Of Words, Meaning, and Hermeneutics: J.L. Austin and Paul Ricoeur on the Art of Making Sense of Things

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to bring together the convergent elements in J.L. Austin's and Paul Ricoeur's philosophies of language. Though a number of studies have already claimed that Ricoeur has in some ways been influenced by Austin, to date, not a single study has been made that exclusively focuses on the interrelatedness between Austin's and Ricoeur's philosophies of language. Thus, in this paper, I will start with a general exposition of the philosophical connection between Austin and Ricoeur. I will then show how Austin and Ricoeur define and also understand the nature of words, the central component of every language. I will next explore the interplay of meaning and hermeneutics through a detailed discussion of the Speech Acts Theory (Austin) and the Hermeneutics of Symbols (Ricoeur). Afterward, I will argue that in Austin and Ricoeur, words, meaning, and hermeneutics constitute the art of making sense of things and of interpreting certain aspects and features of language.

Keywords: Austin, Ricoeur, words, meaning, hermeneutics, speech act

1. Introduction

Two of the most respected figures in Analytic Philosophy and Hermeneutics are John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960) and Jean Paul Gustave Ricoeur (1913-2005) respectively. Austin, coming from the Oxford tradition of philosophy of language, was famous for his Speech Acts Theory. Ricoeur, coming from the Continental tradition of phenomenology, was renowned as well for his theories of interpretation. Albeit the two come from different philosophical traditions and orientations, still, their common treatment of language oftentimes coincides and, in a way, corresponds to one another. Hence, in this paper, my aim will be to bring to light how Austin's and Ricoeur's philosophies of language – if we can call both their approaches as such – constitute an art of making sense of things, that is, of interpreting

certain aspects and features of language. Though a number of studies have already claimed that Ricoeur has in some ways been influenced by Austin, to date, not a single study has been made that exclusively focuses on the interrelatedness between Austin's and Ricoeur's philosophies of language. It is for this reason that this present study is being conducted.

2. The Philosophical Connection between Austin and Ricoeur

J.L. Austin and Paul Ricoeur were contemporaries. Although the two ventured into different philosophical directions, at some points, their paths crossed when Ricoeur began to shift the focus of his philosophizing to language and hermeneutics. Dowling (2011, x) claims that, thanks largely to the initiative of Ricoeur, J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* came to the attention of French readers in 1970. Ricoeur's initiative suggests two things. First, it could mean that Ricoeur saw something in Austin that Ricoeur found worth sharing. Second, it could also mean that Austin made a real impact on Ricoeur. These implications are in various degrees true because Ricoeur not only cited Austin in his lectures (Taylor 2006, 102) but also adopted Austin's Speech Act Theory in his (Ricoeur) philosophical corpus (see Kaplan 2003, 30).

According to Kaplan (2003, 30), Ricoeur's conception of discourse is heavily influenced by Austin's Speech Act Theory. This claim by Kaplan is also re-echoed in another study by Melo. As Melo (2016, 320) observes, for Ricoeur, language is constituted by locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, all of which were originally conceived by Austin. This clearly indicates that Austin has really influenced Ricoeur, shaping Ricoeur's understanding of the nature of language. As Blundell (2010, 74-75) affirms in his study, Austin was a major source from whom Ricoeur draws one of the key elements of his (Ricoeur) theory of language. Since language occupies a central place in Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory, it can be said that Austin's thoughts are also one of the influences of Ricoeurian hermeneutics.

Moreover, Kaplan (1997) argues that Ricoeur's initial occupation with language was concerned about finding some

equilibrium between words and actions. And this equilibrium that Ricoeur sought, he found it through Austin's Speech Act Theory. This only denotes that Austin played a no-small role in the development of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory. Austin was such a huge factor on Ricoeur. As Busacchi (2017, 22) reveals, Austin's influence on Ricoeur stretches from Ricoeur's hermeneutics up to Ricoeur's philosophy of action. Thus, following Austin, Ricoeur has always tied language and action to one another (Żarowski 2012, 75).

