subject matter of one's assertions (which need not be, though of course it may be, the asserter's beliefs)' (McDowell 1980, 127). McDowell's observation is correct so far as it goes, and it suggests an emendation to Strawson's analysis whereby condition (1) is replaced by the following:

> *S* intends *H*
>
> (1′) to come to believe that *p*.

This alteration, however, would not really help, for the emended analysis is vulnerable to the same objection as the original. In the Birmingham Six example, there was also no chance of *S*'s bringing *H* to believe that *S* had played no part in planting the bombs.

McDowell does not himself propose the emendation. He makes the remark just quoted en route to an account of telling which differs more radically from Strawson's. Earlier, I justified focusing on telling by pointing out that instances of that speech act are the main way people gain knowledge from hearing others speak. McDowell goes much further. For him, communication, in the most basic sense of the word, simply *is* 'the transmission of knowledge', or 'the instilling of information' (McDowell 1980, 128, 133).[5] 'When the communicative process functions properly', he elaborates,

> sensory confrontation with a piece of communicative behaviour has the same impact on the cognitive state of a perceiver as sensory confrontation with the state of affairs which the behaviour, as we may say, represents; elements of the communicative repertoire serve as epistemic surrogates for represented states of affairs. (McDowell 1980, 134)

McDowell argues for this view by way of an extended comparison between human acts of telling and the instinctive sounds made by unselfconscious creatures. When a bird instinctively emits a characteristic sort of squawk on seeing a predator,

> other birds might acquire, on hearing such a squawk, a propensity towards behaviour appropriate to the proximity of a predator (flight, increased caution in feeding, or whatever). This propensity might match a propensity they would

[5] McDowell recognizes that we count people as having communicated even when no knowledge is transferred (for example, because the hearer does not believe the speaker). He insists, though, that this application of the concept occupies a 'second level' which has to be understood by reference to an underlying level at which 'communication takes place . . . only when information is actually transmitted about the topic of discourse' (McDowell 1980, 131).

> have acquired if they had seen the predator themselves. In such a case we can regard the squawk as a further mode of sensitivity to the presence of predators, over and above more direct kinds of perception. (McDowell 1980, 129)

He goes on to suggest that this sort of atavistic propensity provides the best explanation of how it is that we can gain knowledge by being told. 'It seems unpromising to suppose', he writes,

> that knowledge by <testimony> owes its status as knowledge, quite generally, to the knower's possessing a cogent argument to the truth of what he knows from the supposed reliability of the speaker. A more attractive line of thought is that the linguistic repertoire retains, through the alteration in nature involved in the onset of self-consciousness, a form of the characteristic which was essential to its pre-linguistic ancestor: in suitable circumstances (to be spelled out in any fuller elaboration of this idea) its exercises are cognitive stand-ins for the states of affairs which they represent. (McDowell 1980, 135)

I want to argue, though, that this cannot be the best explanation of how we humans can acquire knowledge by being told. It cannot be that because it is not a good explanation.

My objection is not to McDowell's treatment of animal communication. His 'line of thought' may look like armchair speculation, but in fact closely related ideas have been found fruitful by those engaged in investigating communication between non-linguistic animals. A well-known case, involving creatures further up the evolutionary scale than birds, is the alarm calls of vervet monkeys. Vervets have three kinds of call for different kinds of predator, calls which prompt very different kinds of responsive behaviour. On spotting a leopard, a vervet makes a 'bark' and monkeys who hear this call run up a tree. On spotting a python, a vervet makes a 'chutter' call; monkeys who hear this stand on tiptoe and look closely at the ground. On seeing a martial eagle, a vervet makes a 'cough' and monkeys who hear this call dive under bushes. What is particularly significant is that this last call is, in part, learned. Baby vervets are innately disposed to 'cough' on seeing anything in the sky, including falling leaves, but during infancy they learn to narrow down the class of things on sight of which they give the cough. When fully mature, they give the call only when they see an eagle. Even when the responses are not purely instinctual, then, we can still conceptualize their contents in the way McDowell suggests, namely, as an additional mode of sensitivity to various kinds of predator (see Hurford 2014, 41 and 43).

