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Power in communication: implications for the semantics-pragmatics interface

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Abstract

This paper argues that closer attention to social factors, and especially to power relations, may enrich the theoretical study of language. It takes its departure from Searle's work in the philosophy of language and on the foundations of social reality. Searle's analysis of language and institutional facts implies a consensus view of society, and rests upon an ideology of language as a kind of social contract. Some problems for such a contract view are pointed out, and an alternative approach, which may be qualified as a conflict view of language and communication, is outlined. Power is a crucial variable in such a view; some of the desirable features of such a power concept are discussed. A conflict view of language may have non-trivial implications for the division of labor between semantics and pragmatics, and provide a fresh perspective on the notions of literal language and language change. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Power; Semantics-pragmatics interface; Social facts; Language ideologies

1. Introduction

The analytical tradition in the philosophy of language has developed some refined conceptual tools for the study of semantics and pragmatics, and an almost commonsensical picture of the division of labor between them, but it rests on a rather oversimplified view of language as a social phenomenon. It usually assumes that semantics involves just the conventional rules of language, which determine sentence meanings that are held to be literal and stable. Pragmatics (whether conceived of in

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terms of Grice's theory of implicature or of speech act theory) is taken to deal with speaker's meaning in so far as it deviates from, or involves the exploitation of, sentence meaning; as such, it is the domain of individual speakers' intentions rather than of conventions. This division of labor between semantics and pragmatics also leads to an appealing view of language change as originating in individual (intention-governed) usage, which then gradually becomes conventionalized in the language system.¹ In social-scientific terms, semantics would thus qualify as a domain of structures, and pragmatics as a domain of agency.

Now this restriction of semantics to what Saussure would call *langue* has undoubtedly been a highly successful decision, but should be seen for what it really is: no more than a methodological choice. In fact, this choice leads to a highly artificial picture of social reality, and delegates the obvious facts of language variation and change to a secondary status by methodological fiat. In so far as reference is made to a language community at all, this is typically assumed to be perfectly homogeneous and harmonious. In more descriptive approaches, like sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, these methodological assumptions have not proven very fruitful, and are nowadays largely abandoned; but a critical reappraisal of them will also have important theoretical implications for core linguistics. The wedge I will use to drive home this argument is the concept of power. The theory to which I will apply it is John Searle's philosophy of language and mind, and in particular his recent account of the construction of social reality.

Against this line of argument, however, two obvious lines of objection may immediately be brought up. First, this may seem like old news to many a reader. Haven't disciplines like linguistic anthropology and critical discourse analysis been telling us all along that language has something to do with power? And second, a criticism of Searle's ideas may sound to many like a rear guard battle. In the empirical study of communication, speech act theory (especially Searle's version) has long since lost ground to more descriptive approaches like Conversation Analysis (CA). So why bother flogging a dead horse?

Both objections are off the mark. Regarding the former, the idea that language has something to do with power has simply not left any appreciable impact on theoretical or core linguistics, which, for the most part, seems to have proceeded on the assumption that precisely abstracting away from messy social factors is the best warrant for theoretical progress and success. Moreover, claims that language may serve the production or reproduction of power relations are common enough; but here, I intend to make a case for the reverse claim, viz., that power relations are at least in part constitutive of linguistic communication itself, and this claim is much more rarely made, let alone elaborated in theoretical or conceptual terms.

Regarding the second objection, this paper—apart from being programmatic—admittedly has a somewhat dialectical character, in that it does not commit itself to

¹ The most sophisticated recent statement of such a view, which employs Levinson's tripartite distinction between particularized conversational implicature as intention-carried, generalized conversational implicature as 'preferred interpretation', and semantic or sentence meaning as conventional, can be found in Traugott (1999).

Searle's theoretical framework. The problems speech act theory faces in dealing with, for example, conversation are by now too well known to merit any extended discussion, let alone any attempt at refutation; nowadays, CA is widely perceived to offer a more adequate approach to the dynamics of actually observed conversation, rather than artificially contrived and decontextualized sample speech acts.² But given CA's well-known reluctance to engage in any kind of theorizing, and given the fact that Searle's work is still widely influential in the core-linguistic areas of semantics and pragmatics, the choice seems justified. Searle is also a useful starting point in so far as he is well aware that there are problems here that demand to be resolved. His writings are conveniently explicit on the theme at hand, more so than the broadly comparable work of Grice, for example.

