Opinion in Speech Act Theory

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The following discussion examines the possible status of "opinion" in speech act theory. Several arguments are presented which suggest that "opinion" are a phenomenon occurring at a fundamentally different level of abstraction than other illocutionary acts. The utilization of the concept of "frame" from the anthropological study of "the ethnography of speaking" provides a means whereby "opinion" might be formally incorporated into speech act theory as well as a methodological approach to its further investigation.

In everyday life it is frequently necessary to distinguish between facts and opinions. Judgement as to the respective status of a particular statement is typically achieved through recourse to the "real world" where the empirical validity of the statement may be ascertained. In making reference to the external world (and its presumably verifiable truths) speakers and hearers share an evaluation procedure which may be employed to determine whether a particular statement is a fact or merely an opinion. A similar approach has been utilized within linguistic philosophy where it has been assumed that propositional content may be formalized and subjected to empirical verification. However, as shall be argued below, an appeal to real world verification is an inadequate approach if one seeks to identify, distinguish and characterize the role of opinion in interactive discourse. To accomplish this goal, the important questions must be concerned with the linguistic and social features associated with the expression of opinion. If facts and opinions are conceived of as products, generated by and emerging from a discursive process, then the key to their differentiation should be sought within the linguistic structure of the text and the contextual features surrounding its production. Thus attention must be directed
toward the discovery of the varied means by which speakers and hearers mark certain statements within a discourse as being intended or interpreted as either fact or opinion.

A rejection of the primacy of propositional verification as a means of distinguishing fact from opinion is desirable for several reasons. First, it is often the case that propositional content, henceforth (p), is either not suitable or is impossible to subject to the traditional logical modes of verification.\(^1\) Secondly, and crucially for the present perspective, is the observation that in discourse, particularly interactive discourse, what is important is not whether a given proposition can be formally verified, although this may very well enter the discussion, but rather whether a given speech act is perceived by the speaker and the hearer as a statement of fact, and therefore uncontestable, or of opinion. It is this subjective, and the ensuing negotiated intersubjective, classification of instances of speech that to a great degree influences the direction of subsequent discourse. As a consequence of its role in shaping discourse, an understanding of the "sociolinguistics of opinion" would be an important step toward the formalization of the social and linguistic rules underlying the production of a wide range of texts.

The topic of "opinion" has recently been examined within at least one of the academic traditions concerned with language, linguistic philosophy. The discussion which follows will initially focus upon the philosophical approach exemplified by J. Searle's speech act theory and the status of opinion in his taxonomy of illocutionary acts. Insights and problems which arise will be noted and, finally, in an attempt to answer some of these problems and expand our understanding of the phenomenon, an alternative approach will be suggested based upon "the ethnography of speaking" and studies in social interaction.
In order to come to grips with the pragmatics of linguistic behavior, the philosophy of language has recently directed the majority of its energy towards an investigation of speech acts. Speech act theory, as formulated by its central exponent, John Searle (1965, 1969, 1976), has as its foundation concepts drawn from earlier investigations of Grice (1957) and Austin (1962).

A speech act, for Searle, is an instance of rule governed linguistic behavior produced with intention by a speaker. The notions of intention and convention (i.e. that behavior is rule governed) were adopted from Grice's (1957) characterization of meaning. Thus, following from Grice, Searle emphasizes the "essential" relationship between meaning and intention in spoken language:

In speaking a language I attempt to communicate things to my hearer by means of getting him to recognize my intention to communicate just those things....(Searle 1965:238).

The preliminary philosophical investigations of "ordinary language" published by Austin were also crucial in the development of speech act theory. While rejecting Austin's (1962) initial distinction between constatives and performatives, maintaining instead that all constatives shared implicitly the characteristics used to distinguish performatives, Searle did adopt Austin's notions of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary act. Focusing his attention upon the role of illocutionary acts, Searle (1976) reevaluated and expanded upon Austin's classification of illocutionary verbs to form a taxonomy which remains in general acceptance to this day.