Contra McDowell, some people may still doubt if the alarm calls of lower animals have any representational content. The vervet's 'cough' call is, in part, a learned response. All the same, the reaction to it—that of diving under a bush—may yet be a reflex; and if it is simply a reflex, there is no warrant for the thesis

that hearing the call provides information about the monkey's environment. There is, though, evidence that tells against the hypothesis that responses of this kind are always reflexes. The relevant observations this time concern Diana monkeys, which, like vervets, have different alarm calls for leopards and eagles. Experimenters recorded four different sounds: a leopard alarm call, the growl of an actual leopard, an eagle alarm call, and the screech of an actual eagle. They then played back these sounds, in different orders, to group of monkeys in their natural habitat (an African tropical forest). In the first scenario, the leopard alarm call was followed five minutes later by the leopard's growl and (after a long pause) the eagle alarm call was followed five minutes later by the eagle's screech. In the second scenario, the leopard alarm call was followed five minutes later by the eagle's screech, and (after a long pause) the eagle alarm call was followed five minutes later by the leopard's growl. In both phases of the second scenario, the monkeys showed considerably more alarm than in any phase of the first scenario. This suggests that the responses to calls are not purely reflexive, but that the monkeys form expectations about their environment as a result of hearing them. If that is right, then it is reasonable to ascribe to the calls some primitive representational content (Hurford 2014, 69–70).

For these reasons, I accept McDowell's account as an outline of a theory of animal communication. We may also accept, for the sake of argument, his speculative suggestion that human language evolved from calls of this kind. I deny, though, that McDowell provides a remotely plausible account of telling as a form of communication between mature human beings. The kernel of his account is the claim that 'sensory confrontation with a piece of communicative behaviour has the same impact on the cognitive state of a perceiver as sensory confrontation with the state of affairs which the behaviour . . . represents'. However, while human communicative behaviour can always be 'confronted' in experience, many of the states of affairs which such behaviour represents cannot. Someone may tell me that π is a transcendental number, and what they tell me is the case. Yet it makes no sense to speak of a 'sensory confrontation' with the state of affairs of π's being transcendental. As a general description of acts of telling, then, McDowell's account will not do.

What is worse, his account fails even when applied to tellings whose contents consist in the obtaining of perceptible states of affairs. Suppose John tells me that Sarah is in the Wharton Room. In this case, it at least makes sense to speak of a 'sensory confrontation' with the relevant state of affairs. An example of such a confrontation, I take it, would be my seeing Sarah in the Wharton Room. It is, though, extremely implausible to claim that hearing John say that Sarah is in the Wharton Room has 'the same impact on my cognitive state' as seeing her there. In both cases, we may grant, the end result may be my learning—my coming to know—where Sarah is, but there is a crucial difference in how that result is attained. If I see Sarah in the Wharton Room, an account of how I know that

she is there will not involve John at all. That, however, cannot possibly be the case when I hear John say that she is there. My trusting him on this matter—my believing him, as we say—is clearly crucial to any explanation of how I come to know where Sarah is as a result of being told. McDowell may be correct when he writes that my acquiring knowledge in such a case cannot be due, 'quite generally, to [my] possessing a cogent argument to the truth of what [I] know from the supposed reliability of the speaker'. However, my learning something by being told must in *some* way involve my relationship with the speaker. Describing that relationship precisely is a difficult task to which we must soon turn. It cannot be right, though, to delete the audience's belief or trust in the speaker from the description of the epistemic situation, which is what McDowell's account does.

5. A Better Account of Telling

Our question, then, remains: what is it for *S* to tell *H* that *p*?

According to C.S. Peirce, 'to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth' (Peirce 1934, 384). Even in a situation where *S* is addressing *H*, *S* can assert that *p* without telling *H* that *p*. When I lead *H*, a student, through a formal proof that *p*, I am addressing her, and in concluding the proof I shall assert that *p*. However, although I have performed communicative speech acts which have brought her to know that *p*, I have not *told* her that *p*. Why not?

