

The status of language in religious studies these days has never been higher, particularly in theology, where the search for new language-games in which to talk about or to God has reached fresh heights (or depths, depending on your point of view). Subjecting the language of theological expression to critical scrutiny has been extremely beneficial: at least the weaknesses in our expression are now more recognized, and hence more readily avoidable, than hitherto. But there has been little positive thinking on a sufficiently large scale to produce a linguistic tool-kit that can get anywhere near the edifices constructed by the old language-games. The reason for this, I am fairly certain, is a failure to develop an approach which is broad enough to cover all uses of language—not just the specific issues of traditionally formulated dogma, but the sociological, political, psychological and many other facets of everyday intellectual existence which a contemporary theology has got to come to terms with, and, ultimately, integrate. All the suggestions so far have been much too restrictive to provide the basis for any general theory.

Where can any such general theory come from? Charisms apart, there seem to be two possibilities. Linguistics itself might be of help, if so many of its proponents were not currently trying to turn themselves inside-out, claiming to be cognitive psychologists in disguise (I am referring, of course, to current trends in generative grammar). The other possibility is Philosophy—philosophy of

language, in particular. Searle's book falls within this category, and its presence for review in a religious journal might well be accounted for in terms of an archetypal hope that perhaps *this* book will give us a lead as to how we should handle some of our perennial linguistic problems. I don't think it will, but it is an interesting enough book for all that. The reason for its relatively restricted interest might be summarized by saying that readers would learn a great deal about the methods, principles and wranglings about the subject 'philosophy of language' from this book—much less about the phenomenon 'language' itself.

The book is easily summarized. It consists of two parts: the first is an attempt to provide a theory of speech acts; the second tries to apply this theory to the clarification of various fallacies in philosophy, and to the solution of certain philosophical problems (the way in which 'ought' can be derived from 'is', Russell's theory of definite descriptions, and the meaning of proper names). I shall not spend any time on the second part: it is a fairly technical discussion, along (as far as I can tell) orthodox philosophical lines, of various viewpoints associated with these problems; and it does not, it seems to me, make all that much use of the theory proposed in the first part, which is the core of the book. What is this theory, anyway?

The concept of 'speech act' falls within a very clear tradition: it derives directly from

Austin, and before him, Wittgenstein, and focuses on the idea that language has uses as well as structure—functions that have to be evaluated independently of their truth value and verifiability. We use language to command, promise, swear, explain, and so on; and these would be different kinds of speech acts. One particular category of speech act cited by Austin was the ‘performative’—here the language used is an integral part of the action (when the man says ‘I baptize you . . .’, part of the act of baptizing *is* the utterance used). Now what we have in Austin is a set of stimulating but scattered observations about speech acts. There is no theory outlined in any explicit, systematic way. Searle’s aim is to construct such a theory—or, at least, ‘to provide the beginnings of a theory of speech acts’ (p. 131). He certainly does develop a number of helpful ideas; but they do not, in this book, emerge very clearly as a theory either. Searle talks a lot about criteria, hypotheses, assumptions, and so on—but I do not get a coherent picture out of all this. I think the main reason is the absence of clear definition to organize the reader. As far as I can make out, the term ‘speech act’ itself is never defined: Searle *characterizes* the concept at various places, but does not define it, e.g. page 16: ‘the production or issuance of a sentence token under certain conditions is a speech act, and speech acts (of certain kinds to be explained later) are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication’. In Chapter 2, he attempts to ‘state a set of . . . conditions for the performance of particular kinds of speech acts’. A more precise account is not given of the term, and the reader is left to work out an integrated view of it himself. A far more detailed treatment is presented in Chapter 3, but this is in connection with the derived term ‘illocutionary acts’ (another

concept of Austin’s, though not used by Searle in precisely the same way, cf. p. 23, fn.). However, the term ‘illocutionary act’ is not defined either, but characterized: ‘Stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc. = performing *illocutionary acts*’ (p. 24).

I found this book illuminating in places, and frustrating in others. I lack the philosophical training to appreciate any nuances present in the in-fighting. Apart from the absence of definition, I was also worried by a certain tension between stated aims and practice. Searle claims that his book, being an essay in the philosophy of language, is an ‘attempt to give philosophically illuminating descriptions of certain *general* features of language, such as reference, truth, meaning, and necessity’ (p. 4, my ital.). But what exactly a general feature is is not clear; and later he sees the book’s methodology in highly specific terms. ‘I am a native speaker of a *language*. I wish to offer certain characteristics and explanations of my use of elements in *that language*’ (p. 15, my ital.). There seems some kind of contradiction here. I also have an in principle worry about any linguistic theory which claims to be general and yet exemplifies its claims solely from one language—especially if this language is English of a fairly restricted kind. Sketching a theory of speech acts, in outline, is easy enough (I am speaking relatively!). Applying it in detail is a very different story. And with speech acts, where socio-linguistic and stylistic problems turn up everywhere (though Searle does not refer to this literature), it is the detailed analysis of problem cases which will be the ultimate measure of the explanatory power of the notion. For this, however, the theologian, as everyone else, will have to wait. A charism, indeed, might be a better horse to back.