INTENTIONS AND CONVENTIONS

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The controversy over the roles of intention and convention in speech acts goes back at least to Searle's 1965 paper 'What is a Speech Act' and his book *'Speech Acts'*, as well as to Strawson's 1964 paper 'Intention and Convention in Speech Acts'. ([1]) Since then two books, Lewis's *Convention* (Harvard, 1969 and Schiffer's *Meaning* (Oxford, 1972), and a number of articles, have made further contributions to the issue. In this paper, however, I want to look back mainly at Strawson's argument in order to make clear some of the problems that arise directly from his treatment. Although, therefore, I shall make some references to later work, particularly that of Searle and Schiffer, this later work is not the focus of my attention. One way of justifying such an attitude would be to show that not all the original problems have been yet resolved; but although I believe this to be true I shall not argue the case here. Instead I shall try to clarify those problems by discussing Strawson's argument under the two headings of intention and convention.

I. *Intentions*

In his paper Strawson tries importantly to bring together Grice's 'intentional' analysis of non-natural meaning and Austin's account of illocutionary force. Eventually he makes a number of qualifications to his unifying plan, but in general terms he wishes at least tentatively to identify a speaker's performance of an illocutionary act with his having a complex set of intentions in making his utterance. Put generally a speaker will perform a certain illocutionary act if and only if he has a corresponding set of complex intentions, and the

audience at least recognizes those intentions and so under-
stands the force of the utterance. It is not necessary to go into
the detail of Grice's intentional analysis (²). For present pur-
poses it is enough merely to note two features of Strawson's
unifying attempt. The first is that, as in Grice's account, the
speaker's 'primary intention' will be directed to some effect
or response on the part of an audience. For 'informative' dis-
course, for example, the primary intention will naturally be
that the audience believe that about which he is being in-
formed. For 'prescriptive' discourse the natural intended res-
ponse will be the audience's obedience, or conformity, to the
command or request or advice. Although, as we shall see, there
are problems about these primary intentions I shall simply
take over this standard piece of vocabulary (³).

The second point concerns Strawson's account of the au-
dience's understanding of the force of an utterance, which
Austin, under the title 'uptake' had rightly thought in some
way involved in the successful performance of an illocution-
ary act (⁴). Strawson claims that the audience's understanding
of force lies not in the fulfillment of the speaker's primary in-
tention, but only in its recognition. We will see later that there
is some obscurity in this, too, but it has the merit of neatly
linking the Austin and Grice accounts and also plainly has
some truth in it. It is surely uncontroversial to say that for
an audience merely to understand what they are being inform-
ed about it is not required that they should actually come to
believe it. Strawson's account rightly makes room for the
needed contrasts between mere understanding and belief, or
between understanding and disobedience.

Strawson proposes to test his unifying hypothesis by using
it to separate illocutionary from non-illocutionary acts. Austin
had considered a number of criteria for marking this division
but in the end admitted that he had not provided an adequate
test (⁵). Strawson then uses his own account to distinguish the
illocutionary act of warning from the non-illocutionary act of
boasting, or showing off. He evidently regards his account as
passing this test, and rests his view on the following two
points. He says (p. 32-33 in *Philosophy of Language*):

When we show off we are certainly trying to produce an effect on the audience; we talk indeed for effect; we try to impress, to evoke the response of admiration. But it is no part of our total intention to secure the effect by means of the recognition of the intention to secure it. On the contrary, recognition of the intention might militate against securing the effect, and promote an opposite effect, for example, disgust.

And again,

The difference between showing off and warning (one difference) is that your recognition of my intention to put you on your guard may well contribute to putting you on your guard, whereas your recognition of my intention to impress you is not likely to contribute to my impressing you.

Strawson therefore takes it that the explicitness or 'essential avowability' normally involved in warning is not available in such a case as boasting or showing off. But the argument here is open to two objections. I shall discuss these in terms of 'boasting' rather than 'showing off', since the former, like 'warning', but unlike the latter, can take a direct propositional object.

