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***Semantic and Pragmatic Investigations  
of the Speech Act of Assertion***

**PHD THESIS**

**SUMMARY**

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## ***Keywords***

assertion, speech acts, semantics, correspondence theory of truth, act of referring, act of predicating, logic, pragmatics, meaning

## ***Semantic and Pragmatic Investigations of the Speech Act of Assertion***

### **Abstract**

According to the definition of Charles W. Morris, language is a well-defined system of signs and man, a sign-using being. The goal of Morris was to create such a theory of signs that would enable him to explain the way language works, thus contributing to a better understanding of language itself. The central notion of the analysis of Morris is the notion of semiosis, a term that denotes every case in which something functions as a sign.

My paper builds on Morris's semiotic definition of language, based on which I have distinguished three dimensions of language: the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic dimensions. These dimensions of language presuppose one another, and they consider language from different points of view. Syntax considers language as a system defined by the relations between signs. Semantics looks at it as the relation between signs and the things the signs denote, while pragmatics stresses the relation between the signs and the users of those signs.

In my paper I have analyzed the speech act of assertion, based on various semantic and pragmatic considerations. During my analysis, I wanted to draw attention to two things: on one hand I wanted to emphasize the fact that when considering language there is no clear-cut line that can be drawn between semantics and pragmatics; and on the other hand I wanted to underline the fact that the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of language are not two competing dimensions, but rather they complement one another.

In the first chapter of my thesis I pointed out the four sources that influenced my paper. The first source was Gottlob Frege's way of thinking about language. In the case of natural

languages, the phenomenon of ambiguity urged Frege to create such a formal system in which a sign was assigned one, and only one meaning, and based on certain initial true propositions, one could obtain other true propositions. This idea of Frege forms the basis of modern logic, and formal semantics.

The second source of the dissertation was John L. Austin's remark that led to the formulation of the speech act theory. While studying statements, Austin concluded that the criteria based on which we traditionally categorize some statements as true, and others as false, doesn't apply to certain statements; for there are statements that are neither true nor false. These are in fact statements that we use not to describe the world with, but to perform actions with. Austin called descriptive statements constatives, and statements that we perform actions with performatives.

The third source of the paper was the work of John R. Searle, who further developed Austin's speech act theory. Searle agreed with Austin's conclusion, and thought that every utterance of a statement counts as performing a certain act, and thus defined the use of language as rule-guided behavior. The most important result of Searle's hypothesis is the fact that he considers the theory of language to be part of the theory of action.

Finally, the fourth source of the thesis was Herbert Paul Grice's views on meaning. In the background of Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meaning lies the notion of intention. According to Grice, the meaning of an utterance can often be traced back to the intention of the speaker, so the speaker's intention plays a key role in our understanding of the way language works.

In chapter two, as a result of the semantic considerations regarding the assertions, I have dedicated considerable space to the presentation of the correspondence theory of truth. In this chapter I have laid out the intuitive formulation of the correspondence theory of truth, according to which a proposition is said to be true, if it describes the world according to reality. The theory assumes the correspondence relation between the world on the one hand and the things that are said in the proposition on the other. Outlining the correspondence theory of truth was important as far as semantics deals with the relation between signs and the objects that the signs denote. Thus, the main question of semantics concerns the way the signs signify the objects, in case of the propositions it concerns their truth.

The third chapter is the continuation of the second, and I set forth the arguments of the Strawson–Austin–Searle debate about the nature of truth. By doing so I presented how this debate about the nature of truth led to the beginning of the speech act theory. The debate drew our attention to the fact that when speaking about statements their correspondence to reality is not the only criterion based on which we can categorize them. There is at least another aspect, that stresses the action-performing nature of statements.

In chapter four I presented the speech act theory, which underlines the idea of statements as tools for performing actions. First, I described the theory as it was conceived by John L. Austin, then the way it was further developed by John R. Searle.

The analysis of the acts of referring and that of predicating (chapter five), and the section of the paper that deals with the part concerning logic (chapter six) are an addition to the chapter about the correspondence theory of truth. When considering the acts of referring and predicating we find ourselves inside the proposition. In the case of the referential expression I presented the way the expression points out the logical subject of the proposition in the world, while in the case of the predicative expression I showed the way the expression describes the entity that the referring expression refers to. Chapter six deals with logic and is closely connected to the one that precedes it. The part concerning logic shows us the way a formal system works. In the formal system of logic semantic values are assigned to the basic categories of the grammar of logic: entities are assigned to names, and truth values to propositions. There are two operations that even in a strictly formal treatment of language, like logic, establishes a connection between semantics and pragmatics. These two operations are the operations of valuation and interpretation. Valuation is the operation that assigns a value to the ambiguous expressions within a sentence, thus completing the interpretation of the sentence. In case of the natural languages, the speaker itself is the one doing the valuation mostly based on the context. Although formal logic and semantics are characterized by a lack of context, it seems, that in case of the operation of valuation a context is given.

Unlike in the case of the semantic dimension, the pragmatic dimension of the language is defined by context. The context-based character of the use of language was outlined with reference to the Strawson–Austin debate. Within the debate the idea that by using the language we not only describe the world as it is, but also do something else already emerged. And this idea was further exposed by both Austin and Searle in their speech act theory.

According to them, to speak means to act. Take, for example, the utterance “the light is red”; depending on the context the utterance may count as a description or a warning.

In the last two chapters of the paper, I discussed the views of Austin and Searle. Based on their thoughts I presented the problem of meaning as it arises in the pragmatic dimension.

When it comes to explaining the meaning of utterances, Searle tends to explain them by leaning on the meaning as it is defined by conventions. In contrast, Grice relies heavily on the context-based character of the pragmatic dimension and in trying to explain meaning he lines up a whole arsenal of arguments. He thus explains his theory about the speaker’s meaning defined by the speaker’s intentions, his views about communication governed by the cooperative principle, and his thoughts about conversation governed and influenced by the conversational maxims and implicatures.

In the last chapter of the thesis, as a personal contribution to the subject-matter, I raised an issue in form of a comment that concerns one of Searle’s remark about the illocutionary act of assertion. Talking about the preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions of the act of assertion, Searle claims the following: if the speaker asserts a certain proposition, she has evidence to support what is said in the assertion; she believes what she claims in her proposition; she guarantees that her statement represents a state of affairs. And then Searle adds, that it is acceptable to say that the speaker by making a statement asserts a certain thing but doesn’t attempt to convince the hearer.

Considering the views of H. P. Grice, Rom Harré and Robert Brandom about the assertion, argumentation, and inference I have tried to show that based on the premises listed by Searle we would not feel comfortable accepting his remark about the lack of attempt on the speaker’s part to convince the hearer. I think the fact that Searle accepts the existence of a mind independent reality, and the correspondence theory of truth places the illocutionary act of assertion in an epistemological-scientific context where the question of truth doesn’t arise as indifferent. Based on Grice’s view on the teleology of communication, Harré’s thoughts on the rhetoric of scientific argumentation, and Brandom’s idea of the justificatory responsibility related to assertions, I tend to think that one of the goals of the serious use of language, if not the only one, is to reveal the truth. If so, we will always be ready to argue in favor of the truth of our own propositions, and thus the intention of convincing the hearer will be present in us as speakers.

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