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"LYING, POETS TELL THE TRUTH …"

The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse by John Searle — a still possible solution to an old problem?

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to consider an answer to the question whether Searle's idea of sentence in a literary text is still relevant. Understanding literary utterances as specific speech acts, pretended illocutions, is inherent in the process of considering the sentence in a literary text in broader terms. Accordingly, it appears necessary to outline it. Reference to other ideas formulated both in the theory of literature as a speech act [R. Ohmann, S. Levin] as well as in logic, ontology and the theory of literature [J. Pelc, H. Markiewicz, R. Ingarden] will render it possible to adequately place and assess Searle's theory. Confronting Searle's theory with the order in a literary work (the relation between the text and the literary work, the status of the presented world, the issue of reference and fiction) will in turn render it possible to determine how empirically adequate Searle's theory is.

Keywords: fictional discourse, ontology, reference, objects created in a work of fiction, pretended illocution, cognitive function, act of speech, fictional assertion.

Establishing the status of a sentence in a literary work does not seem to be an indifferent issue, not only for the development of the philosophy of language but predominantly for the theory of a literary work. It results from the necessity of defining a specific relation between a sentence used in a function of creating fictional reality, false accordingly to the assumptions of classic logic, and a cognitive function that undoubtedly plenty of literary works fulfil. Here comes the question, how come that a sentence with a theoretically no cognitive value is still capable of conveying the knowledge about the world? This apparent contradiction

is attempted to be explained in various ways — starting from taking away from a literary work any of the cognitive values, recognising its straightforwardness [Margolis 1965], up to the conception assuming that every coherent and artistically successful literary work fulfils a cognitive and ideological function [Rosner 1970]. The status of a literary sentence itself is defined in various ways — it is said to be a false sentence [Pelc 1960, 97–128, 399–402], *quasi*-judgment [Ingarden 1960, 229–244], or it is assumed as the heterogenic status of the utterance in a literary work that recognises statements as false or true depending on the type of the subject in the statement and empiric verifiability of its content [Markiewicz 1976, 118–147]. John Searle's conception, formulated years ago, is remarkable, however, not only as the next voice in a discussion about a literary statement. Constituting an attempt of incorporation of John Austin's theses to the theory of a literary work becomes one of the programmatic texts of the discipline in literary research which is not new in fact, but still unappreciated in Poland [Ohmann 1971, 1–19; Ohmann 1973, 81–107; Beardsley 1973, 23–39; Levin 1976, 141–160]. Although it is not what makes the main goal of the study in this article, it is Searle who also offers comprehension of the issue of literary reference and the essence of the literary work as definite type of artefact or its position towards another kind of literature and culture products.

1. Main theses of John Searle – *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*

1.1. From the doctrine of etiolations of language by John L. Austin to the theory of literature as an act of speech

The reconstruction of John Searle's conception should be preceded by the answer to a question, what determines the speaking about a literary work within the theory of speech acts, as the statement that it simply results from the presence of some speech acts in a text of a literary work, what is obvious anyway, does not explain the assumed by the philosopher methodological assumptions and the conception of the description [Searle 1975, 319–332]. Although John L. Austin was not involved in a literary work itself, in a way he started a discussion about the logical status of fictional discourse, formulating the doctrine of etiolations of language. Its presence in the philosopher's theory seems to be a natu-

ral consequence of dividing the statements into two subsets: *non-literal* statements and the statements which are particularly deviant, thus *non-serious*. The concept of etiolating is used by the researcher in a few situations — when he analyses the problem of adversity of the speech act (he excludes, among others, a poem), when he deliberates the matter of an locutionary act (then he defines phenomenon such as acting, literary fiction or declamation as non full act) and when he introduces the term of *parasitic speaking*, other words *not particularly normal* (it includes, among others, poems and jokes). This kind of assertion is characterised by splitting the sender and the receiver (*I* included in the statement differs from *I* which stands for the real author of the statement, whereas *you* which is indicated by virtue of the statement meaning differs from *you* who it is in fact directed to) and another kind of reference [Austin 1986, Tomasik 1990, 115–144]. The author of thesis *How To Do Things With Words* noticed characteristic suspense of the reference in muttering, repeating someone's remarks, uttering sentences in a foreign language, acting, declamation, quoting and a literary work. These are the locutionary acts, which show a potential object reference. A literary work — which is obviously an element of sets that are influenced by etiolating — ought to be shortly defined as the text with a fictional reference and fictional instances of sending and receiving [Austin 1986].

1.2. Fiction vs. Literature [Searle 1975, 319-320]

Thus, John Searle develops Austin's thought providing the means of expressing a literary work (based on the assumptions of his theory) as a special kind of language creation, in which the speech acts are present, but they have an essentially different character and they fulfil a different function although the meaning of the words in the text of a literary work is the same as in colloquial speech acts.