2. Language, meaning, and social practice

With these things in mind, let us now turn to the interrelation of language and social factors. Actually, my main argument is rather simple. It can be summarized as follows:

- a. A theory of linguistic communication, such as speech act theory, forms part of a theory of action (cf. Searle, 1969: 17); specifically, communication can be seen as a form of *social* action;
- b. The concept of social action, however, not only involves meaning practically by definition, but is also "logically tied to that of power" (Giddens, 1993:116);
- c. Consequently, an adequate theory of linguistic communication would seem to have room for a systematic account of how power is articulated in language, and how meaning and power interact.

The two premises would seem rather obvious, but the conclusion has rarely been drawn in theoretical linguistics. The argument stated in this way is still informal, in that it does not yet specify exactly what is meant by 'linguistic communication', 'power', or 'social action'; but it will suffice at this stage. The discussion of the concept of power will take up the bulk of this paper. As an everyday folk concept, the notion of power is used in a variety of senses, which need not have any common core (cf. Emmet, 1954). Part of the aim of this paper is to explore what a more analytic and theoretically useful notion of power should look like.

Searle's more strictly linguistic views seem to imply a clear-cut division of labor between semantics and pragmatics as, respectively, the study of the convention- and rule-governed domain of (literal) sentence meanings; and the intention-governed domain of speaker's meanings in so far as they deviate from the meanings expressed by sentences. Searle is well aware that things are not quite this simple, however: whereas most authors simply assume a given and unproblematic notion of literal

² For an early statement of such criticism informed by Conversation Analysis, see Levinson (1981).

meaning, he actually sets out to characterize this notion explicitly.³ He has famously argued that literal meanings require what he calls a *Background*, which consists not of intentional states but of (social) practices. In other words, even such an apparently obvious element of communication as that of literal meaning can not be characterized in purely linguistic terms, but requires an appeal to social factors. But even the theoretical *concepts* of literal and serious language, pretending, metaphor, etc., Searle notes, depend on such a Background:

“Our use of these concepts [sc. intention, fiction, and metaphor] and our distinctions between the intentional and the unintentional, the literal and the metaphorical, and between fictional and nonfictional discourse is [*sic*] grounded in a complex network of linguistic and social practices.” (1983: 79)

For this reason, Searle argues, no clear-cut distinction between, for example, literal and non-literal language can be given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Nevertheless, he treats literal, serious, non-pretended language as logically or conceptually prior:

“The existence of the pretended form of the speech act is logically dependent on the possibility of the nonpretended speech act..., and in that sense the pretended forms are *parasitical* on the non-pretended forms.” (1977: 204–205)

It will appear below that Searle’s view of literal language does indeed depend on some very specific, and debatable, ‘Background assumptions’ regarding the nature of social practice.⁴ Similar assumptions seem to inform much other work in theoretical semantics and pragmatics, but they rarely come as close to the surface as in Searle’s writings. This paper aims at making these assumptions explicit, and at proposing an alternative.

3. Searle on the creation of institutional facts

Searle clearly feels the need to meet the challenge posed by the social nature of language use, and to develop a more explicit account of the social reality and social practices underlying linguistic communication. He sets out to do so in *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995). Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, in this work he does not develop a theory of social *action*, as his earlier remarks on speech act theory as part of the theory of action and on the Background as consisting of social practices would seem to warrant; instead, he presents a theory of social *facts*, or of *institutional facts* as he calls them. Here, he follows, so to speak, Durkheim’s focus on social facts rather than Weber’s focus on social action. This does not have any

³ For more discussion of the problematic status of the notion of literal meaning, see Leezenberg (2001: 295–304).

⁴ In *Speech Acts*, it appears, the claim that nonliteral or nonserious speech acts are not theoretically essential to communication hinges on Searle’s famous ‘Principle of Expressibility’, according to which everything that can be meant can be said literally (1969: 19–21). This principle has been criticized on independent grounds (Levinson, 1983: 241–242; Leezenberg, 2001: 120), and need not further concern us here.

major consequences for the course of the argument to be developed below, however, as institutional facts will turn out to be constructed by collective social action anyway.

Searle treats language as just one specific kind of institutional fact, like money or marriage; he gives it a privileged status, though, as the basic social institution: all other institutions, he argues, presuppose language, but language does not presuppose them (1995: 60). On his view, the language system, linguistic structure, or if you like *langue*, can thus be systematically analyzed as the result of collective social action, rather than as an abstract system or structure floating above it. That is, the claim to be made below, that power is involved in the constitution of institutional reality, and thus of language, does not merely apply to the (pragmatic) domain of language usage, but also to the (semantic) domain of language structure.