(1) First of all it appears from Strawson's own account that the crucial distinction between the two acts is not wholly sharp. It is not that explicitness is required in one (the illocutionary) but impossible in the other. Rather it is that in one case explicitness is more likely to be effective, while in the other case it is less likely to be so. But in that case the criterion does not generally separate cases of warning from cases of boasting. For we may expect to find cases of warning where explicitness will be ineffective, and perhaps also cases of boasting where explicitness will be effective. The boy who cried 'Wolf', and the counter-suggestible child, will be natural candidates for the former cases. And perhaps it is not too hard to think also

of circumstances, e.g. an insensitive audience, or a culture different from our own, where boasting is not condemned but approved, and where it is inexplicitness that will make the boast ineffective or counter-productive. If the general point is right, however, then Strawson's account does not serve to distinguish, as it was apparently meant to do, between one illocutionary act, warning, and a non-illocutionary act, boasting. All it will do is to distinguish some cases of the former from some cases of the latter. It would be possible, perhaps, to take Strawson to be drawing two divisions, one between illocutionary and non-illocutionary warning, and one between ilocutionary and non-illocutionary boasting. Yet, although that might seem a natural way to pursue the point, it runs counter both to Strawson's aims and also to Austin's assumption that warning always is illocutionary and boasting never is.

Or again it would no doubt be possible to argue that given the antecedent probabilities of success in the two cases every speaker of some language will have a strong motive for maintaining explicitness in one case and avoiding it in the other. Such a genetic account, of a kind Schiffer frequently appeals to, may make it seem plausible that the initial probabilities of success will be self-confirming. They will still not, however, provide that superior test which Strawson claims for them.

(2) There is, however, a second and more important objection. If we look more closely at Strawson's analysis there seems to be an odd ambiguity in the operation of his criterion. The best way to bring this out is to ask why it *is* that explicitness is likely to be counter-productive in the case of boasting. Here, I think, Strawson implicitly gives *two* answers; one, which is correct, but does not fit his analysis, and a second, which fits his analysis, but is incorrect. For the correct, or at least obvious, answer to the question is surely that the speech act is likely to be ineffective if what is made explicit is the intention to boast, or show off. It may be that in current Western, or Anglo-Saxon, culture to make *that* intention clear is to produce hostility, resistance, or even disgust. But Strawson's analysis requires that it is not *that* intention, but rather the

primary intention to impress, to evoke admiration, whose re-
cognition leads to counter-productive results. But to make
that intention explicit is. I think, not particularly likely
to be counter-productive even in Western, or Anglo-Saxon,
cultures. For at any rate there is not the same resistance to a
man's intending to impress as there no doubt sometimes is to
his intending to boast or show off. It is the latter intention, not
the former, which is generally objectionable. But it is the for-
mer, and not the latter, which the analysis requires to be ob-
jectionable.

If this is right, then something more serious has gone wrong
in the argument, which brings importantly into question the
relationship between what might be called the 'speech act' in-
tention and the 'primary' intention. Between, for example, the
intention to inform and the intention that the audience believe;
between the intention to order and the intention that the au-
dience obey; between the intention to warn and the intention
to alert; or between the intention to boast and the intention to
impress.

Of course one way of solving this problem would be to
establish an identity between the speech act intention and the
primary intention, in its complex nest of Gricean intentions.
And, as we have seen, Strawson's initial step is at least to put
forward tentatively just such an identification. And elsewhere,
leaving aside the strongly conventional cases which Straw-
son regards as outside the scope of an intentional analysis, he
also suggests that to understand the speaker's complex set of
intentions just is to understand the force of his speech act. On
the other side, however, he insists on qualifying the tentative
identification both by reference to the conventional cases, and
also by reference to an inability in some intentional cases to
determine fully the nature of the illocutionary act on the basis
of a knowledge of the primary and other intentions. Further-
more Strawson also mentions an argument in his final para-
graph, also used by Searle (*Speech Acts,* p. 46), which, if cor-
rect, would break even the minimal link between the speech
act intention and the primary intention, in that direction.

If that argument were valid, then with the other qualifica-

tions to be made to the tentative identification, it would jus-
tify the rejection of that identification. The argument, as stated
by Searle, goes like this:

> I may say something and mean it without in fact intend-
> ing to produce that (corresponding) effect. Thus, for
> example, I may make a statement without caring whether
> my audience believes it or not, but simply because I feel
> it my duty to make it.

