

BA Thesis Final Evaluation



UNIVERZITA
KARLOVA

Antonín Šmíd, Austin, Derrida, and Searle on Intention in Communication

ÚFAR, FFUK, SS 2023-204

General Description of the Work

The bachelor thesis by Antonín Šmíd could be described, as the title itself somehow suggests, as a conversation between three philosophers, Austin, Derrida, and Searle, on the problem of the relation between intention and communication. More concretely, the candidate sets out to discuss the way in which Derrida and Searle respectively (mis-)interpreted or (mis-)understood the role of “intention” in Austin’s lectures famously published with the title *How do to Things with Words*. In this respect, it is a quite ambitious work insofar as the candidate wants to argue that, in spite of some important insights, both thinkers got something fundamentally wrong about Austin’s attempt at accounting for the role or, better: the non-role of intention in speech acts in general, in performatives in particular.

To this end, the work is divided into three main parts. Besides the introduction, where the candidate quickly presents an overview of the work, there is a first chapter mainly dedicated to Austin himself and his *How do to Things with Words*. A second chapter follows, in which Derrida’s famous text on Austin (*Signature, Event, Context*) is critically discussed; finally, the candidate dedicates the third chapter on Searle, his reading of Austin and corresponding criticism of Derrida’s own reading. The conclusion to the work summarizes the candidate’s main arguments and acquisitions.

The first chapter is in many respects the most important one, as it is here that the candidate sets the stage, so to say, for his critical reading of both Derrida and Searle. Here the candidate offers a brief overview of Austin’s overall project with a quite specific aim. Following Austin’s lectures, Antonín shows that, in the attempt at accounting for “performatives,” “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary acts,” Austin tends to ascribe a progressively less important role to the speaker’s intention. He does describe Austin’s attitude vis-à-vis the concept of intention as “dismissive” (p. 16). What emerges instead, the candidate argues, is a “context”-based conception. With this important result in mind, the candidate moves on to discussing Derrida first, and then Searle. Derrida, the candidate states,

interprets Austin as an author “whose theory of communication revolves around intention” (p. 21), and his strategy is that of contrasting his own view on communication (based on his general notion of *writing*) with the speech act theory. Against Derrida’s intentionalist reading, Antonín argues that, for the British philosopher, it is “conventions” that determine which speech acts are possible and not primarily the speaker’s own “intention” (this being an aspect overlooked by Derrida) (p. 22). Of course, this does not mean that Derrida himself does not recognize the importance of the “context” and of the sets of “conventions” in order for communication to be possible; the mistake he makes is that of assuming that this is not the case also for Austin. Thus, the candidate concludes, “Austin has more in common with Derrida than Derrida himself realizes” (p. 24). If Austin is dismissive of the role of intention, and if Derrida is highly critical of it, Searle takes the notion of intention to be vital for his own revised version of the speech act theory. Searle regards communication as an explicitly intentional behavior, which he bases on Grice’s definition of non-natural meaning (p. 27). Upon this basis, the candidate discusses Searle’s own criticism of Derrida and his contention that even in the case of *writing* one cannot avoid taking into account the intentional dimension: “what differs in the two cases is not the intentions of the speaker but the role of the context of the utterance” (p. 31).

In this respect, Derrida and Searle stands as two opposite poles. Whereas Derrida criticizes the role of intention in communication, Searle emphasizes it to a very large extent. Both, however, seem to agree on (the candidate would say, wrongly) *understanding Austin’s speech act theory as intention-based*: yet, whereas this is the aspect Derrida wants to discard, Searle is interested in developing it further instead. It is precisely on this point that the candidate can criticize both of them for assuming that, *already for Austin, intention plays or would play a fundamental role*. But this is not the case.

In the conclusion, Searle is explicitly criticized because even if he rightly recognizes that utterances are always accompanied by an intention—from this he concludes that intention is the only key to a “successful communication” (p. 34). On the other hand, the candidate is also very critical of Derrida and of his decision to use *writing* as a sort of paradigm for his discussion of Austin: he assumes that *writing* is less context-determined, and thus he makes the mistake of concluding from this that every system (of communication) works “in the absence of context” (p. 35).

Critical Remarks and Questions

The candidate displays very good knowledge of the primary texts and is aware of the discussions in the secondary literature. This being recognized, I would like to provide a few critical observations on both the general structure of the work and the actual arguments proposed by the candidate.