Whatever its merits as an analysis of assertion—a notion which is, in any case, something of a philosopher's term of art—Peirce's proposal suggests a cognate account of telling which provides an answer to this question. For *S* to tell *H* that *p* is for *S* to make himself responsible *to H* for the truth of the claim that *p*. It is, moreover, to do that precisely by offering *H* his *assurance* or *guarantee* of the truth of *p*. I take this formulation from the illuminating discussion of telling in Richard Moran's *The Exchange of Words*: 'the speaker, in presenting her utterance as an *assertion*, one with the force of *telling* the audience something, presents herself as *accountable* for the truth of what she says, and in doing so offers a kind of guarantee for this truth' (Moran 2018, 51; see also Hinchman 2014, from where I take the term 'assurance'). This account explains why leading *H* through a proof of *p* is not a case of telling her that *p*. In leading *H* through the proof, I am not offering her *my* assurance of the truth of *p*. To the contrary, I am trying to bring her to a point where she does not need my guarantee of that, or indeed anyone else's. For, once she apprehends the proof, she will have her own reason for believing that *p*.

This Peirce-inspired account of telling also deals well with the example which caused trouble for Strawson's analysis. In speaking as he did, the suspect in Birmingham knew there was no chance of persuading his audience that he had not planted the bombs, nor of persuading the audience that he believed that he had not planted the bombs. All the same, in speaking as he did, the suspect could,

and did, offer his assurance of the truth of that claim. The audience rebuffed the offer, but it was still made. By making the offer, the suspect made himself responsible to the police for the truth of his claim. Making himself so responsible, or so accountable, was crucial to his protestation of innocence.

On this conception, telling is a social act whose performance creates a particular relationship between speaker and audience. The relationship in question has a number of features. First and most obviously, it puts *H* in a position to complain to *S* in the event that the claim turns out to be untrue. I can protest to John 'You told me that Sarah is in the Wharton Room, but she isn't there.' It is an important feature of the relationship that I may still make this complaint even if I never believed what I was told. The act of telling will have been successfully performed if the audience receives the *offer* of an assurance that such-and-such is the case. Moreover, the audience can take up the offer without believing what he is told. One may respond to a far-fetched claim by saying 'I'll hold you to that, even though I suspect it's baloney.' In taking up the offer, the audience acquires the right to complain if it turns out to be defective, regardless of whether he believes it.

Another important feature of the relationship created between speaker and audience is that a third party cannot complain in the same terms. If Fred overhears John telling me that Sarah is in the Wharton Room, comes thereby to believe as much, but later discovers that what John said is false, he will think less of John as a potential informant, and he will be entitled to tell others that John is an unreliable source of information about people's whereabouts. He cannot, though, complain to John in the way that I did. He cannot protest 'What you told me is false', for John did not tell him anything. The conception of telling as offering an assurance explains this. The speaker will have made the offer *to* a particular audience (which may of course include more than one person). If the offer turns out to be defective, anyone who discovers as much will take that into account in assessing the trustworthiness of the speaker. Only the members of the intended audience, though, have standing to complain *to* the speaker rather than complain *about* him, for it was only to them that the offer was made.

It is helpful, up to a point, to compare the guarantee of truth offered by a speaker in telling someone something with a financial guarantee. If I guarantee my son's debts, I become liable to repay his creditors in the event that he is unable to do so. Similarly, if I tell you that p, I may be asked to answer sceptics about p in the event that you cannot do so. If I tell you that π is a transcendental number without giving you a proof, you can fairly refer a sceptic about that proposition to me: 'It was Rumfitt who told me this; you had best take it up with him.'

A deep problem in epistemology is to say how, if at all, the creation of these social relationships provides an epistemic reason for a hearer to believe what he has been told. I write here of 'hearers' and of 'what has been told', for an adequate account of the matter needs to explain why it is not only the intended audience who may acquire such a reason. Eavesdropping Fred may have just as much

reason as I do to believe that Sarah is in the Wharton Room. I shall not try to address this problem here.[6] I note, though, that a natural approach to it—one which accords a central place to the notion of *believing the speaker*—is in no way incommoded by the fact just cited. For even though Fred was not the intended audience, he can still be said to have *believed John* just as readily as I (the addressee) can.