Further, Wolterstorff (2006, 41) hints that Ricoeur's acquaintance with Austin may have been due to Ricoeur's reading of Gadamer. Ricoeur wanted to expand Gadamer's hermeneutics and because of this, Ricoeur turned to Austin because Austin's Speech Act Theory has the elements that Ricoeur needed so Ricoeur could expound and expand Gadamer's hermeneutical theory. This resulted, in Laughland's (2017, 27) account, into a new Ricoeurian Speech Act Theory which is nothing more than Ricoeur's own appropriation of Austin's Speech Act Theory. Jervolino (1990, 78) likewise asserts that Ricoeur's version of the Speech Act Theory is very much similar to Austin's, but Ricoeur's contains a hermeneutical element that is not present in Austin's: the employment of dialectic, that is, the necessary interplay of words to arrive at a more meaningful language.

In a more recent study, Wolicka (2018, 12) avers that in his treatment of language, Ricoeur arrived at his own conception of linguistic phenomenology by employing Austin's Speech Act Theory. But it is in the field of hermeneutics, especially in biblical interpretation, where Ricoeur found a greater application for Austin's Speech Act Theory which he (Ricoeur) incorporated in his (Ricoeur) hermeneutical theory (Wallace 2000, 304-305).

So, based on the number of studies that I have referred to above – and there are actually many more studies which I can no longer include owing to limitation of space and time – I can conclude that Austin has been a significant influence on Ricoeur. I can even say that Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory, for which he became one of the most celebrated figures in the philosophical world, would not have been that complete if it were not for Austin and his (Austin) Speech Act Theory.

3. Austin and Ricoeur on Words

Aside from being one of the pioneers of the Speech Act Theory, Austin is perhaps also better known for having authored the posthumously published *How to Do Things with Words* (1962, and henceforth *HTW*). For this, it is very tempting to begin from *HTW* in getting some firsthand ideas of how Austin himself defines and understands words. However, even before *HTW*, Austin already said something about words in two earlier opera: "The Meaning of a Word" (1979 [1940]) and "A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address" (1979 [1957]). Hence, our presentation and examination of Austin's definition and understanding of words would be incomplete if we would not take a look – even if only briefly – at these early oeuvres. In fact, Austin's definition and understanding of words in these mostly-ignored opera would be the foundation of Austin's Speech Act Theory.

In "A Plea for Excuses", Austin (1979 [1957],181-182) tells us directly his overall ideas about words. Firstly, he says that words are tools which we can use as instruments of representation, that is, as instruments that represent thoughts, ideas, phenomena, or things in general (see also Baz 2011, 146-147). But since words do not always clearly signify what they are supposed to represent, words can also be used as an instrument of defense against "the traps" of language. This notion of words as tools suggests that for Austin, language – in particular our use of words – can be our downfall when we are not careful with what we say. As a matter of fact, Austin's approach as a whole is considered "pedantic" in that he would insist that we should always be careful with how we use our words (Berdini and Bianchi 2017). Secondly, Austin (1979 [1957], 181-182) holds that words are neither facts nor things. They cannot be held and seen (save when words are written down) because, thirdly, words for Austin are nothing more than mental constructs which we employ either to simply create meaningful sounds or for a specific purpose in order to achieve a desired end (Austin 1979 [1957], 181-182).

In "The Meaning of a Word", Austin (1979 [1940], 55-75) strongly criticizes the idea that when we philosophize we should always be concerned with employing clearly-defined

words, that is to say, their meaning should never be vague. Austin (ibid., 56) argues that in general, the meaning of a word is dependent upon the original sentence from which it is uttered. Properly speaking, only a sentence has meaning (ibid.). So, before we can attribute a meaning to a word, we should first analyze the sentence where it originates from and determine the word's original purpose in that sentence. This should be our primary concern when we philosophize.

For Ricoeur (1974e, 76, 256), meanwhile, words are an essential component of language; they make up language. And language is what defines man since it is through language that man relates with his fellow humans and with the world (ibid.). Ricoeur (ibid.) further believes that by nature, words are characteristically polysemic in that every word, in any language, tends to have more than one meaning. Hence, words are generally symbolic because aside from their manifest meaning/s, they also carry indirect or veiled meaning/s (cf. ibid. 13). But aside from being polysemic, words, insofar as they are symbols, are also opaque (Ricoeur 1970, 27; see also Ricoeur 1967, 20). Their underlying meanings are not always readily evident. On account of the polysemy and the opacity of words, then, there is always a need for hermeneutics. As Quito (1990, 85) notes, whenever we deal with symbols, it is necessary to employ interpretation. Symbols always call for interpretive thinking (Zaner 1979, 34). For this reason, interpreting words – which are in essence symbols – requires a hermeneutics of symbols through which we can decipher the real and often hidden meanings of symbols (Itao 2010, 4).