Now let us have a closer look at how, according to Searle, the creation of institutional facts proceeds. The creation of institutional facts like priesthoods and presidencies, he argues, requires three essential ingredients:

- (a) *collective intentions*, where each individual's intentions are directed towards a collective action (such as playing a baseball game);
- (b) the *assignment of function*, i.e., individual or collective intentionality may impose functions upon individuals, natural objects, or artifacts that go beyond their physical or biological characteristics. Thus, a bank note is not merely a slip of paper, but serves as a means of payment by virtue of the function collectively assigned to it;
- (c) *constitutive rules*, i.e., rules of the form 'X counts as Y in context C', which emerge when a function assignment is institutionalized and acquires a more generally normative character. For example, in the context of soccer, getting the ball in the opponent's net under the right conditions counts as a goal.

Now none of these notions is unproblematic: first, there are rivals to Searle's account of collective intentionality, which seems to simply postulate the existence of collective and cooperative social action, without accounting for how such cooperative behavior can come about in the first place. Second, it turns out that Searle characterizes function assignment as the conferring of power to individual human actors, so his theory does not really explain the efficacy of non-human institutional facts like the existence of money, language, and universities, other than as properties, rights, or obligations of individual actors. Third, the sharp distinction between regulative and constitutive rules has not gone unchallenged. But these problems need not concern us here.

On the basis of these three notions, Searle argues that underlying all institutional facts is a primitive logical operation of the form:

We accept that S has the power (S does A)

In other words, the institutional fact of, say, the presidency of the United States, is based on a collective intention assigning to an individual S the status functions, or

powers, of the presidency that allow him or her to act as such. Searle thus explicitly describes social and institutional reality in terms of the creation and maintenance of specific powers.

This analysis makes clear that the efficacy of, say, performative language cannot be wholly characterized in terms of the powers conventionally associated with words, but also depends on the power or status function conferred on the person uttering them. Thus, I can only successfully say “I hereby declare you legally married” if I have the status function of a priest or civil servant, and am endowed with the rights and obligations to do so in particular circumstances. Already in *Speech Acts*, Searle notes that the successful performance of speech acts like promising or conducting a wedding ceremony both presupposes specific institutions and may itself be seen as an institutional fact (1969: 51–52). His later work may be seen as a more systematic elaboration of this point. Searle also implies that the power effects of language usage importantly involve the constitutive rules of institutional reality, which are part of the illocutionary force of speech acts, not merely perlocutionary effects.⁵ Moreover, institutional facts are facts only if they are *believed* to be facts. An individual only has the status function of, say, the presidency of a country, if people believe that he does, i.e., if they accept him as such. In this sense, intentional states like beliefs are logically prior to institutional facts.

Searle’s analysis has interesting implications for CA, which has criticized classical speech act theory for overly directing its attention to highly institutionalized and ritualized forms of language usage like baptisms or wedding ceremonies, at the expense of more ‘spontaneous’ forms of communication. If correct, it rebukes this criticism, with its implication that our social world is permeated by institutional facts of all kinds and at all levels: consequently, even an apparently spontaneous and informal conversation between friends presupposes a vast array of institutional facts and their constitutive forms of power.

Given this analysis of the construction of institutional facts, let us take a closer look at the concept of power involved. On several points, this conception is clearly informed by the work of two prominent contemporary social theorists, viz., Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. In this sense, it is rather more sophisticated than, say, the classical—and still widely influential—Weberian view of power as the ability to realize one’s own intentions even in the face of opposition from, or at the expense of, others. Searle himself does not really elaborate on this, but as we will return to both authors below, it might be useful to make these points more explicit.

Like Foucault, Searle argues that power relations are not simply negative forces of domination by a state or a sovereign; in various forms, they permeate the entire social fabric, and are not necessarily negative.⁶ He is rather more apologetic than Foucault, however, about introducing the concept of power at all, as he fears it may offend liberal sensibilities that view power as essentially a disruption or perversion of social life that otherwise is, or should be, based on equality and the absence of repressive power. To allay such worries, he argues that “institutional power—massive, per-

⁵ I am indebted to Dick Janney for raising this question.

⁶ See especially Foucault (1975: 32 ff) and (1976: 121–135) regarding these claims.

vasive and typically invisible—permeates every nook and cranny of our social lives, and as such it is not a threat to liberal values but rather the precondition of their existence” (1995: 94). Much like Foucault, in other words, Searle treats power not as a negative or restrictive force, but as a condition that is actually productive of social reality.