6. The Role of Truth-Conditions in Telling

Rather than pursue this discussion into the epistemology of testimony, I want to return to my main theme and consider whether the proposed analysis of telling casts any light on the Homeric struggle between the theorists of communication-intention and the theorists of formal semantics. I think it does, initially by exposing the fallacy in Strawson's argument in favour of the first party to the dispute.

That argument, it will be recalled, ran as follows. The theorist of formal semantics is right to say: 'To know the meaning of a declarative sentence is to know under what conditions one who utters it says something true.' By itself, though, that claim does not take us very far, for the notion of saying something true demands explanation. An adequate explanation, Strawson contends, will have to involve such notions as 'expresses such-and-such a proposition' or 'expresses the thought that *p*', and these notions can themselves be explained only by reference to acts of telling and cognate ADBEs. That is why he holds the theorist of communication-intention's account of meaning to be fundamental. On the conception of telling recommended here, however, this explanatory story unravels. Telling cannot satisfactorily be analysed as a form of ADBE. Instead, it is a speech act in which the speaker offers an audience his assurance that the sentence uttered expresses a truth. It is here that the theorist of formal semantics sees *his* chance. On the recommended conception, the notion of truth is internal to that of telling. Might not the cognate notion of a truth-condition also be involved in an adequate account of that act?

There is a simple and powerful argument for an affirmative answer. For let us reflect on the situation of a speaker who wants to tell someone something. Suppose, for example, that I want to tell my monoglot German friend Kurt that dogs bark. Given our analysis of telling, what this means is that I want to offer Kurt my assurance that dogs bark. That account of my goal sounds right, but how am I to achieve it? I shall have to say something, but how shall I choose what to say? I shall need to find a sentence, *A*, such that Kurt will take my utterance of *A* (in that context) *as* offering him my assurance that dogs bark. But what has to obtain for me to have any reason to expect that Kurt will take my utterance of *A* in that way?

[6] For illuminating discussions, see Hinchman (2014) and Moran (2018, chap. 2).

Two factors must be in place for this expectation to be reasonable. First, there has to be some general practice, to which both Kurt and I are parties, of using sentences of a certain sort so as to offer assurances of this kind. Second, a particular sentence must have a particular property—a property related to that general practice—which make it reasonable to expect Kurt to hear an utterance of that sentence as offering the specific assurance that dogs bark. Now when we try to articulate what this general practice is, and what the related properties of sentences are, the notion of truth, and a certain conception of a truth-condition, force their way in as indispensable parts of the story. For the general practice which makes any act of telling possible is surely this: when a speaker *S* directs a declarative sentence *A* to an audience *H*, *H* will take *S* to have offered *H* his assurance that *A* expresses a truth, in the context in which it was uttered. To be sure, the practice is general, not universal. There will be many occasions on which the speaker is speaking flippantly, or ironically, or manifestly joking, etc., and on these occasions the audience will not take the speaker to have assured anyone of anything. Such occasions apart, though, the audience will take the speaker to have offered his assurance of the truth of the declarative sentence uttered, and the speaker will know as much.

As regards the second factor, assuming that this is the right account of the general practice of telling, the relevant property of the particular sentence uttered is pretty well determined. I want to offer Kurt my assurance that dogs bark. I know that if I utter sentence *A* in a context where my utterance will be taken seriously, Kurt will take me to have offered him my assurance that *A* expresses a truth (as uttered in that context). So I shall select an *A* which I know Kurt will take to express a truth (in the context of utterance) *only if* dogs bark. For in that case, Kurt will move from taking me to have offered him my assurance that *A* expresses a truth, to taking me to have offered him my assurance that dogs bark. Generally, if a speaker *S* has reason to tell *H* that *p*, *S* also has reason to utter a sentence *A* which he knows *H* will take to express a truth (in the context of utterance) *only if p*.