Continuing Austin's deliberations, Searle pays attention to the fact that the concept of fiction is far more reaching than the concept of literature; what is more, identifying fiction with literature is a mistake, as not every work that is defined as literary is a fictional assertion. Due to the fact that literature is *a family of meanings*, the philosopher is willing to do the research on fiction not the literary work itself. His text contains no qualities that would make it a fictional assertion and it is the author who decides what its character is, similarly to a reader who decides whether to consider it as a literary assertion. There are not

any distinct borders between what is literary and what is non-literary. A fictional assertion is not the same what a figurative assertion; some definite stylistic elements can be found as well in a colloquial speech act as in the work of fiction. Another Searle's distinction concerns the definition of metaphorical use of expressions as non-literal and fictional as *non-serious.*

1.3. Fictional Text as the Set of Pretended – Untrue Illocution [Searle 1975, 323-326]

While defining semantic and pragmatic conditions that assertion fulfils as a special illocutionary act, Searle stresses that in fictional discourse we also identify assertions, but they actually lack the author's commitment to truthfulness. The author of fictional discourse does not perform at the same time a special illocutionary act of telling a story or writing a novel; accepting such a solution would lead to the thesis that fictional discourse controls completely different meanings of words and thus, as a consequence, it would be incomprehensible for the reader. In Searle's opinion, the author of a work of fiction pretends to perform a series of standard illocutionary acts, without the intention of misleading anyone. There are not any features of the text that would allow to consider it as fictional and that is why this is the illocutionary attitude of the author toward the discourse that makes the discourse fictional. The possibility of fiction is established by the set of extra-linguistic horizontal conventions that break the vertical rules which establish connections of illocutionary acts in paralinguistic reality. What is more, fictional discourse ought not to be considered analogically as a lie and this what makes it different is the existence of another type of convention where untrue assertion can be performed without the intention of misleading. Pretending to perform illocutionary acts depends on the actual performance of acts of assertion (in Austin's terminology — in the actual performance of phonetic and phatic) with the intention of applying horizontal conventions thanks to which normal commitment to the assertion is repealed.

1.4. The Act of Reference vs. Ontology of Objects Presented in Fiction [Searle 1975, 329-332]

The author of work of fiction by pretending that he performs the act of reference, he pretends the object exists. A pretended object refer-

ence is the condition to create a fictional character, as it happens in
the text of a literary work. The effective acts of reference toward a
fictional character can be performed by being outside the statement,
for instance, formulating conclusions after reading. In Searle's opinion,
within the fictional discourse, there are also *genuine* acts of reference
what is followed by genuine illocutionary acts. Thus, if the author gives
genuine information, for example, concerning topography of a city or
makes general judgements about reality, he performs this way fortunate
illocutionary act. Moreover, each genre of fiction can be distinguished by
studying their nonfictional commitment to representing facts in objective
reality. And this way, in a realistic novel, the author will undoubtedly
present facts as well; however, in a science fiction novel, this kind of
genuine assertion might not be found at all. The criterion of coherence
becomes the most important and decides about the acceptability of the
ontology. The presence of statements which are neither fictional nor a
part of the novel, such as an initial sentence in *Anna Karenina*, leads
Searle to a conclusion that a work of fiction, in general, does not consist
only of fictional discourse. The result of the philosopher's theses should
be accepted as some kind of ontological duality of the world created in
a literary work: it would consist of genuine objects, strictly fictional,
constituting the author's creation only.

2. The Assessment of Searle's Theses

2.1. The Problematic Status of a Literary Sentence as Pretended Illocution

Wojciech Tomasik in his article *Od "etiolacji" do "ideologii szczerości"*
questions the possibility of demarcation between pretended and non-
pretended illocutions in the text of a literary work, giving attention to
the fact that it can cause perlocutionary effects in the order of reality
[Tomasik 1990, 115–144]. Accordingly, it is very difficult to establish the
connection between pretended illocution and genuine perlocution. Gen-
uine illocutions, although the criterion of distinguishing is not clearly
defined by Searle, would be able to fulfil a cognitive function; however,
a literary work itself, which contains a heterogenic text with regard to
acts of speech which create it, could not comprehensively communicate
cognitive contents in such a way. Thus, cognition received from the sub-

stantiation of a literary work would constitute the set of unrelated and incoherent fragmentary perlocutions. This method of understanding the status of the text in a literary work designs a virtual reader, being able to distinguish the pretended and nonpretended illocutions, who would change the cognitive attitude toward the literary work — formulating them as fictional on one occasion, therefore cognitively valueless, and on the other occasion as functioning in an analogical to colloquial acts of speech way, therefore capable of causing definite effects in the order of life. Such an attitude seems to be inconsistent with reader's colloquial substantiating experience, who rather formulates a literary work in a comprehensive way, and with regard to the indicators of fiction sanctioned by culture (such as a title or a form) focuses more on the reception of the text aesthetically not cognitively. Regarding the vague criterion of distinguishing pretended and nonpretended illocutions within a work of fiction and also the possibility of their pragmatic and logical assessment from different perspectives (pretended illocution from a reader's point of view does not have to be automatically abode by the reader as pretended and the other way round) and also defining what the text means within the reality, seems completely impossible.