Searle, in his belief that "the basic unit of human linguistic communication is the illocutionary act" (1976:1), proposed a "reasoned classification of illocutionary acts into certain basic categories or types" (1976:1). Presupposing the established distinction between the illocutionary force (F) of an
utterance and its propositional content (p), he outlined twelve criteria by which the different types of illocutionary acts could be characterized. Three of these criteria: the illocutionary point, or "essential condition" (the intention behind the speech act), the direction of fit (is the illocutionary point an attempt to make the words fit the world (↓) or the world to fit the words (↑)), and the differences in expressed psychological state or the "sincerity condition" (e.g. belief (B), intention (I), want (W) etc.), were seen as the most significant for the taxonomic purpose. From this basis five fundamental types of illocutionary acts were distinguished and symbolized as follows: representatives (↓↓B(p)), directives (↑ W(H does A)), commissives (C↑I(S does A)), expressives (EØ(p)(S/H + property)), and declarations (D↑Ø(p)). An additional class derived from the overlap of representatives and declarations was also noted.

Because of its apparent omission of a class of speech acts, commonly referred to as opinions, the comprehensiveness of Searle's taxonomy has recently been questioned. Atelsek (1980), noting the substantial role of opinion in many speech events (e.g. debate, argument, even institutional decision), initially examined the possible status of opinion within the taxonomy. Concluding that Searle's "classification is not as neat nor as consistent as it first appears" (221), it was suggested that "opinions are an additional class, one that can be characterized along the same lines as Searle's five classes" (Atelsek 1980:221). Opinions as a type of illocutionary act were symbolized as ØØ(B)(S + J(p)), where Ø is the illocutionary point common to all opinions, Ø indicates that there is no single direction of fit between words and world, (B) is the sincerity condition of belief and (S + J(p)) denotes the ascription on the part of the speaker of the judgement of a proposition to himself.
At first glance the inclusion of an additional illocutionary act seems reasonable but a reexamination of the arguments presented by Atelsek as well as a reconsideration of the "less significant" criteria for the characterization of illocutionary acts as outlined by Searle (1976) leads to a conceptually superior view of the nature of opinion as a speech act.

Atelsek's motivation for suggesting the creation of an independent class of illocutionary acts to accommodate opinions was based upon the observation that they share some but not all the criteria which characterize representatives and expressives. Representatives, according to Searle, are statements committing the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition and, as such, are an attempt to match language to the empirical world. Both these requirements are met in the following sentence:

I state that the table is red.

The validity of the (p) - the table is red - may be empirically determined and the speaker, by stating that (p), is committing himself (assuming his sincerity) to its truth. Because, as Atelsek claims, in the case of opinions, it is often impossible to literally characterize the (p) as true or false and there appears to be no single direction of fit, they do not meet the requirements and can not be considered members of the class of representatives. The sentences below were provided as evidence of this claim.

1. (I think that) this room should be painted blue.
2. (I think that) this art exhibit is lousy.

As the (p)s are subjective statements and therefore can have no true or false value associated with them, the claim is made that it would be impossible for the speaker to commit himself to the truth of the expressed proposition. Atelsek also utilizes an interpretation of inconsistency in direction of fit (where in 1.
it is world to words but in 2. it is words to world) to reject the possibility of opinions conforming to Searle's class of representatives.

Though similar to expressives in that they have no direction of fit and that they do express a psychological state, that of belief, Atelsek states that opinions fail as expressives because the psychological state need not be uttered for a successful performance of the locution. In order to express thanks a speaker must utter the word "thank" but it is not necessary to precede an opinion with "It is my opinion that...", "I think that...", or "I believe that...". This point appears to be trivial, however, for a reexamination of the class of representatives and its paradigm of verbs including thank, congratulate, apologize, condole, deplore and welcome, immediately suggests that the taxonomy is attempting to capture a feature shared by these verbs which is qualitatively different from the expression of opinion. Though Atelsek points out the similarities they must surely be considered inconsequential and peripheral when consideration is taken of the great gap separating the illocutionary points of expressives and opinions.