In fact, further reflection shows that the relationship between Kurt and *A* needs to satisfy an additional requirement. One sentence that meets the condition stated at the end of the last paragraph is '*Hunde bellen und England wird die nächste Weltmeisterschaft gewinnen*.' For I know that Kurt will take that sentence to express a truth only if dogs bark and England will win the next World Cup, from which I may reasonably expect him to infer that it expresses a truth only if dogs bark. It is clear, though, that this would be a poor choice of sentence to utter if *all* I want to tell Kurt is that dogs bark. For in uttering the sentence I would also be offering Kurt my assurance that England will win the next World Cup, and this is something I may not want to do. Certainly, if my aim is simply to tell Kurt that dogs bark, making that choice would leave me unnecessarily liable to complaint. In telling Kurt that dogs bark, I unavoidably risk complaint should it turn out that they do not. However, uttering the conjunctive sentence under consideration would also leave me at risk in the event that England does not win the next

World Cup. The suggested choice of sentence, then, would be poor because, in making it, I would unnecessarily jeopardize my reputation as a reliable and trustworthy interlocutor. Generalizing this consideration, we see that there is a further condition which must obtain between Kurt and a well-chosen sentence. It is not enough that Kurt should take the sentence I utter to express a truth (as uttered in the relevant context) *only if* dogs bark. He must also take it to express a truth (as uttered in that context) *if* dogs bark. Putting the two conditions together, we conclude that a well-chosen sentence must be such that Kurt will take an utterance of it to express a truth (in the relevant context) *if and only if* dogs bark. Moreover, for my choice to be fully reasonable I shall need to *know* that Kurt will take the sentence I utter to express a truth if and only if dogs bark.

7. Knowledge of Truth-Conditions: The Fourfold Inferential Disposition

The knowledge I am counting on Kurt's having, then, is knowledge that '*Hunde bellen*' (as uttered in the relevant context) expresses a truth *if and only if* dogs bark. That may look like ordinary propositional knowledge. When we analyse the situation more closely, though, we see that it is not.

I aim to offer Kurt my assurance that dogs bark. I fulfil this goal by uttering a sentence, *A*, whose truth Kurt will take me to have guaranteed. If my goal is to be fulfilled, what is required of the relationship between Kurt and *A*? What is essential is that Kurt should be disposed to *infer* from the premise that *A* expresses a truth to the conclusion that dogs bark. His being so disposed is not equivalent to his knowing, or believing, any single proposition. In particular, it is not equivalent to his knowing the conditional proposition that dogs bark if '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth. It is certainly not equivalent to his knowing the pertinent material conditional, i.e. to his knowing that either '*Hunde bellen*' does not express a truth or dogs bark. For Kurt could know *that* while failing to notice that it combines with the premise that '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth to entail that dogs bark, and hence not being disposed to infer from that premise to the conclusion that dogs bark. Yet it is Kurt's having that inferential disposition which is vital to the achievement of my communicative goal. Finally, I need to know, at least implicitly, that Kurt has that disposition if I am to have good reason to direct the words '*Hunde bellen*' towards him. It may be granted that I shall have succeeded in telling Kurt that dogs bark if, on the basis of some half-remembered German lessons, I utter the words '*Hunde bellen*', even though those half memories do not amount to present knowledge. Success of that kind is fluky, though. If I am reliably to find sentences which Kurt will take to have certain truth-conditions, that will be because I possess the linguistic capability called 'knowing German'.

The like goes for the disposition to make the converse inference. If I want to tell Kurt that dogs bark but no more than that, I shall choose to utter a sentence, *A*, for which I know that Kurt will take my guarantee that *A* expresses a truth to have been fulfilled in any circumstance where dogs bark. So, when I choose to utter '*Hunde bellen*', I am relying on Kurt's being disposed to infer from the premise that dogs bark to the conclusion that '*Hunde bellen*' (as uttered by me in the relevant context) expresses a truth. This inferential disposition, too, is not equivalent to knowledge of, or belief in, any single proposition. In particular, it is not equivalent to the knowledge that either '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth or dogs do not bark. As before, Kurt could know that proposition without being disposed to infer from the premise that dogs bark to the conclusion that '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth. What I need to select, then, is a sentence *A* for which Kurt is disposed to make a *two-way inference*: from the premise that *A* expresses a truth to the conclusion that dogs bark, and conversely.