Moreover, Searle notes that power may be invisible despite, or perhaps precisely because of, its pervasive presence. This point is also noted by Foucault, who devotes much of his work to the analysis of hidden but pervasive mechanisms of ‘micro-power’. Last, Searle seems to concur with Foucault’s claim that “power comes from below” (1976: 124): it is not imposed from above in the force of domination by a sovereign, but arises from the collective action, or interaction, of the different social actors involved.

Like Bourdieu, Searle (1995: 99–102) distinguishes between different kinds of power established by collective action, notably symbolic, deontic, and honorific powers. Especially the first of these echoes Bourdieu’s famous concept of symbolic power as the essentially masked power to create and maintain meanings (cf. Bourdieu, 1991: ch. 7). Searle likewise notes the importance of symbolic power as the ability to represent, or to impose meanings, as a crucial prerequisite in the creation of institutional reality. On the basis of his definition of the creation of institutional facts as the imposition of specific rights and duties, however, he concludes that symbolic, honorific, and other powers can actually be reduced to purely deontic powers, and this is a conclusion Bourdieu would undoubtedly resist. For example, his sophisticated ethnographic analyses of honor in Kabyle society in terms of a competition for ‘symbolic capital’ implies that folk notions of honor do indeed play a role in the pursuit of ulterior practical goals, and do not simply consist in ‘status valued for its own sake’, as Searle (1995: 109–110) suggests.

A second point of convergence is Searle’s remark that there is “an element of magic [...] in the creation of institutional facts out of brute facts” (1995: 45). The magic here, of course, resides in the fact that institutional facts can be created out of brute physical facts by using mere words—especially in performative utterances. This seems to echo Bourdieu’s (1991: 170) view of symbolic power as the ‘almost magical power’ of constituting the given social reality through utterances. Thus, the repeated statement by regionalist or nationalist militants that a local dialect or group of dialects really is a distinct and unified language may actually contribute to producing an ‘objective’ social reality where these vernaculars are ultimately accepted as distinct languages (cf. Bourdieu, 1991: 220).⁷

Finally, Searle himself explicitly notes the similarities between his own conception of the *Background* and Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus*. The latter is characterized as a complex of internalized dispositions to specific forms of action; as such, it is generative of specific forms of social practice, such as table manners, the use of a particular dialect or sociolect, or the tendency to speak at a specific level of politeness. Apparently, the concepts of *Background* and *habitus* were originally developed

⁷ Something of this kind has indeed happened with, among others, Occitan in France, Zaza in Turkey, and Croat in Former Yugoslavia.

independently; but part of Searle's more recent characterization of the Background as involving, among other things, the disposition to behave in specific ways (1995: 136–137), does seem indebted to Bourdieu's formulation of the *habitus*.⁸

Here, too, the apparent similarities should not blind us to the very real differences between the two. Searle does not at all address the question of how Background assumptions are acquired or internalized, and unlike Bourdieu, neither does he discuss how the Background depends on external social structures (like class, age, or gender); he simply seems to assume that it is a complex of given, shared, and agreed upon practices. Moreover, as *internalized* and embodied structure, the *habitus* cannot be reduced to structures external to the individual actor; but being a largely unconscious kind of 'second nature', it cannot simply be equated with the individual actor's intentions either. It thus transcends the opposition between structure and agency, and it is unlikely that Searle would be willing to go that far.

4. Language as a social contract

The one central point on which Searle differs from both Foucault and Bourdieu is in his conviction that power—as opposed to repression—is legitimate by definition, and the result of agreement rather than of force or struggle. This conviction is explicit in his very characterization of the logical construction of institutional facts as the collective acceptance of, or agreement to impose a status function on, an individual S. The reason for this rather important (and as we shall see rather problematic) divergence from both authors seems to lie less in any theoretical disagreement than in Searle's patent desire to make the concept of power palatable to liberal tastes.

These liberal predilections make it easy to see that Searle maintains a *consensus view* of social reality, i.e., a view of social institutions as essentially built on, legitimated by, and contributing to, agreement and the mutual benefit of the social actors involved. The classic statement of such a consensus view is, of course, Émile Durkheim's sociology, which treats social action as aiming essentially at the maintenance of social cohesion and integration. More specifically, Searle turns out to view institutional facts, of which language is but one variety, as a kind of *social contract* that actors engage in for their greater individual and mutual benefit. The notion of a social contract is, of course, a familiar one in social and political philosophy, especially from the writings of Hobbes and Rousseau. It is not nearly as well known, however, that a similar notion informs many philosophical and linguistic theories of language. The characteristic features of a social contract view seem to be as follows:

- (a) cooperation and consent enter into social reality almost as a matter of *definition*;
- (b) cooperativeness is a matter of mere self-interest;

⁸ In developing these related notions, Bourdieu and Searle seem to have drawn inspiration from the same phenomenological, and ultimately Heideggerian, tradition.