If opinions are indeed a type of basic illocutionary act it seems that their position within Searle's taxonomy would be as a subset of representatives. Contrary to Atelsek's assertion, it is certainly possible for a speaker to commit himself to the truth of a proposition unverifiable in the objective world. Surely this is precisely the case with opinions. In addition, philosophical investigations of "possible worlds" and "the truth-gap" problem have suggested that no proposition may appropriately be judged true or false in isolation. Any such judgement must be made with reference to the surrounding contexts, both pragmatic and linguistic (i.e. the context of discourse), of the speech act (Strawson 1971:95). Searle himself qualifies his
requirement for the objective verificability by stating that it is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for representatives (1976:11). Atelsek's major reason for not including opinions within the class of representatives thus seems to have weak foundation.

The second problem with assigning opinions to the class of representatives concerned direction of fit. Atelsek's conclusion that opinions have no direction of fit was made with specific reference to a fit with the objective world. Clearly, opinions belong in the realm of the subjective; they are expressions or statements of personal belief. For this reason, all opinions can be conceptualized as an attempt to characterize the world in the words of the speaker. This subjective fitting of the world of the speaker's words may be the crucial distinction between representatives and opinions. Since this distinction is accomplished by a simple reversal of the two of the features of representatives, direction of fit and the world referred to, the two categories (i.e. representatives and opinions) might be considered the polar extremes of a single linear continuum. Representatives and opinions may be but the terminal points of the possible range of a single type of illocutionary act.

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\begin{array}{c}
\text{representatives} \\
\text{------------------------} \\
\downarrow \uparrow B(p)_{\text{obj.}} \\
\downarrow \uparrow B(p)_{\text{subj.}} \\
\end{array}
\]

Note that the subscripts obj. and subj., referring to the objective and subjective worlds respectively, are redundant in the above symbolization. All true representatives must make reference to the "real" world and opinions to the subjective.

As illustrated above, the position of any statement along this continuum, and therefore its characterization as fact or opinion, must be the result of either shared mutual belief or negotiation
on the part of both the speaker and the hearer. The idea of negotiated meaning or interpretation will be returned to in later discussion.

The possibility of including opinion as a subset of Searle's class of representatives was based upon the assumption that opinions were indeed illocutionary acts operating at the same level of abstraction as those recognized by the taxonomy. Several arguments may be presented which suggest that opinion is a phenomenon whose nature is fundamentally distinct from the illocutionary acts of Searle's taxonomy.

Though Searle underscores the difference between illocutionary verbs and illocutionary acts, all acts are shown to be marked by the use of certain typical verbs. For example, of directives he states that "Verbs denoting members of this class are ask, order, command, request, beg, plead, pray, entreat, and also invite, permit, and advise" (Searle 1976:11). (Note Searle (1976:22) for several qualifications of this statement.) Except in special circumstances (i.e. in indirect speech acts or metaphor (Searle 1979)) these illocutionary verbs must be present - as in "I pronounce you man and wife." - or are clearly understood - "(I order you) Go home." Several facts thus lead one to suggest that opinions are in some way fundamentally different from the other illocutionary acts: 1) the infrequent use of the verb opine in the expression of opinion; 2) opinions, when explicitly marked by a verbal form, are done so with verbs associated with other illocutionary acts, (e.g. "to believe" that (p) is an exemplary representative); and finally, 3) these verbs (or verbal phrases) can in all cases be deleted in the expression of an opinion, (e.g. ",(I think) the party was boring." ",(I believe) communism is bad.")

A second argument, based upon sentences similar to the ones which follow, concerns the observation that opinions, (0), are
necessarily composed in part by other illocutionary acts.

