

SPEECH ACT THEORY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

This article examines the use of speech act theory in biblical interpretation and the way it has been used in the past two and half decades. The first section of the article explains some of the aspects of speech act theory and how it can be applicable to Biblical texts. Speech act theory can be applied to texts in many ways and two approaches followed most by scholars are examined in the second part of the article. On the one hand there is an approach which deals with each speech act in detail and the there is an approach where the focus is more on the overall perlocutionary effect of a text. It is clear that the enormous potential of this method has not yet been utilised fully by New Testament scholars.

1. Introduction

The literary analysis of biblical texts has been one of the outstanding developments in the field of biblical interpretation in the last thirty years. As scholars started to explore outside the paradigm of historical critical methods, it was inevitable that they would also appropriate a variety of literary methodologies and approaches. With the focus on the texts as literary artefacts, modern literary theory offered New Testament scholars a plethora of useful new ways to look at ancient texts. Approaches ranged from structuralism to deconstruction to reader-response criticism to narrative criticism and so on. This appropriation of methodologies went hand in hand with a synchronic focus on the text rather than a diachronic one, which aimed at discovering the pre-history of the text and focusing on its historical aspects.

According to Tovey (1997, 21-22), this meant three important things. *First*, a literary approach implies a holistic view of the text, as being intentional and having an overall purpose and aim. The text is no longer only viewed in terms of smaller segments deriving from prior sources, as was the case in form and redaction criticism, but it is viewed as a coherent whole where “meaning is found in the relationship of the parts to the whole”

(Tovey 1997, 21). *Second*, meaning in texts is no longer seen as fixed and vested only in the text and the author. The creative role of the reader in constructing meaning in texts also came to the fore. Tovey (1997, 22) says that “meaning is conceived as the outcome of a creative interchange between the author of a text and its readers . . . attention is fixed upon the rhetoric of the text, and upon the way in which it shapes the act of reading and beyond that upon the nature of meaning not so much as content to be excavated from the text as an event created by the implied author’s narrative strategies and the reader’s responses.” *Thirdly*, for many literary critics the focus on historical or social aspects of texts faded into insignificance. The focus on the texts themselves became so strong that traditional historical-critical considerations were relegated to the back-burner. Tovey (1997, 23) is correct in stating that this tendency to lose interest in historical critical aspects should be addressed. And indeed, in recent years, there were some concerted efforts to bring the historical critical and the social scientific study of the NT and various literary approaches closer to each other.

In this arena of renewed focusing on the text as literary artefact and on the communication of the text as a unified whole, speech act analysis also became a field of interest to biblical interpreters.

Speech act analysis or speech act theory¹ (henceforth abbreviated as SAT) is a theory of language use and its effects. It was first expounded in the 1955 William James lectures presented by J. L. Austin at Harvard and was published in 1962 under the title *How to Do Things with Words*.² In his work, Austin looked at the *effects* of different kinds of utterances in conversation and other speech, in other words, the performative aspect of language usage. For example, the utterance “It is cold today”, addressed to a person coming into a room, can induce the person to close the door. And the words “I do”, spoken in a specific context, can establish a legally binding contract between two people. John Searle ([1969]1977, 1979, 1999) and Paul Grice (1975, 1989) followed the lead of Searle and developed more comprehensive models of SAT. They also refined some of the concepts in Austin’s work, which was not a full fledged development of SAT, but rather the beginnings of a theory.

As SAT developed and found its niche in pragmatics, biblical scholars, looking at a variety of literary theories to supplement their exegetical programmes, turned their attention to SAT as well. In fact, Briggs (2001b, 4)

1 For brief but useful overviews of the major developments in the history of SAT, see Briggs 2001 and Sadock 2004.

2 Cf. Austin (1962) 1975.

credits one of Austin's students, Donald Evans (1963), as the person who first applied some of the principles of SAT to biblical language. It has since been used in biblical interpretation over the last 30 odd years in a variety of ways, and while relatively few major publications have dealt with SAT, this endeavour has focused the attention of biblical interpreters on the performative aspect of language. It was increasingly realized that language and words are not neutral carriers of meaning, but actually have effects and achieve. People can indeed *do* things with words. This is even more significant if one takes the nature of biblical texts into consideration: these texts were not intended to be literary products; they were pragmatic, created in a real life situation with a view to persuade, to change attitudes, to get people to do things and to act in a specific way. And in the arena of pragmatics, SAT is a very useful tool to enable interpreters to focus on the performative aspect of language as well.