- (c) the actors agreeing to confer powers on an individual are, or should be, *equal*;
- (d) actors are held to be essentially *autonomous*.

All of these features appear clearly in Searle's analysis: he practically defines collective action as cooperative or consensual (1995: 24); he notes the role of self-interest as a reason for creating and maintaining institutional facts (1995: 81); and he notes that differences in individual powers only result from a prior agreement by individual actors presumed to be equal and autonomous (1995: 94). Similar views of linguistic communication as a kind of social contract seem to inform most, if not all, other contemporary analytical theories of language and language use. It is less an explicitly elaborated theory, however, than a 'language ideology', a 'folk theory' or—as Searle might call it—a Background assumption. In fact, something like a social contract view of language seems to be so universally assumed that few people feel the need to even argue for it; but once it is made explicit, and its main features are characterized, it turns out to be rather less self-evident and more debatable than one might think.⁹ It actually is a founding or legitimating *myth*, in which the actors engaging in a contract are first abstracted away from any given social relations, and then portrayed as wholly equal, autonomous, and rational. This is not, of course, how people actually enter into social institutions, or how they acquire a language. Rather, these processes consist in the prolonged socialization, in a typically strongly asymmetrical power relation, of an individual into a given set of expressions, constructions, and rules. Thus, a child learning a language simply is not in a position to modify or reject the language it is supposed to learn, or can only do so at the price of severe sanctions. As a historical reconstruction of the origin of language, the social contract account is wholly conjectural; as a 'rational reconstruction' of the reasons for having language, it carries a host of unwarranted assumptions about the relative status and resources of language users.

Given his social contract view of linguistic and institutional reality, however, Searle seriously overemphasizes the consensus underlying social reality; thus, his analysis of the performative "You're fired!" as creating the institutional fact *We no longer accept S has the rights and obligations (S acts as an employee)* (1995: 108–109) describes as a consensual agreement what is more properly characterized as a bare assertion of power. The fired employee or employees may not at all be willing to accept the removal of their rights and obligations, but they are simply not in a position to do anything about it. Their acquiescing in the employer's statement thus need not indicate an active consent as much as an inability to effectively pursue or defend their own aims and interests. Conceptually, this way of characterizing power

⁹ In a sense, Habermas's theory of communicative action, which takes the 'ideal speech situation' of fully cooperative exchange between fully equal participants as a 'regulative ideal' governing all speech behavior, can be seen as an attempt to formulate such a consensus theory of communication in more detail. The view that linguistic communication in itself is or should be free of any power relations, and that power is essentially a disturbance of effective communication, is most explicitly argued for in Allwood (1980).

can be seen as overemphasizing the conferral and removal of powers as individual properties, at the expense of viewing power as an aspect of the interaction between different social actors. Searle thus downplays the fact that power may not only be an individual capability or ability of an individual, but also a relation *between* individuals; it can be not only a power-*to*, but also a power-*over*. Likewise, he underestimates the possibility of creating institutional facts through the struggle for, or even the arrogation of, powers. His analysis of one of the most famous cases of such power struggle, the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, is quite revealing in this respect:

“One way to create institutional facts in situations where the institution does not exist is simply to act *as if* it did exist. . . . The Founding Fathers acted *as if* their meeting in Philadelphia was a context C such that by performing a certain declarative speech act X they created an institutional fact [Y] of independence. They got away with this, that is, they created and sustained acceptance of the institutional fact because of local community support and military force.” (1995: 118–119; emphasis added)

But then, in Searle’s own terminology, the United States of America, the most powerful nation on earth, were created by a *pretended*, i.e., a fictional and parasitic speech act! And this is not an isolated or exceptional case. As numerous nationalist struggles in recent years indicate, declarations of independence need not be based on the consent of all involved; they may involve competing claims to legitimacy, which may well be fiercely (and even militarily) contested by others. Likewise, the firing of an employee may more fruitfully be seen as an assertion of power that may be contested or challenged. Searle’s analysis simply leaves no role for any such kind of struggle, competition, or negotiation concerning the powers involved in institutional facts; and an important reason for this failure is his delegation of nonliteral or nonserious language to a secondary, theoretically nonessential status. That is, even at the descriptive level, he does not quite do justice to the complexities of establishing, maintaining, and changing social reality. There may thus be reason to look at the concept of power, and especially of the struggle for power, more closely.