1. (I think that) the bus is late. $0 + I$
2. (I believe) you should come. $0 + !$
3. (I think that) I shall stop working now. $0 + C$
4. (I think) congratulations are in order. $0 + E$
5. (I think) your services are no longer required. $0 + D$
   (i.e. You're fired.)

It was in only one exceptional case that Searle recognized an overlapping of two illocutionary classes (i.e. the representative directives). As all illocutionary acts can be shown to participate in the construction of opinions, and this cannot be said of any of the other illocutionary classes, one is again led to conclude that opinions are phenomena of a different level of abstraction and do not belong within a taxonomy of illocutionary acts.

A third argument, relying upon cognitive considerations, concerns the saliency of the various classes of illocutionary acts and the ease with which they may be recognized. As was mentioned in the opening comments, it is often difficult to distinguish opinion from other illocutionary acts. This is not the case, however, for illocutionary acts in general. Few individuals, be they in the role of speaker or hearer, would have any difficulty in distinguishing between directives and commissives, or between declarations and expressives, for example. These facts, too, seem to argue for a fundamental difference separating opinions and illocutionary acts. In addition, the key notion of the intention behind communication in the definition of speech act is also placed under stress. If the speaker is unable in all cases to distinguish between opinion and fact (i.e. representatives) in his own utterances, the notion of an ego-motivated intention as the primary characterization of communication becomes inadequate.

The preceding three arguments are strong evidence in
support of the contention that opinions may not correctly be considered as a type of fundamental illocutionary act. The suggestion is made that opinions are composit speech acts, more complex than illocutionary acts and operating at some different level of philosophical/linguistic abstraction. Opinions are not illocutionary acts in Searle's sense, but are composed of illocutionary acts and additional "framing" features, often not evident within the immediate linguistic realization of the act, whose consequences upon the force or strength with which the illocutionary point is delivered are constrained by pragmatic, stylistic and discourse considerations rather than solely by sentential phenomena. Thus several of Searle's secondary criteria for the distinction of illocutionary acts reemerge, having greatly enhanced significance.

Searle, in constructing his taxonomy, recognized, yet neglected to utilize to any significant degree, the criteria of illocutionary strength, status relations between interlocutors, discourse context, and stylistic performance. When considering opinions, however, it is an appreciation of the interrelationship of these features and their effect upon a given statement that is most revealing. These features can profitably be reconceptualized as elements contributing to the structure of a unit whose function it is to "frame" an underlying illocutionary act as an opinion: O[F(p)]. These criteria, in contrast to their minor role in Searle's formulation, are in actuality the critical determiners of the strength of the illocutionary act. It is this strength, defined in terms of the combined influences of pragmatic, stylistic and discourse features, that determine the categorization of a given (p) as fact or opinion. The greater the strength of an illocutionary point, whether it is a consequence of the status of the speaker (in terms of knowledge or institutional position), the persuasiveness of its delivery or the support it receives from
surrounding discourse (additional opinions, etc.), the greater the possibility of its acceptance as fact within that particular discourse. A lesser strength, relative to conflicting (p)s in the same context, would encourage the classification of the act as opinion. Diagrammatically this may be represented as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{relative pragmatic} \
\text{relative stylistic} \
\text{relative discursive} \\
\end{array}
\rightarrow
\begin{array}{c}
\text{relative} \
\text{strength of} \
\text{illocutionary point} \\
\end{array}
\rightarrow
\begin{array}{c}
\text{rel. + strong = fact} \\
\text{rel. - strong = opinion} \\
\end{array}
\]

The representation above redundantly stresses the importance of the relativity of all features within the system. The strength of an illocutionary act is always a value determined solely by comparison with other acts within the same discourse. So too, are the values of its determiners - the pragmatic, stylistic and discourse features.