However, we must also emphasize that SAT should not be viewed as a comprehensive theory of language which can be used in isolation, and through which one can achieve a comprehensive reading and understanding of a particular biblical text. SAT must rather be seen and used for what it is, and what it can contribute to the total analysis of a particular text. It focuses attention on the effects of the use of certain utterances in a specific speech situation. As such its focus is narrow, determined by the markers in the text, and can be used to supplement other exegetical tools to get a better understanding of a communication. "In understanding the meaning of a literary discourse, the reader needs to attend not only to what the author is saying (i.e. to the propositional content of the discourse) but also to what he or she is doing by what is said" (Tovey 1997, 70).

In this article we are briefly going to look at what the theory of speech acts is. We will also then by means of illustration look at the way in which this theory of language has been applied to NT texts in the past. There we will look at an approach which deals with each utterance in a text in detail, and we will also look at the way in which the theory can be applied to the overall performance of a larger segment of text.

2. Doing Things With Words: The Theory

Before we look at the way in which SAT has been used and appropriated by some biblical interpreters, it is advisable to give a brief exposition of some of the main features of SAT. In SAT attention is directed toward utterances, and the effects achieved by these utterances in specific speech contexts. Austin (1975, 108) stated that "when we say something we are generally

doing a number of things, including uttering an intelligible sentence which conveys a particular intention and effects a particular response.”

A number of basic principles constitute the rough outlines of SAT. These are the following:

2.1 Any utterance consists of a number of acts

Austin (1975) indicated that in any utterance there are actually three acts being performed:

1. A locutionary act, which is the production of an intelligible and recognizable combination of words which usually constitutes a sentence. It is “roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference which again is roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense” (Austin 1975, 108).

2. An illocutionary act, which is an act performed by the speaker when making a specific utterance. For example, by making a specific kind of utterance a speaking can be stating, warning, requesting, commanding, representing, threatening and so on. In short, the illocutionary force of an utterance is “the impact which an illocutionary act is intended to have on its hearer” (Tovey 1997, 71). For example, a question normally, and unless there are markers in the context indicating otherwise, requires an answer from the person addressed. Searle (1979) refined Austins’ taxonomy of illocutionary speech acts and indicated that there are five types of illocution (see also Pratt 1977, 80-81):

- Assertives are illocutionary acts in which the speaker asserts or states or represents or claims something. The focus is on representing a state of affairs.
- Directives are illocutionary acts with which the speaker intends to get the hearer to do something. The speaker can be requesting or commanding or directing the hearer to do something.
- Commissives are illocutionary acts in which the speaker is committing to something in future. It is achieved by vowing or promising or swearing and so on.
- Expressives are illocutionary acts in which the speaker’s thoughts or feelings about something are expressed. The speaker can be thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating.

- Declarations are illocutionary acts which “bring into being the state of affairs to which they refer, e.g. blessing, firing, baptizing, bidding, passing sentence” (Tovey 1997, 72).

3. A perlocution or perlocutionary act is the intended effect inherent in an utterance. But this intended effect can be vastly different from the actual effect. Over the actual effect of an utterance the speaker has no control, and it is the hearer who reacts to the utterance in his/her own way.

2.2 Context helps to determine the category of speech act being performed

To understand the illocution and perlocution of an utterance it is crucial to pay attention to the context within which it is performed. For example, in a context where a person has expressed the fact that s/he is hungry, the utterance “I have bread” can be construed as an offer to provide food, rather than a mere assertive that the speaker has access to bread. It is thus important to know who is speaking, in what manner, under which circumstances, to whom and why. This helps to determine which category of illocutionary act and eventually perlocution is involved in a particular speech situation.