2.2. The Problematic Status of Literary Reference

The Searle's solution to the problem of the literary reference seems to be unsatisfying as the way of explicating its definition has been based on vague and problematic demarcation between pretended and nonpretended illocutions within the work of fiction. The difference between the act of literary reference and the act of reference in the order of life depends, according to the philosopher, on different ontological status of the objects of reference. Accepting one of the strict rule of reference, the axiom of existence, the act of literary reference ought to be assumed as completely unsuccessful [Searle 1969]. It is worth noticing the fact that even in colloquial acts of speech we refer quite effectively to what does not exist, for example, to dwarfs or other legendary, fantastic or mythical characters. Moreover, the text of a literary work does not contain any indicators, which would allow to distinguish pretended and nonpretended acts of reference. An average reader is not able to answer a question when indeed the author performs the act of reference and when he only pretends such an act. The examples given by Searle are problematic to such an extent that using the authentic personal name

or a name of a place does not decide about authenticity of the reference; it is quite easy to find such a literary work with a denotation of such a proper name that is not genuine in accordance with objective status of things in the extraliterary reality. Taking into consideration the fact that what the pretended reference would be from a reader's point of view, it would not necessary have this character for the reader. As a result, the term of literary reference vanishes and the way of how a literary work refers to reality is not defined so as to guarantee the development of coherent conception of cognitive function in a literary work.

In fact, the philosopher uses the term of *ontology* but his deliberation lacks the initial comments on the status of existence of name denotations of that appear in pretended illocutionary acts. There is no suggestion as to understanding presented objects; from philosophical point of view doubtful seems to accept that objects created in a literary work can be as well clearly fictional as real. It is difficult to talk accurately about the reality of literary objects if the presented world which is created in a literary work is basically different from objective reality. The object, which Searle would define as real, takes part in fictional presented world getting in different functional and semantic connections with remaining, strictly fictional, objects. Even without doing appropriate ontological research, we can assume that considering such a way of existence with any elements of false presented world leads to unsolvable contradictions even on the ground of non-classic ontology [Stróżewski 2004].

2.3. Vague Definition of a Literary Work

Determining one certain and empirically adequate definition of a literary work seems to be pointless due to obvious historical changeability of the term of a literary work which is always adjusted to a present culture situation. However, it does not mean that we are not able to give some categorical indicators of a literary work. Searle, as well as other representatives of the theory of literature as an act of speech, treats a literary work in an analogical way toward other assertions touched by etiolating what in consequence leads to revoking particular values. Even if we do not expect the solution to the problem of literary indicators, it is worth mentioning that although — as Searle rightly claims — there is no even one factor in the text that would indicate its unreality, there are culturally sanctioned indicators of unreality which cause that we read a text in a aesthetical way; we are focused on getting along with false world

not the real one — a literary form, title and even a place of presence in the text — thus, it can design the reading of an aware participant of the culture. It is worth pondering, even though it is a difficult venture, whether fiction which determines a literary assertion does not have a different character from fiction which concerns jokes or other etiolating assertions. A linguistic research will not give a satisfying answer; it is necessary to start deliberations, which will probably become an essential starting point; however, they basically ought to be concentrated on ontological status of objects presented in a literary work [Paśniczek 1984, 1988, 1994, Parsons 1975, 73–86, Cyzman 2003, 57–119].

3. Without a Solution. Final Conclusions

John Searle's proposition seems to be even these days cognitively attractive enough to show dynamic aspect of the text of a literary work stressing its essential otherness from colloquial acts of speech. The conception of the logical status of fictional discourse is questionable and at the same time proves the limited possibilities of using a strictly linguistic theory in a theory of literature. If the theory of speech acts has not worked out the concept of a text, proving itself among single acts of speech, undoubtedly it cannot be used for explaining the text of a literary work [Wierzbicka 1983, 125–137; Tomasik 1988, 125–140]. Searle's deliberations, as well as establishments of most remarkable researchers who are engaged in a problem of the literary status of a statement, should consider creative power of the text as a base of literary work which is followed by a particular modus of referention in a text of fiction [Cyzman 2003, 57–119]. Maybe Katarzyna Rosner's solution, who studied the way a literary work fulfils a cognitive function on the basis of presented world implied as the symbolic system, appropriately completed by ontological research would give a fuller picture of an interesting phenomenon [Rosner 1970].

Searle formulates only a proposition of a solution to an old semantic problem which relatively encourages to further fundamental questions. It seems that Austin's theory of speech acts does not give possibilities of its fuller deception. Searle himself ends his article with a statement *that so far, there has been no general theory which explains the mechanism due to which pretended illocutions convey illocutionary intentions* [Searle 1975, 332]. Thus, the solution to this interesting issue is still waiting for its courageous (naïve?) discoverer.

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