Relativity is a useful concept for it implies a process of "working out" or negotiation of the values for each of the contributing criteria. It was previously suggested that the classification of a speech act as either fact or opinion must be conceptualized as the result of negotiation carried on either within the discourse or be based upon the presupposition of previously established mutual beliefs. The present hypothesis, while supporting this formulation, suggests that not only must the status(es) of fact and opinion be negotiated but also that in accomplishing this end negotiation must occur establishing the relative values of the pragmatic, stylistic, and discourse contributions to illocutionary strength. Social and linguistic phenomena therefore enter into the process of the interpersonal and intersubjective evaluation of speech acts.

While speech act theory can provide insight into certain aspects of opinion, i.e. its structure in terms of functional units, here suggested to be \(O[F(p)]\), "opinion frame" and
illocutionary act, it is in many ways inadequate as a guide to the complete understanding of the role and behavior of opinion in linguistic communication. In addition to the problem of speaker intention and the noted difficulty of the recognition of opinion previously mentioned inadequacy arises from the rigidly taxonomic goals of the theory itself. Searle's classification of illocutionary acts sought to isolate and characterize the basic functions of speech (or the type of acts which may be accomplished through speech) and because of his use of a taxonomic method this resulted in an extremely static view of language and human behavior. Analysis of speech acts is also limited to isolated and independently considered sentential units, for as Searle stated "(it is) the production of the sentence token under certain conditions (that) is the illocutionary act" (1965:222). Neither is much attention directed towards the impact on the speech act of the social roles of the interlocutors. As has been demonstrated, the characterization and indeed the values of the essential components/determiners of opinion are derived through negotiation. A dynamic, even dialectic, process of negotiation is by its very nature impossible to capture and describe through the utilization of a static taxonomic model. The process of negotiation is also crucially affected by features present in the context of the entire discourse as well as those of the surrounding social world within which it is produced. The sentential limitation and the lack of a determined consideration of pragmatic social constraints exhibited by speech act theory further hinders an expanded understanding of opinion. We must therefore now ask: is there any approach which will aid in improving our knowledge of this speech phenomenon?

A possible escape from the theoretical deadend of speech act theory might lie in a principled merging of concepts developed by anthropologists concerned with "the ethnography of speaking" and
by sociologists in the area of conversational interaction. Both of these frameworks emphasize a thorough examination of the complete contents and structure of a discourse, the crucial role of social rules and extra-linguistic context in the determination of linguistic behavior, the notion of meaning as negotiated product rather than as given (i.e. it too is problematic), and the dynamic, essentially interactive nature of linguistic communication. Because of this apparent correspondence between theoretical concern and the previously elaborated characteristics of opinion, an examination of opinion through this framework would seem to be a logical point of departure.

Footnotes

1. For example, the proposition (p) in the statement, "I think the play was superb." (i.e. the play was superb), can neither be verified nor refuted in any formal, logical manner. Similar to expressions of personal evaluation in this respect are statements expounding widespread ideologically or socially based beliefs: e.g. (p)Communism is bad.

2. Searle quotes Grice as follows: "To say that A meant something by x is to say that 'A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention". (Searle 1965:228).

3. a. representatives - \&\{B(p)
   \& - illocutionary point of representatives
   \& - direction of fit: words to, world
   B - sincerity condition: belief that (p)

   b. directives - !\&W (H does A)
   ! - illocutionary point of directives
   \& - world to words
   W - want that (p): hearer does act A
3. c. commissives - C↑I (S does A)
   C - illocutionary point of commissives
   ↑ - world to words
   I - intend that (p): speaker does act A

d. expressives - EØ(p) (S/H + property)
   E - illocutionary point of expressives
   Ø - no direction of fit
   P - possible psychological state (e.g. thank, apologize, etc.) as assigned to speaker or hearer: property assigned to speaker or hearer

e. declarations - D↓Ø (p)
   D - illocutionary point of declarations
   ↓ - words to world and world to words
   Ø - no sincerity condition; institutional/status condition: declare that (p)


5. For example Laver and Hutcheson (1972), Sacks et.al. (1974), Schegloff (1972), Sudnow (1972).

References Cited


