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Bohemica litteraria. 2015, vol. 18, iss. 1, pp. 7-12

ISSN 1213-2144 (print); ISSN 2336-4394 (online)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/134965
Access Date: 29. 11. 2024
Version: 20220831


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A Short Reflection on Speech-Act Theory of Literary Fiction

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Key words:
Speech-Act Theory, Theory of Fiction, Literary Narrative.

Klíčová slova:
Teorie řečových aktů, teorie fikce, literární vyprávění.

Abstrakt:

Stručná úvaha o řečových aktech v teorii literární fikce

Esej sumarizuje přístup k literární fikci, který vyvinuli představitelé teorie řečových aktů (autor fiktivního vyprávění předstírá autentické vypovídání). Autor eseje teorii předstírání domýšlí a navrhuje ilokuční charakter fikčního diskurzu popsat jako nepřímou deklaraci (vyprávění svou ilokuční silou nepřímo deklaruje stav věcí, o kterém vypovídá).

In my short essay, I will deal with the topic of illocutionary characteristics of fictional discourse, which I discussed last year during the workshop about John Searle's philosophy held in Prague (prof. John Searle attended the workshop and took part in discussions). At first, I will briefly summarize the conclusions drawn by John Searle in his article "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse." Then I will attempt to develop and elaborate on selected aspects of Searle's analysis.

John Searle has argued that there is an inseparable link between fictional narration and the speech act of assertion. According to Searle fictional texts bear no syntactic or semantic attributes that would indicate their fictionality. Authors create literary fiction by imitating or, more fittingly, by producing fictive assertive speech acts. If anyone wanted to question this fact, they would have to

tackle a number of theoretical difficulties. From my point of view, the following two problems would be especially difficult to overcome:

1) Even at first sight, fictional narration comes *in the form of assertion*. Let us have a look at the usual example of Arthur Conan Doyle's short story: "We were seated at breakfast one morning, my wife and I, when the maid brought in a telegram. It was from Sherlock Holmes..." (cf. DOYLE 2013) When reading sentences written by Doyle, the literal meaning of the words and sentences used does not enable us to read the narrative as, for instance, a promise, order or a standard declaration. Even though we are aware of the fact that fictionality depends primarily on assertive force and not on propositional content, it is obvious that sentences in the indicative bear features typical of assertive utterances representing a certain state of affairs.

2) Fictional narration *assumes* that it will be read as if it were valid as an assertion. This follows from the rules of the language "game" that we submit to while reading fiction. Why is that? If an author of fiction wants to use words to display certain circumstances (characters, events, the fictional world in which the story takes place), he or she has to employ speech acts that serve to represent reality. These speech acts are necessarily assertives. The uniqueness of assertives is also apparent as far as the direction of fit from words to the world is concerned: while they are being performed, words fit to the world. If fictional narration is to have due effect on the reader, it needs to be read as a true stating of facts, as an authentic linguistic representation.

Similarly to Searle, I am going to use Doyle's short story to explain this matter further. Fiction is based on an authorial creative act, characterized by Searle as pretending. Doyle creates fictional characters and events in that he seemingly refers to them. In order to reach the fictional characters and events, the reader needs, at least temporarily, to read the fictional narrative as a true report of events. The reader has to believe that the fictional narrator, Dr. Watson, actually asserts something, i.e. gives a true account of what actually happened. We read the narrative as if it displayed a word-to-world fit: as if Watson was an actual person recounting what he had experienced with Sherlock Holmes.

I am convinced that this analysis, which draws from John Searle's conclusions, is correct. However, I would like to suggest several ideas that I consider as a potential development of his theory. I think that the example of Doyle (who

by pretending that Watson is speaking creates fiction) and Dr. Watson (who truthfully recounts his experiences) expresses the peculiarity of the fictional communicative situation. A reader reading fiction enters a communicative situation which is split into two parts, or, more precisely, has double illocutionary force.

At first sight the situation seems to be complicated, but in fact it is not complicated at all. The fact that we simultaneously read the same sentences as a fictional work and as a truthful narrative does not confuse us in any way. We have deep experience with this type of communication transaction. For example, many fairy tales begin with the phrase "Once upon a time"; in Czech we would find "bylo nebylo", which word for word translates as: "There was and there was not" (for example "a girl called Little Red Riding Hood"). This fairy tale phrase is present in all fictions, so to speak: we are imagining a story which we know never actually happened because we receive it in a language form that we use routinely to narrate stories that really occurred.

What are the consequences of my ideas on double narration for the illocutionary characteristics of fictional discourse? Are there any? I think so. As I have already mentioned, a fictional narrator (whether it is a first-person narrator like Watson or an impersonal third-person narrator), whose role the author adopts, performs assertive speech acts. Yet what illocutionary validity does a fictional utterance have from the perspective of the empirical author? We could settle for the standpoint taken by Searle: from the perspective of the author it is pretending of an assertion. But Searle centres his argument around that which the fictional utterance is *not*. He does not tell us which illocutionary class fictional discourse belongs to. Apparently Searle finds it unimportant, for he comes to the conclusion that fictional utterances are not authentic speech acts.