Competent German speakers may be said to know that the sentence '*Hunde bellen*' (when uttered in a context where it will be heard *as* a German sentence) expresses a truth *if and only if* dogs bark. The knowledge thereby attributed to them, though, is a certain inferential disposition and not ordinary propositional knowledge. The force of 'knows' in this context is that the disposition in question is grounded in a process of *learning*—in the present case, the process of having learned German. It was this use of 'knows' plus a conditional which Ryle noticed when he wrote that 'knowing "*if p, then q*" is . . . having a license or warrant to make a journey'—viz., the intellectual journey from the antecedent '*p*' to the consequent '*q*' (Ryle 1950, 250). *Pace* Ryle, I do not imagine that this dictum provides an adequate general account of the meaning of the English conditional; it may even be that this use of the conditional is somewhat sloppy. In the analysis of telling, though, we can always find a less sloppy formulation by specifying the inferences which the speaker relies on the audience's being disposed to make.

Further reflection on the relationship which must obtain between speaker and audience in successful acts of telling shows, indeed, that *S* must take *H* to have two additional inferential dispositions. As we saw, any speaker who tells someone something puts some of his own credibility on the line. When John tells me 'Sarah is in the Wharton Room', he offers me his assurance of the truth of the sentence he utters; he will lose credit if what he assures me of turns out not to be the case. We mark this loss of credit by saying: 'John has spoken falsely' or 'John's statement is false', and the loss will accrue in any circumstance where Sarah is not in the Wharton Room. A sentence *A* which is selected in order to tell *H* that *p*, then, will have a third property: *H* will be disposed to infer from the premise that not *p* to the conclusion that *A* (as uttered in the relevant context) expresses a falsehood.[7]

[7] By 'the premise that not *p*', I mean a premise whose content is the negation of the proposition that *p* (and similarly for 'the conclusion that not *p*' in the next paragraph). How best to explicate the notion

Finally, consideration of another sort of situation shows that a teller will take an audience to have a fourth disposition. Suppose I am part of an audience listening to a politician who tells us 'Widget exports to the EU have rebounded above their pre-Brexit level.' Suppose also that I am sitting beside a statistician in the Department of Trade who responds to this claim by whispering in my ear, 'That's false'. Suppose, finally, that I accept the statistician's counter-claim. Then I shall conclude that widget exports to the EU have *not* rebounded above their pre-Brexit level. In telling us what he did, the politician knew that an audience who came to think that he had spoken falsely would reach precisely my conclusion. Generally, a speaker who uses *A* to tell *H* that *p* will take *H* to be disposed to infer from the premise that *A* expresses a falsehood to the conclusion that not *p*. A teller, then, will expect an audience to have a *fourfold inferential disposition*.

A Homeric struggle, Strawson wrote, calls for 'living captains and benevolent shades' (Strawson 1970, 172). The only then-living officer in the army of formal semanticists whose work he quoted was Donald Davidson (see Strawson 1970, 176–7). It should be clear that the account of truth-conditions which has emerged from our analysis of telling differs radically from Davidson's. For Davidson, knowing that '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth if and only if dogs bark precisely *is* a piece of propositional knowledge. Specifically, it is the knowledge that both (1) either '*Hunde bellen*' does not express a truth or dogs bark and (2) either dogs do not bark or '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth.[8] For the reasons explained above, this account will not do.