Having defined words as essentially polysemic and opaque, Ricoeur subsequently holds that when we combine words to form a sentence or sentences, the resulting sentence or sentences will also be expectedly "plurivocal" (Pellauer 2007, 59). This is why in the hermeneutic theory of Ricoeur, it is always best to refer to the context of the sentence/s or word/s in order to grasp the totality of the meaning intended by the sentence/s or word/s (ibid.). Without referring or going back to the original context of a sentence, for example, what we will most likely get as a result is a distorted meaning.

4. Austin's Speech Act Theory

John Searle (2001, 219), one of Austin's famous students who also became a renowned philosopher, claims that the greatest contribution of Austin to the history of philosophy is The Speech Act Theory. The Speech Act Theory that Austin proposed is found in *HTW*. In this theory, Austin (1962) classifies our different usage of speech into:

1. *locutionary act* – the act that refers to our generating or uttering of meaningful and sensible words (ibid., 100-101, 106). This speech act may be further subdivided into:

1.1. phonetic act – refers to our act of uttering or speaking words with particular sounds or noises (ibid., 92, 96, 115);

1.2. phatic act – refers to our act of uttering or speaking those words whose sounds or noises correspond to a particular vocabulary and/or grammar (ibid., 92, 96-97, 115, 131); and

1.3. rhetic act – refers to our act of employing meaningful or sensible words (ibid., 96-97, 115).

2. *illocutionary act* – the act that refers to our employing of words or language for a particular end, for example when we are giving advice, proclaiming an oath, ordering, promising, insulting, begging, challenging, forbidding, instructing, apologizing, etc.; these words, on account of their specific purpose, carry a certain force, or in Austin's own words, an "illocutionary force" (ibid., 100, 115, 148). The illocutionary speech act may be further classified into:

2.1. verdictives – those illocutionary speech acts which are essentially intended to carry out verdicts, that is to say, appraisals, assessments, evaluations, estimations, diagnoses on either facts or values (ibid., 120, 141, 153, 156, 159);

2.2. exercitives – those illocutionary speech acts which are intended to exert or exercise one's power, authority, or right, say for instance in making orders, commands, appointments, warnings, etc. This implies, of course, that the speaker of these speech acts wields a certain influence or position of authority or power (ibid., 153, 156-157, 159, 161).

2.3. commisives – those illocutionary speech acts which are intended by the speaker to make commitments such as a promise, a vow, an oath, a consent, etc. (ibid., 120, 156, 159, 169);

2.4. expositives – those illocutionary speech acts which are intended to expose, and hence clarify, our line of reasoning, argumentation, or communication whether we making an affirmation, denial, statement, description, inquiry, response, etc. (ibid., 120, 157, 159, 161); and

2.5. behabitives – those illocutionary speech acts which are intended to conform to social behavior like when we have to say thanks, congratulations, commendations, apologies, etc. (ibid., 85, 88, 157, 160).

3. *perlocutionary act* – the act that refers to the actual effects (be they emotional, mental, psychological, etc.) of our illocutionary speech acts on the hearers to whom we intend our illocutionary speech acts for; in other words, the perlocutionary act deals with the consequences that our illocutionary speech acts produce on our intended hearers, regardless of whether these consequences are intended or not (ibid., 110, 116, 119, 125-126, 131).

Austin's Speech Act Theory, on the whole, represents the epitome of his philosophy of language (cf. Gustafsson in Gustafsson and Sørli 2011, 16). In his Speech Act Theory, Austin gives us a thorough analysis of the things we do with words, of how we normally employ words in order to arrive at meaningful language and fruitful communication (Sbisà 2007).

5. Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Symbols

Ricoeur originally conceived of hermeneutics as the interpretation of symbols (see Simms 2003, 31). He even went as far as "to define, i.e. limit, the notions of symbol and interpretation through one another" (Ricoeur 1970, 9). In other words, interpretation is none other than the making sense of symbols; it is the process of making sense of the meaning of symbols. So what are symbols? Symbols for Ricoeur (1974b, 13) refer to anything that carries double or multiple meanings. In every symbol, hence, one will find a surface meaning as well as another underlying meaning/s (ibid.). For this reason, all symbols are opaque; their underlying meaning/s are not always manifest. This opacity is what makes symbols characteristically enigmatic (Ricoeur 1970, 15). Now how are we to interpret symbols?