2.3 All speech is rule-governed behaviour

Another premise of SAT is that all human communication is regulated by rules which make the communication possible. If any speech act is to be concluded successfully, it must meet certain conditions. These are the so-called appropriateness or felicity conditions which “represent rules which users of language assume to be in force in their verbal dealings with each other; they form part of the knowledge which speakers of a language share and on which they rely in order to use the language correctly and effectively, both in producing and understanding utterances” (Pratt 1977, 81). Each different kind of speech act has different felicity conditions. For example, the appropriateness conditions for questions are “that the one asking the question does not know the answer, sincerely wants to know the answer, believes that the one asked will possibly know the answer but will not obviously provide the answer without being asked” (Tovey 1997, 73).

In addition to these general felicity conditions, H. P. Grice (1975) also identified the co-operative principle (CP) which is assumed to be operating in all conversation. It is a broad principle, stating that any speaker must make his/her contribution “such as is required, at the stage at which it

occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which he is engaged” (Grice 1975, 45). This general principle is underpinned by four maxims which regulate verbal interaction (see also Upton 2006, 98):

- The maxim of quantity which states that any contribution to a conversation must be as informative and bring just as much information to the interaction as is necessary. Not more, not less. “Be economical.”
- The maxim of quality states that any contribution should not deliberately be false or misleading. The truth of utterances is generally accepted implicitly by parties to the conversation. “Be sincere.”
- The maxim of relation states that any contribution to a conversation or interaction must be relevant to that particular topic. “Be relevant.”
- The maxim of manner states that any speech contribution must be as clear as possible, and that ambiguity and obfuscation should be avoided. “Be perspicuous or clear.”

These are the rules parties to a conversation or speech exchange normally assume to be in place and this makes a coherent, directed interchange possible. Speech is thus rule governed. For example, because the co-operative principle is assumed to be in place and because the maxim of relation is also implied, the following conversation is possible: Speaker A: “I can’t see in this closet.” Speaker B: “I have a flashlight.” Because both parties assume that the CP is in place and that they are co-operating, and because both rely on the maxim of relation/relevance, that is, that their contributions are relevant, it is possible to construe B’s statement not merely as a statement of fact, but as an offer to help A by providing a flashlight. Because of the CP principle it is possible to interlocutors to make their speech simple and short and to fill in gaps that might arise in a conversation. The rules which are assumed to be in place make communication possible.

But all rules are not always obeyed, and sometimes rules can be broken or flouted. It must also be noted that whenever one (or more) of these rules is transgressed, the necessity of reconstructing the meaning of an utterance by implicature arises. Grice (1975, 49) lists a number of cases in which the CP or its underpinning maxims are deliberately not fulfilled. Three of these are not applicable to works of literature, but the fourth, that is, “flouting” a maxim, is important for literary texts, because it is the only possible kind of non-fulfilment in a literary speech situation. As we are dealing with the Bible as literature, this aspect is of extreme importance for our purposes. Grice (1975, 49) explains how the flouting or deliberate non-fulfilment of the CP and maxims can necessitate implicature:

He may flout a maxim; that is, he may blatantly fail to fulfil it. On the assumption that the speaker is able to fulfil the maxim and do so without violating another maxim (because of a clash), is not opting out, and is not, in view of the blatancy of his performance, trying to mislead, the hearer is faced with a minor problem: how can his saying what he did say be reconciled with the supposition that he is observing the overall CP? This situation is one which characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature.

Whenever flouting took place, it is necessary to decode the utterance in order to make sense of it. McLaughlin (1984, 32) states:

Conversational behavior that appears to violate or blatantly flout the maxims ordinarily gives rise to speculation as to why the cooperative principle does not appear to be in force, and this state of affairs invites *conversational implicature*, broadly construed of the engagement of a set of interpretive procedures designed to figure out just what the speaker is up to [McLaughlin's italics].