In my opinion, though, fictional discourse could be included in the taxonomy of illocutionary acts. After all, it has both illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects. The question is whether fictional utterances should not be described by means of declarative force (as a performative in Austin's taxonomy). This view is held by a number of renowned literary scholars, such as Gérard Genette (cf. GENETTE 1993: 37–47) or Lubomír Doležel (cf. DOLEŽEL 2003: 149–151, 2008: 49–52, 2014: 11–14). In the following I will inspect this position.

John Searle defines declarations as illocutionary acts whose purpose it is to effect a change in the state of the world or to even create a new reality in it. The

vehicle of the change is the performative force of the utterance: we are changing the world by presenting it as changed. The direction of fit between words and the world is dual: we represent as well as change the world. A change in reality is achieved solely by a successful performance of a speech act. There is no point, however, in assessing the truthfulness of declarations.

Fictional discourse seems to bear some features typical of declarations. Even Frege noted that sentences of literary fiction cannot be evaluated as to their truthfulness. The question whether it is true that the Watsons were disturbed during their breakfast by a letter from Sherlock Holmes can without a doubt be pronounced pointless. By contrast, fictional utterances can be assessed as to their successfulness, since with declarations the crucial thing is not whether what is said is true or not, but what is *done with words*: a possible reality is constructed, in this case a literary work and its fictional possible world.

If we understand fictional discourse as a declarative speech act, does this not cast doubt on the above-mentioned thoughts based on Searle's analysis?

I do not think so. There are numerous speech acts that are declarative even though at first sight they look like assertions. The sentence "Starting tomorrow this chair is yours" is an assertion; however, if it is uttered under certain circumstances (e.g. by a boss who is authorized to promote employees), it can amount to a declarative act of appointing. John Searle calls this type of utterance an indirect speech act. As Searle observes in *Expression and Meaning*, this type of speech act is characterized by a double illocutionary force (cf. SEARLE 1979: 31). This implies that fictional discourse could also be an indirect speech act. In that the narrator directly asserts something (Watson asserts that he has received a letter from Holmes), the writer (Doyle) indirectly creates a fictional work of art.

In my opinion it would be even more appropriate to identify fictional utterance as a peculiar type of an *assertive declaration*, which is a category of utterances Searle views as a transitional category between assertives and declarations. In this category he includes speech acts that require institutional authority. In an ice hockey match, when a video goal judge who has been asked for a decision says, "It is a good goal," this is an illocutionary act of assertive declaration. In other words, this act "looks" like an assertive act (describing the world), yet it stakes a claim for declarative force (the judge's decision is valid "the world notwithstanding," whether or not the disputed goal was scored properly or not). I think fictional discourse shares common features with this category of speech

acts: like assertive declarations, at first sight it looks like a representative act, but in fact it does not fit to the world; by referring to the world, it creates its own world, in which the proposition is automatically true.

It is about time I brought my lengthy discussion to a conclusion. I drew on Searle's theory of fictional discourse. I think it is beyond any doubt that no clear formal attributes exist that would indicate the fictionality of text. Fictional narratives make use of a language form used for representing reality. For this reason, they borrow the form of assertive speech acts, as only assertives have the force to represent the world. Fictions come into being as "non-deceptive pseudoperformances," as assertions *communicated to the reader in the narrator's account*. Up to this point my approach is in accordance with Searle's elegant analysis. Nevertheless, I have added a few further observations: I suggest describing a fictional communicative situation as an utterance with double illocutionary force. Faced with the question of how to describe the performance of the author, I chose to view fictional discourse as a declaration or a performative. Fictionality is a foundation of the author's illocutionary stance. However, in that the author formulates the narrator's assertion, he or she also indirectly declares the fictional work of art and its world. I can see a couple of advantages in this proposal. 1) The term "double illocutionary force" draws attention to the fact that we read fiction not only as a story, but also as a work of art created by an author. Doyle's narratives function both as suspenseful tales told by Dr. Watson and as brilliantly written detective stories. *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) is to be read not only as Marcel's recollections, but also as a masterly innovation in the form of the novel. And *Lolita* is not just a confession of a conceited paedophile, but also a major tragic-comic novel. 2) The declarative force of fictional discourse provides an explanation of why it is possible for the reader to "believe" the narrator's assertions. By simultaneously identifying the author's declaration in the fictional narrative, readers understand that the sentences are automatically valid. Therefore, they do not have to lose any sleep over questions such as whether it is true that the letter from Sherlock Holmes really arrived while the Watsons were having breakfast.

Translated into English by Zuzana Fonioková

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