In fact, there is no single proposition, knowledge of which will serve. Suppose we had said (overcoming Davidson's taboo on intensional notions) that the crucial condition on *A* is that Kurt should know that *A means* that dogs bark. Again, we would have a problem, for Kurt might know that '*Hunde bellen*' means that dogs bark while not being disposed to infer from the premise that '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth to the conclusion that dogs bark. The premises that '*Hunde bellen*' means that dogs bark, and that '*Hunde bellen*' expresses a truth, jointly entail that dogs bark; that is, they necessarily imply that conclusion.[9] There is,

of negation is a difficult problem in philosophical logic. When *A* says that *p*, it cannot be assumed that the result of prefacing *A* with the words 'It is not the case that' expresses the negation of *p*. 'It is not the case that Napoleon, who recognized the danger to his right flank, himself led his guards against the enemy position' does not express the negation of 'Napoleon, who recognized the danger to his right flank, himself led his guards against the enemy position', for neither sentence is true if Napoleon was unaware of the danger.

[8] Davidson was led to focus on *T*-sentences in the form '*s* is true if and only if *p*' because he proposed to 'sweep away the obscure "means that" [in the intensional locution "*s* means that *p*"], provide the sentence that replaces "*p*" with a proper sentential connective, and supply the description that replaces "*s*" with its own predicate' (Davidson 1967, 23). The context makes it clear that 'proper' here means 'extensional'. This is confirmed by the discussion of the rogue but nevertheless true *T*-sentence ' "Snow is white" is true if and only if grass is green' at Davidson (1967, 25–6). For an introduction to Davidsonian truth-conditional semantics, see Lepore and Ludwig (2007).

[9] The entailment is not formally valid, but that is true of many necessary implications. Compare the old chestnut 'It is red all over; so it is not green all over.'

however, no general requirement that a rational thinker must be disposed to infer from any premises which he accepts to any conclusion which those premises entail. To the contrary, it is clear that our inferential dispositions barely begin to cover the range of entailments of things which we accept (see Harman 1986). I accept that cats do not bark, and this proposition entails that the moon is made of cheese if and only if either cats bark or the moon is made of cheese. All the same, I am not disposed to move from accepting that cats do not bark to accepting that conclusion. What matters for successful telling is that the audience is reliably disposed to make (and is known to be disposed to make) the relevant fourfold inference: from '*A* expresses a truth' to '*p*'; from '*p*' to '*A* expresses a truth'; from 'not *p*' to '*A* expresses a falsehood'; and from '*A* expresses a falsehood' to 'not *p*'. Being so disposed is not equivalent to knowledge of any single proposition.

8. The Homeric Struggle Resolved

Where does this leave Strawson's Homeric struggle between the theorists of communication-intention and the theorists of formal semantics?

As I explained in §6, our analysis of telling exposes the fallacy in Strawson's argument in favour of the theorists of communication-intention. That argument requires telling to be an ADBE; it is not. But what about his conclusion? Was he wrong to give the palm to the theorists of communication-intention? He allowed that the *dictum* 'to know the meaning of a declarative sentence is to know under what conditions one who utters it says something true' was itself true. Has our discussion shown anything more than that this *dictum* is, indeed, true?

I think our analysis does refute Strawson's conclusion. On Strawson's view, a telling's content *ipso facto* determines the conditions under which it is true, but the telling's content is determined first, as that of the belief the telling expresses. On our account, beliefs do not enter the picture, and truth-conditions are not inherited from their contents. Rather, a sentence's truth-conditions are determined by the syntactic and semantic rules of the language to which it belongs, alongside relevant contextual factors. This account of what determines linguistic content is fundamentally at odds with Strawson's.

To say so much, though, is not to claim that the theorists of formal semantics are the victors in the Homeric struggle. The proper conclusion is that an adequate philosophical account of meaning—and of the content of speech acts—will have to do what has been attempted here for the case of telling, and analyse those acts so as to reveal how syntactic and semantic rules contribute to their successful performance. 'There is no hope', Strawson says, 'of elucidating the notion of the content of such speech acts <as stating, expressly supposing, and so on> without paying some attention to the notions of those speech acts themselves' (Strawson 1970, 181). I agree. Where I differ is in denying that these acts are adequately

described as ADBEs. A satisfactory account of them will bring in the rules and conventions which determine truth-conditions, or the corresponding semantic features of non-declarative sentences. It need not bring in *beliefs* or their contents.