This argument, however, is fallacious, as Schiffer briefly
notes (*Meaning* p. 68). There is, of course, no dispute that
Searle, and Strawson, have described a possible, even com-
mon, situation. I may have to inform you officially that you
owe the governement £x in unpaid tax, but not care at all
whether you believe me. The question is, though, whether my
not caring about this entails that I did not have the relevant
primary intention. In general it is surely clear that the prin-
ciple lying behind this move is false; there is nothing to pre-
vent my intending something even if I do not care whether
that thing materializes or not. If, for example, my wife urges
me to sow vegetable seeds in order to produce a crop later
on I may do this despite the fact that I am quite indifferent as
to whether the seeds flourish or die. In such a case, with ge-
nuine good will and no sabotage, it seems to me that I certainly
intended to produce a crop of vegetables, though I did not
care whether they materialized or not. Not caring, here, does
not entail not intending; or to put it the other way round, in-
tending does not entail caring.

Searle's argument, then, leaves us where we were before,
namely, wondering whether even a minimal entailment be-
tween a speech act and a primary intention can be made out.
Two kinds of consideration might be used to argue that in
general even such a minimal link fails. If this were so, then
Searle's conclusion would be correct, even though his argu-
ment for it was not valid.

First we might strengthen Searle's argument by adding a
further feature to the kind of case he described, and making

use of a more plausible general principle. For even in the case of the intention to inform and the corresponding primary intention, it may be that I wish to inform someone when, on other grounds, I know perfectly well that he cannot believe what I tell him. If, in such a case, we make use of the principle that one cannot intend something which is known to be impossible, then perhaps I may have the intention to inform without intending the audience to believe what I say.

Second, we might reinforce the general difficulty by noting cases where it is not obvious how we should identify the primary intention. Take the case, discussed by Strawson and Schiffer, of someone's objecting to a point made in an argument. How should we identify the primary intention here? Among the natural candidates would plainly be the intention to get the audience to retract the original claim, or to counter with further argument, or just to give up. If we say merely that the objector intended the audience to take note of the point made against him, this sounds unhelpfully weak, and verging on the bare requirement of audience understanding, which it was part of Strawson's aim to enrich with the Gricean analysis. Schiffer also notes a number of cases, including 'reminding' or 'pointing out', where there scarcely seems to be, or to be any need for, any further primary intention (*). In such cases the natural way to identify a primary intention seems to be to transform the speech act intention into the passive. The speech act intention, then, would be to remind the audience, and the primary intention that the audience be reminded. Such a case preserves, in a rather trivial way, an identity between the two intentions, but scarcely seems adequate as a model for all other illocutionary acts.

In these cases there appears to be some price to pay in unclarity for the privilege of going beyond the notion of audience understanding in identifying a speaker's primary intention. Quite apart from the general difficulty of adequately identifying a primary intention in all cases, this also underlines a further problem in Strawson's original account. For so long as there is some reference in the primary intention other than that of the audience's understanding the force of the utterance,

there will remain the question whether for that understanding
it is required that the audience recognize the speech act inten-
tion. Or, to put the point in a clearer way, so long as there is
no logical connection between these two intentions, it remains
unclear whether it is recognition of only one or of both which
is required for understanding on the part of the audience (⁷).

Strawson's general attempt, then, to bring Gricean inten-
tions into the analysis of illocutionary acts leads to some pro-
blems over and above those which led Strawson to regard the
hypothesis as tentative. In particular it leads to an over-simple
picture of the role of intentions, and if so, then also to a sim-
plification of the opposition between intention and convention.
But in order to make this last point clearer it will be necessary
to consider Strawson's treatment of convention.

II *Conventions*

Strawson's paper starts from the idea that Austin relied far
too heavily on the unelucidated concept of a convention. In
one respect Strawson is certainly right, for although Austin
seems to assume that there must be conventions of illocution-
ary force to set alongside conventions of meaning (sense and
reference), he does very little to explain what such conven-
tions would be like. Indeed he also admitted in *How To Do
Things With Words* (pp 118-119, for example) that the notion
of a convention was unclear. But such a concession is less
than Strawson requires; for his view is not just that the idea
of a convention is unclear but that Austin's appeal to conven-
tions of illocutionary force is simply wrong.