Ricoeur (1970, 28) maintains that a universal method of interpreting symbols does not exist; rather, what exist are two opposing methods of interpretation, namely: the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith. The hermeneutics of suspicion, true to its name, is interpretation characterized by doubting (cf. Scott-Baumann 2009, 97). While it primarily doubts the surface meaning of symbols, it also involves doubting ourselves – we, who act as interpreters – in order to destroy our prejudices and arrive at an unbiased interpretation (Scott-Baumann 2009, 68). Meanwhile, the hermeneutics of faith is interpretation that is characterized by believing (Ricoeur 1970, 20). It seeks to understand not only the surface meaning, but also the deeper meaning/s of symbols. And it does so by listening to what the symbols really intend to convey (cf. Ricoeur 1967, 28).

Since the hermeneutics of symbols can either be an exercise of suspicion or faith, we have what Ricoeur (1970, 20) simply calls "the conflict of interpretations." This conflict, however, is not something permanent. Ricoeur argues that when we apply philosophic reflection, the conflicting and seemingly incompatible hermeneutics of suspicion and faith will no longer be opposed to each other; they will become complementary (Ricoeur 1974d, 322-323). This is because philosophic reflection, or simply reflection, provides the structure for resolving the contrasting modes of interpreting symbols (Ricoeur 1970, 42-43). The structure that reflection provides to reconcile the conflicting hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of faith comprises the dialectic method (ibid., 495). Reflection, then, via the employment of dialectic, is that process by which we critically appropriate (cf. Ricoeur 1981, 185) the meaning/s of symbols through a dialectic of suspicion and faith (cf. Ricoeur 1970, 54; see also Itao 2010, 12-13). Thus, through reflection, the hermeneutics of symbols becomes complete.

6. Speech Act Theory and Hermeneutics of Symbols as Art of Making Sense of Things

Having established the philosophical connection between Austin and Ricoeur, discussed Austin's and Ricoeur's definition and understanding of words, presented the Speech Acts Theory

of Austin and the Hermeneutics of Symbols of Ricoeur, I will now argue that in Austin and Ricoeur, words, meaning, and hermeneutics constitute the art of making sense of things, that is, of interpreting certain aspects and features of language. I am going to divide my discussion into the following subtopics: 1) The Plurality of Possible Meanings; 2) Context and Meaning; and 3) Hermeneutics as the Art of Meaning-Making or Making Sense of Things.

6.1 The Plurality of Possible Meanings

As I have shown in our discussion of Austin's and Ricoeur's definition and understanding of words, for these two philosophers, words can be interpreted in various ways. That is to say, when it comes to words, to insist on a single, universal definition is something untenable. Austin and Ricoeur agree that a word has a plurality of possible meanings (Austin, 1962; Ricoeur 1974e, 13). For Austin (1962), a word in general can be interpreted as either locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary, depending on the presence or absence of "illocutionary force" when a particular word is uttered. The word "stop", for example, is open to many possible interpretations; that's also true for all other words. We cannot assign a lone, final and definitive meaning to a word because language by nature is dynamic; consequently, the meaning/s of a word within language is also subject to change from time to time.

Also for Ricoeur (1974a-e), words are fundamentally polysemic and opaque because in his view, words are always symbolic. For this reason, every word has a plurality of possible meanings. Further, the symbolic character of words very much implies that there are possible meanings of a word which are not immediately manifest, that is, there are possible meanings of a word that are not readily discernible. We cannot therefore say that once we have exhausted the manifest meanings of words, we have also already exhausted all the words' possible meanings. There are still hidden meanings that need to be uncovered and brought into light.

For Austin and Ricoeur, then, words have a plurality of possible meanings. Every word can be interpreted to mean

various things. No word has a single, fixed meaning that will always stay the same.

6.2 Context and Meaning

Both Austin and Ricoeur share the same view that meaning can never be divorced from context. If we want to dig deep into a word's meaning, we have to consider the original context where that word was first uttered or spoken. If we take away context, we are bound to get an incorrect meaning; in other words, we could easily misinterpret the meaning of a word sans the context where the word emerged from.