Take, for example, two conversationalists who are engaged for some time in a discussion of a mutual colleague, who suddenly approaches A from the back and A says: "Don't you think that Fred sometimes acts like an idiot?", to which B replies: "I planted some shrubs yesterday." In order to make sense of B's utterance, A must make a number of inferences on the basis of assumptions about rules and principles of conversation which they both share. This is, of course, done automatically and subconsciously, but could perhaps be explained in the words of A as: "B violated the maxim of relevance, but so far in the conversation he has been very cooperative. For some reason he has chosen to flout the maxim, and therefore indicated that he does not want to pursue the topic any further. He is telling me he does not want to talk any more about this particular subject, and that I should follow his example." If A turns around and sees Fred, the reason for B's flouting of the maxim will become clear to him. The problematic speech situation that has arisen with the apparent flouting of the CP, needs to be resolved by implicature.

We are in agreement with Pratt (1977, 163) that, in literature and literary speech situations, it is always the flouting of a maxim that is relevant whenever there is some sort of failure to fulfil a maxim. This means that whenever flouting has taken place, in literature it is always the intention that this situation is resolved by implicature. It must be stressed, however, that this fact is valid only for the communication between implied author and readers in the text; but it is, of course, possible that the fictional speaker or character is failing to fulfil the CP in the fictional (re)construction of a

verbal exchange. This failure of a fictional character to observe the CP can even result in the breaking off or failure of the conversation on the level at which the characters are interacting. But the CP between implied author and readers is of course not violated, or rather the readers assume that it is not and “it is this assumption which determines the implicatures by which we resolve the fictional speaker’s violations at the level of our dealings with the author” (Pratt 1977, 175). The flouting of the above listed maxims results in a number of so-called figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole, meiosis, irony and so on. In this respect SAT provides a novel way of looking at these phenomena and of explaining and identifying them.

2.4 SAT and literary discourse

Although SAT is mostly aimed at real-life conversation it is also extremely valuable in analysing literary texts. Tovey (1997, 78-80) mentions a few advantages of applying SAT to these texts. *First*, he (1997, 78) indicates that literary discourse in a text is the result of the communication between (implied) author and (implied) reader and it takes place in the context of language exchange which is, like real-life speech, governed by conventions, rules and felicity conditions. The communication is also determined by a specific context, the speech context. *Second*, that SAT tends to foreground intention in a literary work. In “that respect it shares with recent narrative theory the recognition that a work of literature is the product of an author who engages in an act with a purpose We may inquire after the illocutionary intentions of the author” (Tovey 1997, 9). He further indicates that with SAT’s illocutionary force “there is a tool which rescues and places in a proper perspective the concept of an intent behind the production of a literary work.” *Third*, the emphasis of SAT on context is also important, because it is only in the speech context that meaning can be deduced. And the context of literary works is the literary speech situation. Tovey (1997, 80) argues that “we must expand the notion of ‘text’ from a formalist vision of words-on-a-page to the speech act focus upon verbal performance whose meaning is determined by having regard to ‘co-texts and contexts’. In other words it is a shift from literary text to the literary act.” *Fourth*, in SAT the role of the reader is implicitly and explicitly recognised and taken into consideration. The reader is the “respondent in a literary speech situation.” (Tovey 1997, 79). The notion of implicature which is part and parcel of SAT is also of significance for analysing literary texts. Because literary texts are also expressions of rule governed behaviour, implicature operates at all levels of the literary speech act, and this provides us with a tool to study and

interpret the gaps in discourse and texts, “the unspoken assumptions and messages upon which meaning depends” (Tovey 1997, 80; see also Lanser 1981, 76-86). *Finally*, SAT can help us analyse literary texts at more than one level. It can help us analyse the discourse at the level of the characters in the text and the communicative acts taking place on that level, but it can also assist in analysing the discourse on the level of the implied author and implied reader where the same utterances can have different functions in terms of the difference in speech context. It would thus seem that SAT is indeed well equipped to analyse literary texts in its own unique way, by bringing the notion that literary texts are also speech events and actions to the table. And it is also worth noting that SAT holds great potential to integrate its principles with various aspects of literary and narrative criticism.