It is important to see the reason for Strawson's belief, na-
mely the illustrative contrast which he draws between genui-
nely conventional and non-conventional illocutionary acts.
The former class is exemplified by a judge pronouncing sent-
ence within the framework of the law, or by utterances made
as part of a codified ritual, or the official rulings of an umpire
in a strictly regulated game such as chess or cricket. The latter
class is illustrated by a bystander warning someone about to

skate that the ice is thin, or someone objecting to a point in an argument, or someone requesting a friend to do something. In between these extremes come cases like formal introductions or stereotype surrenders where customary practice seems to have hardened almost into a rule.

There is no doubt that these illustrative examples have a clear impact, and that there are important differences between the example in the two classes. But it might be doubted whether these differences exactly or properly capture the distinction between what is a convention and what is not. Lewis, for example, takes a view which would deny the name 'convention' to most of Strawson's preferred cases ([8]). It is not my intention to take sides on that issue, but rather to note only that at least Strawson's cases scarcely seem to exhaust the kinds of convention there are, which might have a bearing on the production and understanding of speech acts.

The illustrative examples do not by themselves make unambiguously clear the sense of the puzzling term 'convention'. Strawson says that his requirement for a convention is that it be 'statable'. although most of his standard examples meet the stricter requirement that conventions are explicitly stated, or written down. Certainly, however, if we take guidance from the standard examples which Strawson gives, then there will be many social habits, customs, practices and so on, which we would normally count as conventions but which are not explicitly listed in any rule-book or manual of guidance. Examples' like the times at which a certain population takes its meals seem to illustrate that ordinary notion of a convention, despite the fact that there is no set of rules to determine these customs. Such conventions, if they can be so called, seem to be of a kind very different from Strawson's central cases. It is perhaps also worth noting that such an example does not seem to fit into Lewis's central category of conventions either. For it is difficult to fit such customs into the pattern of solving co-ordination problems, which gives Lewis's notion its basic flavour ([9]).

Nevertheless, even if Strawson's description of conventions is less than complete, the point by itself is less than decisive

against his account. For it might be the case that he extension
of the term 'convention' has no particular bearing on the pro-
duction and understanding of speech acts anyway. We need,
therefore, to raise the further question whether there are any
such extensions which can be shown to have such a bearing.

But such a demonstration is not as easy to carry out as it
may seem to be. It is tempting to fall into her rap which Straw-
son identified in which the term 'convention' is emptied of any
specific sense. Skinner, for example, in his discussion of Straw-
son, ends by treating acts as 'conventional', and so regulated
by conventions, when they are 'capable of being under-
stood' ([10]). With such an interpretation there could certainly
be no opposition between intentions and conventions, but only
because the term 'convention' has been emptied of any specific
sense. Or again we might try to illustrate cases where the
conventions in question seem to be too close to the kind of
cases which Strawson recognises. Thus, we might say that it
is in Britain a social custom or convention that people in dis-
tress shout 'Help', or that in eighteenth century Scotland it was
a convention that 'Gardey loo' was a warning to pedestrians
that something was about to be emptied into the street. But in
these cases we might also feel inclined to say that these con-
ventions, whether linguistic or social, should strictly fall within
the scope of Strawson's explicit rules. If such examples con-
tain any lesson for our purposes it is only that the division be-
tween what we might call 'linguistic' or 'social' conventions is
not wholly sharp.

Another kind of case would be one where the resolution of
an ambiguity depends upon a tacit social custom. Thus in
England a host might ask his guest whether he could have the
latter for lunch, where it is generally plain that the utterance
is an invitation and not a proposed menu. It seems plausible
to say that it is the existence of a social custom, that the
society in question is not cannibalistic, which enables the
utterance to be made and understood without ambiguity. He-
re we might expect information about the ambiguity to be
listed in a dictionary, although the background social conven-
tions governing the particular utterance might be required to

resolve the ambiguity. There is a further complexity in this kind of case. For it might be said that it is not so much the mere existence of a social convention which bears on the speech act, as the mutual understanding or acceptance of it on the part of the speaker and his audience. This point, which plainly has some force, serves to connect such an example with the more familiar case of warning someone about to skate that the ice is thin.