As I have disclosed earlier in this paper, in Austin's (1979 [1940], 55-75) definition of a word, he underscores that in itself a word does not possess meaning because only a sentence has meaning, the very sentence where a word appears. Austin in his Speech Act Theory continues to hold the same understanding of a word: that it in itself is devoid of meaning because only a sentence is meaningful. In the Speech Act Theory, Austin (1962) purposely classifies our employment of language into *locutionary* (further subdivided into phonetic, phatic, and rhetic acts), *illocutionary* (further subdivided into *verdictives*, *exercitives*, *commissives*, *expositives*, and *behabitives*), and *perlocutionary* precisely because the meaning of our words and language very much depends on the presence or absence of "illocutionary force."

On the part of Ricoeur, context too plays an important role in meaning-making (Pellauer 2007, 59). One has to go back to the context of a word or sentence in order to fully grasp the word's or sentence's meaning in its totality (ibid.). In the first place, words and sentences have multiple possibilities of meaning. Minus the context, which is precisely there to provide the framework for understanding meaning, one is bound to misrepresent the real meaning/s that a particular word or sentence is supposed to convey.

For both Austin and Ricoeur, therefore, no meaning can possibly arise independent of context. It is always necessary to take context into account, for without it, meaning-making cannot properly proceed. Meaning-making has to always involve context; meaning-making has to always be in the light

of a particular context. And both Austin and Ricoeur recognize the indispensability of context.

6.3 *Hermeneutics as the Art of Meaning-Making or Making Sense of Things*

Austin's method, as a whole, fits perfectly into the realm of philosophy of language. His primary concern is to analyze how we make use of language for different locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary purposes (Austin 1962). Even so, Austin's method may still be considered as hermeneutical because it is, on the whole, "an utterance analysis tool" (Kaburise 2011, 2). That is to say, Austin's method also seeks to interpret, to make sense of our utterances via a rigorous linguistic analysis. In this sense, I argue that the Speech Act Theory is also a form of hermeneutics because it is an interpretive endeavor: it seeks to draw out meanings, to make sense out of things, specifically, certain aspects and features and language.

Meanwhile, Ricoeur's method as a whole, though it still fits into the realm of philosophy of language, is more focused on how we should interpret language and its various symbolisms in order to arrive at understanding (Ihde 1971). Because of this, Ricoeur's method can rightly be labeled as "hermeneutical" – that is, it involves interpretation, of making sense of things.

Therefore, the Speech Act Theory of J.L. Austin and the Hermeneutics of Symbols of Paul Ricoeur, in their respective ways, are both interpretive endeavors; they are unique hermeneutical approaches. Since hermeneutics is also very much an art (Gadamer 2006, 29), then I further argue that both Austin's Speech Act Theory and Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Symbols are likewise an art, the art of making sense of things. Both deal with words and their meanings, and they are both instruments intended to analyze and/or interpret language.

7. Conclusion

Having argued that the Speech Act Theory and the Hermeneutics of Symbols are both an art of making sense of things, I now conclude that these philosophical approaches are so much related to one another. It could be because, as I have

shown earlier in this paper, Austin was a significant influence on Ricoeur. But more than this, as I have analyzed, Austin and Ricoeur have a lot of intersecting points in their respective philosophies. First, both Austin and Ricoeur agree that a word, no matter how commonplace, can have multiple meanings; a word can be interpreted in many ways. Second, both Austin and Ricoeur are of the same belief that meaning can never be had outside a context. In short, meaning is always context-based. Without a context, we can never fully or properly grasp the meaning of a word or a sentence. Third, Austin and Ricoeur can be said to be equally believing that their two respective approaches can be taken as an art of making sense of things in that the Speech Act Theory and the Hermeneutics of Symbols are both interpretive, hermeneutical methods.

My analyses further show that the relation between the Speech Act Theory and the Hermeneutics of Symbols is such that both could be used together as complementary instruments, especially in interpreting some things. In fact, I discovered that there have been researches that employ both the Speech Act Theory and the Hermeneutics of Symbols together, especially in Biblical interpretation (see for example Briggs 2003; or Wisse 2004).

Beyond Biblical interpretation, I believe that the Speech Act Theory and the Hermeneutics of Symbols, taken together, are a potent combination in deciphering meanings, especially in today's world of science and technology wherein almost every communication is now being mediated through some gadgets like cellular phones, various social media, Ipads, Ipods, etc. So even if crafted way back in the 1960s (Speech Act Theory) through the 1970s (Hermeneutics of Symbols), the two interpretive approaches of Austin and Ricoeur are still very much relevant today.

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