The above brief exposition (based mainly on Searle) is a simplified depiction of SAT; it does not pretend to be an exhaustive account of all the nuances and complexities a more detailed discussion would reveal. However, SAT has intrigued a number of biblical scholars over the years and although relatively few major works have appeared on the subject, it is already clear that SAT has impacted on biblical studies in many ways. A fairly exhaustive account of the utilization of SAT in biblical interpretation can be found in Briggs (2001a, 236-264) who discusses a number of significant contributions in this regard, such as that of Donald Evans (1963), Anthony Thistleton (1970, 1973, 1992), Du Plessis (1988, 1991), Botha (1991b), Neufeld (1992), Tovey (1997), and so on.

3. Examples of the Application of SAT to Biblical Texts

We will look at two examples of different applications of SAT over the last fifteen years or so. This will give an indication of the variety of ways in which SAT has been used in biblical interpretation.

First, we will pay attention to a methodology which takes narrative criticism into account and which is a close SAT reading of each and every utterance in the text, classifying its illocution and looking at the perlocution. The theory is rigorously applied; the various felicity conditions and the flouting of conditions are also examined, both on the level of the characters in the narrative and on the level of the implied author and implied reader. The text we will focus on to illustrate this approach is John 4:16, a text which is notoriously difficult to interpret.

Second, another way to apply SAT, is to apply it to the communication of the text in more broad brush strokes, and to focus on the interaction of the

author and readers and the text itself as speech act. A good example of this is the speech act exploration of 1 John by Dietmar Neufeld (1994). However, before discussing these two examples, three other works should be mentioned. Two noteworthy monographs, but which we are unable to discuss in any detail here, are those of Tovey (1997) in which he uses SAT to explore the narrative point of view in the Gospel of John, and that of Briggs (2001) who, following the lead of Evans (1963), argues that a thorough understanding of SAT will inevitably result in taking the hermeneutical notion of self-involvement seriously. The work of Upton (2006) is the most recent extended study utilizing SAT in interpreting biblical texts. In the first part of her book she discusses the aural and orality of ancient popular texts and compares the ending of Mark with Xenophon's fictional *An Ephesian Tale*. She emphasises that the aural nature of both these texts necessitates a hermeneutic such as SAT which can take this into account in a comprehensive way (Upton 2006, 3-77). In the second part of her book she then gives speech act readings of the ending of both Xenophon's tale and the three major endings of Mark's Gospel. Her approach is similar to the first way of applying SAT which we are going to discuss below, in the sense that she works from a narratological-informed basis; she refers specifically to Seymour Chapman's model (Upton 2006, 102-104) and does her analysis utterance by utterance, concentrating on illocutionary force and perlocution. She also emphasises Grice's 1975 co-operative principle and maxims and Pratt's 1977 model. Upton's speech act readings are interesting and she succeeds in showing that SAT is ideally suited to interpret ancient popular texts, in the sense that it can incorporate sensitivity for the aural nature of these texts. Her study is yet another example of how SAT can really impact significantly on readings of the NT.

3.1 *John 4:16*

3.1.1 *The problem*

In this section we will be looking at how a rigorous application of SAT can be utilised to shed light on a text which has been notoriously difficult to interpret in the context of a narrative. This text is John 4:16, which forms part of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). Jesus meets the woman at the well and they have a conversation up to a point; but in 4:16 there is a very abrupt break on Jesus' side:

3.1.2 Traditional explanations

The unexpected and abrupt nature of this particular verse (4:16) presents interpreters with considerable difficulties. Various explanations are proposed. Carmichael (1980, 338) contends that this scene is loaded with sexual and marital overtones: “this switch in conversation would be inexplicable if it were not for the underlying marital theme. The woman by requesting the gift of living water is becoming, in a sense for the first time, a bride for the bridegroom.” He comes to this interpretation because for him water can be used figuratively to refer to a woman as a wife (Carmichael 1980, 337). Basically the same interpretation is followed by Eslinger (1987, 178). Olsson (1974, 184) refers to various attempts at explaining this very troublesome utterance. According to him, most scholars read this and the following utterances as a sort of “leading” or “testing” of the woman in which her faith is tested, her conscience is awakened, and her loose living criticized. Other scholars contend that this utterance reveals Jesus’ omniscience.