Strawson takes the 'skating' case to be a clear example of a non conventional, and therefore wholly intentional, speech act. Certainly he is right to suppose that the production and understanding of such a warning are not determined in any simple way either by a linguistic rule or by some social custom. It is difficult to see what kind of linguistic, especially semantic, convention could determine that the utterance 'The ice over there is thin' has the force of a warning. And it is equally hard to identify any single non-linguistic social custom which might be directly concerned in determining its force. It is not a social custom that thin ice is a hazard to skaters, even though such a claim must obliquely refer somehow to a conflict between the consequences of skating on thin ice and the conventional goals of skating. Again it is not a social convention that bystanders issue such warnings to those about to skate, even though the utterance of such a warning may be somehow related to certain tacit social, even moral, conventions.

As in the previous example, however, what seem most directly relevant to the production and understanding of the speech act in such a case are the shared beliefs of the speaker and his audience. In the standard case it seems directly relevant that both speaker and audience either believe or know that the latter is about to skate, that thin ice is a hazard, that its consequences are not generally welcomed by skaters and so on. It is in the light of such mutual beliefs that the speaker issues his warning and the audience understands his utterance as a warning. Of course it is not necessary for the audience to understand the force that he should share all these beliefs. It may be that the speaker is wrong to believe that the au-

dience is about to skate, but this need not be a barrier to the audience's understanding of the force of the utterance. Even in such a case, however, it seems to be required that the audience believes that the speaker has such beliefs if he is to interpret the utterance in such a way. The ascription and sharing of such relevant beliefs are not simply identical with the recognition of intentions, but rather complex background factors which have a bearing on the ascription of intentions. Moreover, these background considerations may themselves depend upon the existence of social conventions or customs.

Even such apparently simple examples tend to blur the contrast between intentions and conventions. They begin to make it plausible that the relation between intentions and conventions is complex, and certainly not so straightforward as Strawson seems to suggest. In his paper he uses the image of a spectrum of cases ranging from the extreme conventional to the extreme intentional, with various mixtures in between. He speaks, for example, of the extreme 'ends of the scale', of the existence of 'intermediate cases' between the two extreme types, (pp. 36-38). Such imagery suggests a simple one-dimensional scale in which, however, there is a strong opposition between intention and convention at least at the extreme ends of the scale. The examples, both of intention and covention, reviewed here suggest, however, that the imagery is misleading. It is misleading both because separately the analysis of intentions and conventions is more complex than Strawson acknowledges, and because together the opposition at the extremes between intention and convention seems to be highly artificial. In particular the cases which are supposed to be purely intentional seem to allow a reference to a conventional element without reducing the notion of a convention to emptiness. To some extent these cases support the conclusion Lewis arrives at by a different route, namely that «...once we capture the conventional aspect, we are done. We have captured the intentional aspect as well» ([11]).

NOTES

(¹) Searle's paper and Strawson's are reprinted in *The Philosophy of Language* (ed. Searle).

(²) Such detail can be found in Grice's original paper 'Meaning' *Philosophical Review*, 1957, and in his later papers 'Utterer's Meaning, Sentence Meaning, and Word Meaning', *Foundations of Language*, 1968, and 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions', *Philosophical Review*, 1969.

(³) One problem which arises out of Schiffer's version of this analysis concerns the plausibility of his division of the class of illocutionary acts into two mutually exclusive sub-classes, the 'assertive' and the 'imperative'. See Schiffer, *Meaning* p. 95.

(⁴) Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p. 115-6.

(⁵) HTDTWW. p. 130-131.

(⁶) Schiffer, *Meaning* pp. 44-46.

(⁷) Schiffer tries to resolve some of these difficulties by reducing the range of primary intentions basically to just two, namely getting an audience to believe something (for assertive acts) or to do something (for imperative utterances). This is done in the context of his claim that these classes of act are mutually exclusive. See note 2 p. 2 above.

(⁸) Lewis, *Convention* pp. 100-107.

(⁹) Lewis, *Convention* Chs. 1-3. See also Schiffer, *Meaning*, pp. 150-155, where he offers other examples of conventions which do not fit Lewis's pattern.

(¹⁰) Q. Skinner, Conventions & the Understanding of Speech Acts' *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1970.

(¹¹) Lewis, *Convention*, p. 159.