This approach has benefits when we return to the problem of saying how speech acts of different sorts can share a content. For Strawson, a non-assertive utterance such as an express supposition inherits its contents from related assertions, for assertive acts express, or purport to express, beliefs. As remarked in §3, such a view faces problems, for there are express suppositions whose contents cannot be asserted. The present account suggests a different picture of the relationship between (for example) the acts of expressly supposing that *p* and of telling someone that *p*. When a speaker expressly supposes that *p*, he does not offer his audience his assurance of the truth of the sentence he utters. The act he performs, though, may still be characterized in terms of truth and truth-conditions. For the speaker puts a sentence forward as something whose truth might fruitfully be investigated or inquired into. Moreover, in order to ensure that that investigation is one into the question *whether p*, he needs to choose a sentence, *A*, which his audience will take to express a truth (in the relevant context of utterance) *if and only if p*. As before, analysis shows that this amounts to the audience's being disposed to make a particular fourfold inference. For the speaker needs to choose an *A* for which, if the audience discovers that *p*, it will infer that *A* is true; and for which, if it discovers that not *p*, it will infer that *A* is false. It is these inferential dispositions which ensure that an inquiry into the truth of *A* is an inquiry into whether *p*.

On this conception of the matter, an express supposition that *p* does not inherit its content from a telling that *p*. The conception, then, is not embarrassed by express suppositions which are unassertible, such as 'Suppose it is raining but no one is asserting that it is raining.' Rather, the rules which determine under what conditions the uttered sentence expresses a truth determine the contents of both kinds of speech act. They do this because, different as the acts are, both involve uttering a sentence which has truth-conditions. The rules which determine those truth-conditions are the crucial common factor in determining the contents of the various speech acts which may be performed by uttering declarative sentences.

9. Conclusion

In this way, Strawson's Homeric struggle can be brought to a peaceful conclusion. Our analysis also offers hope for the irenic resolution of another long-lasting battle. It is common for philosophers of language to write as though 'inferentialist' accounts of the meanings of declarative sentences are fundamentally opposed to 'truth-conditional' theories. It is, of course, possible to fill out those labels in such a way that the results are incompatible. Our account of sentential meaning,

though, combines elements of both. Knowledge of truth-conditions is vital to communicative success; yet knowledge of truth-conditions turns out to be the possession of a suitably grounded, and suitably reliable, set of inferential dispositions.

The shift from propositional knowledge to possession of inferential dispositions is liberating for truth-conditional semantics. In particular, it helps in dealing with certain modal constructions which have been the source of difficulties for traditional truth-theories. We shall expect an adequate semantics for German to license the inference from the premise that '*Zwei ist eine Primzahl*' expresses a truth to the conclusion that two is a prime number, and also to license the converse inference. We can then handle the modal operator '*es ist notwendig daß*' by way of the following semantical *rule of proof*: given licences for the inference from the premise that *A* expresses a truth to the conclusion that *p*, and for the converse of this inference, the following inferences are also licensed: from the premise that '*Es ist notwendig daß A*' expresses a truth to the conclusion that it is necessarily the case that *p*, and *its* converse. This rule of proof licenses the inference from '*Es ist notwendig, daß Zwei eine Primzahl ist*' expresses a truth to it is necessarily the case that two is a prime number, and conversely. The licence holds good even if the German language is so conceived that it is a contingent matter what its constituent words mean. (For the importance of such semantical rules of proof, see Rumfitt 2001.)

It remains to be seen how far this approach assists the construction of semantic theories for natural languages. Reaching a judgement on that issue would take a book, at least. I am confident that the rule-based approach will prove fruitful and, while that approach diverges from Strawson's in several respects, there remains a fundamental affinity. 'As theorists', he remarked, 'we know nothing of human *language* unless we understand human *speech*' (Strawson 1970, 189). The chief aim of this chapter has been to show how an attractive and fecund conception of truth-conditions may be rooted in an analysis of the speech act of telling.

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