O’Day (1986, 131) refers to a few other explanations, such as the view of Bernard (1929, 143) that we only have fragments of the original conversation, and the view of Lindars (1972, 185) that it is a ploy of Jesus to make the woman understand that he is not speaking about real water. However, O’Day dismisses these and other explanations as inadequate. Instead she proposes (1986, 66) an explanation based on the usage of spatial references and irony in both 4:15 and 16. This is intended to focus the readers’ attention on the woman’s ignorance about the origin of the gifts of Jesus: “the Samaritan woman has identified the gift of water with a place, and does not understand that the gift is dependent on the giver, not on any well.”

To my mind, O’Day’s explanation is also inadequate. It does not explain the sudden change of topic, and more significantly, it is definitely not clear that the woman has identified the gift of water with a place. Furthermore, there is no evidence that she does not understand that the gift is dependent on the giver and not on any well. On the contrary, she clearly understands that the water is not dependent on any place; she wants the water, so that she does not need to return to any specific place. Moreover, it is not true that she does not understand that the giver is the important agent and not a well: how else can one explain her request for water from the person of Jesus? She asks him to provide her with water and does not enquire about any other source where the water can be obtained. Others, like Morris (1981, 264) and Hendriksen (1976, 164), find the logic behind the utterance in the fact that

the woman is a sinful person and that her sins must be revealed. This is problematic since the preceding section makes no mention of such a problematic past, unless the fact that she visited the well at an uncustomary hour was meant to suggest this. However, this cannot be substantiated from the text. The reference to her fetching water at an unusual hour (midday instead of the customary time for fetching water early in the morning or late afternoon) is probably the result of the author's strategy to invoke the intertext of the betrothal scene. Her problematic lifestyle becomes clearer in the next section, but this still does not explain the sudden change and the abrupt break in the conversation.

Other commentators mention the strangeness of the utterance in 4:16, but they do not offer any further comment on it. Schmidt (2006, 118) remarks on the Samaritan woman's response in 4:15 that it is a strange utterance: "Auf diese sprachliche Wendung und seelische Kehre der Samaritanerin folgt die sonderbare, ja, absurd erscheinende Weisung 'Gehe hin, rufe deinen Mann' ". He then simply continues to say this offers Jesus an opportunity to show his divine powers. Similarly, Williamson (2004, 49) only refers to the fact that Jesus begins to show omniscience; he does not even comment on the abruptness of the transition. And Day (2002, 166) says "Realizing the need to take a different approach in order to break through her dogged literalism, Jesus abruptly redirects the conversation."

From the above it is clear that readers of the text indeed take notice of the abrupt change of topic as extraordinary and seemingly irrelevant to the preceding discourse. They then proceed to find a variety of mostly theological reasons for this transition. We contend below that SAT offers a different view on this, by explaining the abrupt transition, how the language is used to create such a break, what such a break in a discourse or conversation can signify and how such exchanges actually play out in terms of speech as rule-governed behaviour and implicature. It will also become clear that the illocutionary force of the utterance on the level of the implied author/reader has perlocutionary effects which differ from those on the level of the characters in the narrative.

3.1.3 *A speech act reading of John 4:16*

Despite the fact that all commentators are aware of the strange twist in the conversation in 4:16, none of them offered a convincing solution for this. Most of them focus on the level of the interaction between reader and author. Okure (1988, 104) is an exception. She states that 4:16 "betrays a sense of frustration on Jesus' part."