In focusing on power as an individual property, Searle takes a step back with respect to the standard, still widely current, Weberian conception of power as the capacity to influence or constrain other agents’ behavior, or to “make somebody do things he would not do by himself”. For example, in their influential study of politeness, Brown and Levinson define power as follows:

“P is an asymmetric social dimension of relative power, roughly in Weber’s sense. That is, P(H,S) is the degree to which [. . .] H can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of [. . .] S’s plans and self-evaluation.” (1988: 77)

They add that there are two sources of this power: ‘material control’ and ‘meta-physical control’ (roughly, control over economic distribution and physical force, and over symbolic resources, respectively), either of which may be authorized or unauthorized. Although they acknowledge the obvious reality of power differences, they take these as given and mutually accepted, rather than contested or negotiated. They take the ‘interaction ritual’ performed in polite exchanges as the basis of more elaborate forms of ritual, and by extension, of institutionalized social reality (1987:

43–44). They do so in an explicitly Durkheimian framework that takes social cohesion and integration for granted. Despite their differences with Searle, then, they are equally committed to a consensus view of society.¹⁰

Brown and Levinson's concept of power cannot even properly account for consensual power relations, however. Suppose my beloved and I ardently wish to marry each other; the priest or civil servant with the authority to pronounce us legally married can then hardly be said to 'impose his own plans', let alone 'at the expense' of ours, even though this authority clearly counts as a form of institutionalized power in Searle's sense. Searle's view, then, is more sophisticated than Brown and Levinson's, in so far as it does not treat power as essentially negative or restrictive; it marks a step back, however, in so far as it analyzes power as an individual property rather than in relational terms. But both views tend to describe the exercise of power as a form of deliberate and intentional individual or collective action. They thus presuppose individual agency, and individual intentionality, as conceptually basic.

Searle explicitly subscribes to a form of methodological individualism. Even though he argues that collective intentions and actions cannot be reduced to individual intentions, he still believes that individual human beings are the ultimate repositories of all intentionality (1995: 25; cf. Searle, 1990: 406–407). Brown and Levinson likewise appear to take individual agency as basic, given their view that interaction ritual is governed by individual speakers' intentions.

5. Power, agency, and language: Wolf, Bourdieu, and Foucault

There are reasons to think, however, that individual agency may not quite be the kind of conceptual rock bottom that Brown and Levinson, Searle, and many others take it to be. These reasons become clear from recent social-scientific work on the nature of power. Here, I will briefly discuss three of such more sophisticated power concepts, viz., those of Eric Wolf, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault. All three try to move beyond the primacy of individual agency; they also suggest interesting ways of linking power relations to matters of language use and meaning.

Eric Wolf (1990, 1999) argues that power is an aspect of all relations between people, but works differently at different levels, such as interpersonal relations, institutionalized arenas, and in societies at large. He therefore distinguishes four different kinds or modes of power:

- (a) power as an individual attribute or capability;
- (b) the capacity of an actor to impose his will on other actors in social relations (roughly the Weberian notion of power);

¹⁰ Another ingredient of Brown and Levinson's approach, Grice's theory of conversational implicature, which characterizes cooperative linguistic behavior as being motivated by considerations of rationality and self-interest, seems one more clear instance of the social contract view of linguistic communication discussed above.

- (c) the control of the settings within which people may act (called *tactical* or *organizational* power), for example, the power that is involved in maintaining a kin- or village-based form of social organization;
- (d) the structuring and organization of these settings themselves, thus making some kinds of social action possible or impossible (what he calls *structural power*).

According to Wolf, social organization in terms of kinship, gender, etc., essentially draws on tactical or organizational power. This implies that such cultural categories are not simply given, but are produced and reproduced by the continuous exercise of tactical power; the exercise of such power, however, is constrained by structural power relations. Wolf focuses on this last kind of power, using this concept as a replacement for the more familiar notion of ‘social relations of production’. This kind of power, he argues, structures the political economy, and as it operates on the macrolevel, it cannot wholly be characterized in interactional terms; rather, it makes some forms of action possible in the first place, while rendering others difficult or even impossible. Thus, changes in structural power like the rise of a capitalist industrial economy may lead to the demise of a rural, kinship-based form of social organization, and enable the emergence of a new form of organization in terms of town-dwellers and laborers. Consequently, Wolf thinks of structural power as primarily an economic and political relation; but he also addresses its role in meaning, or “signification” as he calls it. This kind of power is implicated in meaning through, especially, the maintenance of a given set of categories against potential rivals: it upholds one specific (and ultimately arbitrary) way of ordering and categorizing, and even sanctifying, the social world by suppressing alternatives or challenges as disordered, sacrilegious, or literally unthinkable. The ancient Chinese doctrine of the ‘correction’ or ‘rectification’ of names (*cheng ming*), he argues, is a famous example of the workings of such structural power:

“The Chinese doctrine of “the rectification of names” also speaks to this point of the suppressed alternatives. According to this doctrine, if meanings multiplied so as to transcend established boundaries, social consensus would become impossible. Hence, a wise government would have to restore things to their proper definitions, in clear recognition that the maintenance of categories upholds power, and power maintains the order of the world[. . .] *Power is thus never external to signification—it inhabits meaning and is its champion in stabilization and defense.*” (Wolf, 1990: 593; emphasis added)

It is not immediately clear, however, that the power involved in the correction of names is indeed a structural power of the kind Wolf describes, rather than the tactical power held to operate in social organization, of which naming and categorizing would seem to be an integral part. It is even less clear why this structural power should be an aspect of political economy as Wolf requires, rather than of the symbolic sphere. In later work, Wolf does seem to distinguish two kinds of structural power as, respectively, “relations that command the economy and polity and those that shape ideation” (1999: 5–6), but unfortunately, he hardly further explicates or elaborates this distinction. In short, Wolf seems to imply that structural power as a concept of political economy is analytically separate from, or logically prior to, the symbolic or cultural sphere.

With respect to dealing with the symbolic sphere, Pierre Bourdieu's ideas *prima facie* seem more promising, or at least more elaborated. His conception of *symbolic power*, already referred to above, is characterized as "a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself" (1991: 170). This comes close to Wolf's notion of structural power in signification. According to Bourdieu, symbolic power can only function successfully on condition that it is not recognized as such. He emphasizes that this power "does not reside in 'symbolic systems' in the form of an 'illocutionary force' but is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it" (ibid.), and thus suggests a way of incorporating speech act theory into a general theory of action. Symbolic power can shape and constrain the actions of individual agents through its effects on the shaping of their individual habitus, that is, the complex of dispositions that generates actual social practice. The notion of habitus has proved an important one in the theory of action, as it promises to cut across the opposition between structure and individual agency. It is slowly finding its way into linguistic analyses, but its more radical theoretical implications do not seem to have been sufficiently appreciated.¹¹

Bourdieu argues that symbolic power cannot be reduced to economic power, but he does believe it is subordinate to it. He considers symbolic power to be a mis-recognized and legitimated transformation of economic power (1991: 170). Thus, both Wolf and Bourdieu ultimately seem to conceive of power as purely or primarily economical, and as a purely negative force of domination. But there is no good reason to think of power, or the sphere of political economy, as conceptually *prior* to, or even as simply dominating, the sphere of meaning and significance. We should be wary, however, of over-hastily reducing power in communication to such macro-level notions of political economy like 'capitalist relations of production', 'the state,' etc. Likewise, such notions downplay the fact that the power relations involved in and conferred by collective action, as noted by Searle, can actually be productive of social reality.

It is here that Searle's other source of inspiration, Michel Foucault, comes into the picture again. With his famous conception of *power-knowledge* (Foucault, 1975, 1976), Foucault argues both for the primacy of the symbolic sphere with respect to political economy, and against the autonomy of the symbolic sphere with respect to power.¹² Further, Foucault has forcefully argued that the 'Subject' is not transcen-

¹¹ Thus, Levinson (2000: xiii, 386) suggests that the notion of a 'preferred interpretation' which he elaborates in his theory of generalized conversational implicature may have a parallel in Bourdieu's habitus, but he does not seem to note the fact that Bourdieu's analysis calls for a more drastic revision of the relation between linguistic rules or norms and speaker's strategies and intentions.

¹² It should be noted that Foucault does not attempt to develop a general or universally applicable concept or theory of power in either of these works. He merely looks at the articulation of specific forms of power in different forms of punishment and in discourse about sexuality, respectively. His reluctance to formulate a general power concept may be useful as a reminder that we might do well to look at the precise workings of different forms of power in different sorts of language usage before we try to formulate a general concept of 'power in language'.

dental or even autonomous, but constituted in and through both discourse and power relations (cf. Foucault, 1983). One need not accept this as an ontological thesis in order to appreciate its potential fruitfulness as a methodological choice. Power in this sense is not negatively characterized as domination and repression, but positively as productive of both discourse (roughly, systems of utterances) and the Subject itself. It is an intentional, but non-subjective relation, conceived of as a set of strategies rather than rules, to which resistance and struggle are internal. In this respect, Foucault's conception of power seems to be more promising than those of Wolf and Bourdieu.