- The first critical remarks bear on the candidate's overall interpretation of Austin. Although I would tend to generally agree with him and his thesis that the notion of intention is not for Austin as important as one might assume, I cannot fail to note an ambiguity in the manner in which Austin's view (or non-view) on intention is presented. On the one hand, Antonín talks of "dismissive" attitude (p. 16), which seems to suggest a critical attitude vis-à-vis the idea of intention. This impression is corroborated by the candidate's reference to a passage by R. Moati: "Austin never ceased to submit intention to a world of conventions" (quoted on page 16). On the other hand, however, Antonín refers to the problem of intention in Austin as an "underdeveloped" and "overlooked" aspect of his theory (p. 37). One thing is to claim that Austin was dismissive, that is to say, critical of intention, for this would point in direction of a non-intentional speech act theory. But the claim that this is an "underdeveloped" aspect is quite another thing: terms such as "underdeveloped" and "overlooked" suggest that, for the candidate himself, Austin *should have taken intention more seriously into consideration for the sake of his own theory*. Which one is the correct reading?
- Also my second remark bears upon the candidate's interpretation of Austin. On more than one occasion, the candidate claims that Austin fails in clearly differentiating the $\Gamma 1$ and $\Gamma 2$ conditions: ($\Gamma 1$) The procedure also dictates that the persons must have certain thoughts and feelings; ($\Gamma 2$) They must later act in accordance with such thoughts and feelings. Now, if I understand the argument correctly, the candidate claims, using the example of promises, that one can comply with $\Gamma 1$ and yet fail to comply with $\Gamma 2$: the candidate distinguishes between the intention of "making a promise" ($\Gamma 1$), and the intention of "making somebody believe us (even though we might be lying)" ($\Gamma 2$) (p. 11). Now, $\Gamma 1$ without $\Gamma 2$ = "false promises." On Antonín's account (*contra* Austin), a false promise is a promise made with the intention of not keeping it. Not recognizing this, Austin fails in clearly differentiating $\Gamma 1$ and $\Gamma 2$. I must confess that I am not convinced by the argument. Of course, there can be cases when $\Gamma 1$ is not followed by $\Gamma 2$: I can promise X ("to lend some money to a friend)," and yet fail to later keep the promise (for example, because I lose the money playing poker). But nobody would speak here of "false promise." Because if by "*false promise*" one means cases when I do promise X (= $\Gamma 1$) yet without the intention of keeping it (= $\Gamma 2$), then we should be very careful because for Austin a *false promise* is not a *promise* ($\Gamma 1$) that is *false* ($\Gamma 2$): a false promise is not a promise at all. The expression "false promise" is like "false friend" or "false money": false money is not money that is false; it is not money. A false friend is not a friend that is false; it is not a friend (the adjective *false* does not qualify the promise, but rather it changes

it altogether). Whereas the candidate says that Austin fails in differentiating $\Gamma 1$ and $\Gamma 2$ and cannot account for “false promises,” Austin would object that this is neither necessary nor possible: for it is not correct to say, as the candidate does, that one can have the intention of making a promise ($\Gamma 1$) without the intention of keeping it ($\Gamma 2$). For, not having the intention of keeping a promise ($\Gamma 2$) = not having the intention of making a promise ($\Gamma 1$).

- The second series of remarks concern Derrida. Now, although I agree with the candidate that Derrida too strongly (and critically) emphasizes the intentional aspects of Austin’s doctrine, I think that one should however be careful in opposing, in Derrida’s own reading of Austin, the “intentional” and the “context”-based aspects. In fact, in a beautiful passage by Derrida quoted by the candidate on page 21, “consciousness” is introduced as an element of what he (following Austin) calls “total context”: in sum, Derrida is not so much contrasting intention and context as he is recognizing that intention (consciousness) contributes to the constitution of the context itself (and that a full account of the “context” should always and also include, according to Austin, intention and consciousness). I am wondering whether the candidate has not overlooked this crucial Derridean distinction between “context” and “total context.”
- Last but not least, I want to raise a *structural doubt about the thesis*. I am quite puzzled by the fact that while the candidate uses three different texts by Searle, the one and only text by Derrida which the candidate takes into account is *Signature, Event, Context*. Why has the candidate paid no attention to Derrida’s book *Limited Inc. a b c*, where the Algerian thinker systematically and directly replies to Searle? Most crucially, are we sure that one can really understand Derrida’s position (no matter whether one agrees with him) in his short text on Austin without considering: (i) the general context of the essay itself (let us not forget that the essay *Signature, Event, Context* is mostly about Husserl in its first part, and only towards the end Derrida introduces Austin); (ii) and the more general reflections on the problem of *writing* which Derrida developed in the years that immediately precede the essay on Austin. I am saying this for two reasons. In the first place, because nowhere does the candidate seem to justify the decision to limit the attention to just one text by Derrida (he just asserts that he will consider only this tiny essay). Two, because in his criticism of Derrida, Searle takes the term *writing* at face value, while Derrida differentiates between writing in the narrow sense (which is what Searle has in mind) and “generalized writing” (which is what Derrida also calls “trace”). Why is there no mention at all of these other Derridean texts and problems?

Final grade. In light of the above, and mostly of the structural problems I pointed out, I propose 2 as a final grade.

Prague, May 19, 2024

Daniele De Santis, Ph.D.

