13

Intentions and Beliefs as Conditions for Use

13.1 THE ROLE OF BELIEFS IN MAKING STATEMENTS

In Searle’s analysis of speech acts, a number of psychological states are taken for granted and presented as mental conditions for language use. The analysis represents beliefs and intentions as kinds of biological, natural facts to which a language is attached through rules and conventions. It is a picture of language as a linguistic mechanism connecting the minds of the speaker and the hearer. It is an idea of language as an extension (for the purpose of communication) of more fundamental capacities of the mind:

The capacity of speech acts to represent objects and states of affairs in the world is an extension of the more biologically fundamental capacities of the mind (or brain) to relate the organism to the world by way of such mental states as belief and desire, and especially through action and perception. (Searle 1983: vii)

This picture of language has led Searle to develop a foundation of the theory of speech acts within the philosophy of mind: ‘A basic assumption behind my approach to problems of language is that the philosophy of language is a branch of the philosophy of mind’ (Searle 1983: vii). It seems to me that this conception of beliefs, desires and intentions as primitive mental phenomena is necessitated by the attempt to develop Austin’s (1962) remarks into a theory of meaning and of language use. If Searle’s analysis of speech acts is to be non-circular, then the beliefs and intentions treated in the analysis as conditions for use must be conceived of as being more primitive than the forms of language use that are analysed. The analysis would otherwise depend on what

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it purports to explain, namely our promises, requests and statements as everyday linguistic practices.

Consider the following fact. If we look at a newborn child who is lying in his bed next to the kitchen in which his mother is talking loudly, it would never occur to us to say that the child believes that his mother is in the next room. Why is that so? Is it because the child’s mind is still so undeveloped that it cannot form such a complex, inner mental state? Let us investigate that question by studying certain obvious facts of the child’s development.

When the child grows older, he will begin to say, first ‘Mummy!’, then ‘Mummy is in the kitchen,’ and later ‘I believe that mum is in the kitchen.’ What kind of development does this reflect? Does it reflect a development in the child’s mental capacity for certain psychological states which then form more and more subtle conditions for his use of language?

If we want to understand what development is reflected in the child’s successive mastery of these sentences, we must look more closely at the different ways the sentences are used. ‘Mummy!’ is used when directly confronted with the mother, and as a reaction to the fact that the mother shows herself (as smiling in a particular way is another reaction). The child’s behaviour is, to some extent, similar to that of a dog recognizing his master.¹

The use of ‘Mummy is in the kitchen’ is different. Normally, this sentence is used in situations in which the mother is not present and is used to inform an ignorant person of the fact that the mother is in the kitchen. But the child who uses the sentence is obviously not ignorant of the fact that the mother is in the kitchen: he states it as a fact. How did he establish that fact? Well, we can imagine, for instance, that the child has recently been in the kitchen to show his mother a drawing, or that he has heard his mother’s voice coming from the direction in which the kitchen lies. That is, the child may either have observed the mother in the kitchen, or he may have conclusive evidence for the fact that the mother is in the kitchen. If we wanted to, we could go on describing a whole family of different ways of observing the mother in the kitchen, and of situations containing more or less conclusive evidence for the fact that the mother is in the kitchen. It is this family of home circumstances that forms the conditions for the statement that the mother is in the kitchen. A child who learns to use the sentence ‘Mummy is in the kitchen’ must become acquainted with this family