6. Towards a conflict view of language

Such considerations open up the way for a *conflict view* of language usage, one that systematically tries to account for the articulation of power relations in communication and even signification, and abstracts away from questions of legitimacy. Such a conception would not imply a *reduction* of all communication to matters of power, but rather treat power as an irreducible *aspect* of all communication. And it would not be committed to a social contract view of language. It would, however, crucially involve a more systematically elaborated concept of power. At present, we do not have such a concept of power; and in fact, it may be doubted whether any one explanatory concept of power is feasible at all;¹³ but some of its relevant—or at least desirable—features would be:

First, it is not an individual property as much as a relation between two or more actors. Power is rarely if ever simply given or unproblematically present in any individual actor; rather, it arises from interaction. That is, negotiation, struggle, and challenge are internal to it.

Second, it is an *intentional* relation, which cannot be characterized in isolation from the beliefs, aims, and goals involved in social action. Concomitantly, it is not simply or even primarily economic in character, but has an irreducibly intentional, and even symbolic, dimension.

Third, it should not simply be characterized of an opposition between domination and subordination; it is pervasive in all social action and interaction, and may well itself produce such oppositions. Power differences may express themselves as status differences in terms of honor or other privileges, economic differences in the appropriation of riches or control over production, or indeed linguistic or cultural differences (cf. Foucault, 1983: 223).

¹³ Emmet (1954) gives an early overview of different kinds of power, which despite being somewhat enumerative rather than analytical, remains useful. She argues against the possibility of giving a unitary definition of power, and concludes her overview with the remark that “the complexity in the meaning [of ‘power’] may serve as a reminder that government and the management of human affairs are not simple things which can be formulated in terms of force or impersonal mechanisms of control, but that a number of subtle considerations of prestige, faith, admiration, personal flair and social function all enter in” (1954: 26).

Fourth, and related to the preceding point, it is not necessarily a negative or repressive force, since it may have the positive role of being productive, if not constitutive, of institutional facts.

Such a conception of power elaborates how power relations are articulated in the constitution of both structures (or institutional facts) and individual agency. That is, it does not treat either structure or agency as given. It could also have important implications for the semantics-pragmatics interface. On the one hand, it would no longer treat semantics as simply the domain of conventionalized rule-governed literal language. It would view the application of a rule or the adherence to a given convention, not as the passive or unconscious ‘following of a rule’ but as the active reproduction of an institutional fact. Such an approach might account more elegantly for both the apparent stability of literal meanings and their actual instability, and thus provide a more sophisticated account of linguistic variation and change. If one may believe Wolf, the stabilization and defence of fixed literal meanings requires the continuous assertion of power. That is, *pace* Searle, even literal meanings do not simply depend on a Background of shared and agreed upon social practices (with the concomitant powers established in mutual consent), but may actually be a site for power struggles. If this is so, we may have reason to look at language variation and language change from a rather different perspective, one that does not restrict itself to purely language-internal factors. On the other hand, a conflict view of language would no longer treat pragmatics as simply the domain of intention-based strategies. Individual intentions and agency can fruitfully be seen as constituted by, rather than constitutive of, different kinds of power relations.

Thus, the argument put forward here cuts right across the long-debated question of whether conventions or intentions are logically prior, or conceptually basic, in linguistic communication. It has been noted by Wittgenstein and Austin, among others, and indeed by Searle himself (1969: 37–40), that intentions in communication can only function against the backdrop of a set of linguistic conventions or practices, or language games. The present argument goes beyond such assertions, in that it takes neither intentions (whether individual or collective) nor institutionalized conventions as basic; both are in part constituted by relations of power. On the other hand, power is itself an intentional relation, and may well be crucially dependent on language as a means of constructing institutional facts; in other words, power cannot simply be said to be basic with respect to communication or intentionality, either.

Communication, intentionality, and power thus appear to be closely interrelated, and may perhaps even be internal to each other, in so far as none of them can be fully characterized without a systematic appeal to the other two. It may not be possible, or even fruitful, to try to break into this circle by declaring one of them primitive and defining the other two in terms of it. To repeat: my point here is not that all communication can be reduced to matters of power, but merely that power is an irreducible aspect of all communication. Or, to put the point differently, the notions of language, intentionality, and power are indeed mutually interdependent, and may be usefully investigated as such. The next step would be to describe in detail particular cases of such interdependence; but here I have done no more than argue that such a step is worth taking.

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