The two levels of communication in the text (level of characters and level of implied author/reader), have so far never been adequately addressed. Because SAT necessitates this distinction and treats conversations between characters as utterances complying with the rules of natural conversation, it can perhaps offer some suggestions. What makes the solution we offer here attractive, is the fact that it is so simple, and at the same time inherently also allows for the possibilities mentioned by previous interpreters. Especially the ways in which interpreters have read these verses is a real life indication of the perlocutionary effect of the utterance on readers, but as we mentioned, the perlocution of the utterance on the level of the characters differs from that on the implied author/reader level. This went unnoticed by previous interpreters.

We shall then first give attention to the perlocution of 4:16 on the level of characters (for a detailed analysis, see Botha 1991b, 138-149). We already referred to Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975, 45) which, as the ultimate maxim, states that anyone engaged in conversation is obliged to make his/her contribution in accordance with the requirements of the conversation and the stage reached in the conversation, keeping the purposes and direction of the conversation in mind. This CP is supported by the general maxims of quantity, quality, manner and relevance/relation. We also saw that flouting of these maxims invites interpretive procedures to figure out what the speaker is up to.

It seems that the dynamics of the conversation in 4:15f go along much of the same lines, which makes it likely that the inconsistency in the conversation needs to be resolved by implicature. The fact that the woman completely misunderstood Jesus became very clear in the preceding verses. The character Jesus does not want to pursue the issue, or the misunderstanding of the issue, any further and signals this to his hearer, the woman. The signal of his unwillingness to continue on the level of the current conversation is, however, not a rude one. The politeness principle is still being observed and the CP is not jeopardized at all. This "break" also affords the character Jesus an opportunity to continue the conversation and to introduce a new topic or program in his dealings with the woman. By breaking the relevance maxim, the speaker creates a gap or break in the logic of the conversation and the participants in the conversation have to make sense of this by means of conversational implicature. The utterance also serves to cement what has been taking place in the discourse so far. The character Jesus slowly but surely established the pecking order: the relationship between him and the woman has been changing from two

strangers meeting at a well, to that of an individual person holding authority over the other. It is only that kind of relationship that will allow for such an abrupt command. The felicity conditions for commands dictate that the one giving the command must be in a superior position and must have the right to give commands. The person in the inferior position must also recognise this authority. The Samaritan woman clearly allows this change in roles and her subsequent utterances indicate that she has accepted that Jesus is indeed in a superior/authoritative position. These rules have slowly but surely been established so far by the use of the language. This is the reason why the woman does not question Jesus' right to give a command, but merely responds and explains why she is unable to do so. His words had an effect. Words can indeed do things!

That the intended perlocution ("do not pursue this issue further, what about this") indeed strikes home with the character of the woman is clear from her reply in 4:17: she does not press Jesus again to provide her with the water, but rather acknowledges his refusal to continue the subject of water and reacts to his newly introduced topic. She reacts by stating that she has no husband. Her utterance has the illocutionary force of a constative, asserting something, in this case denying that she has a husband. The perlocution or intended perlocution could explain her inability to comply with the imperative of Jesus.

When we move from the communication on the level of characters to the communication between implied author and reader, the illocution and the perlocution are somewhat different (for a more detailed analysis, see Botha 1991b, 141). The implied readers (and the real life readers whose responses we have in commentaries and studies on these verses), are intended to pick up that there is misunderstanding on the woman's side and that a change of topic has become necessary. They mostly interpret the abrupt change (anachronistically) in the light of what followed (Jesus showing that he is omniscient and divine and so on) and not in terms of the utterance itself and its intended perlocution. On the level of the implied author/reader the effect of the utterance serves to warn readers that they must, by means of implicature, determine what has happened and what changes have taken place. The "gap" created should be filled in, and our modern authors have tried with a variety of propositions to fill it, hence the diversity of readings—typical of how implicature works. One should perhaps consider that ancient readers of this text could have filled in the gap because of their first hand knowledge of the rules for verbal behaviour in antiquity and the felicity conditions for verbal exchanges in that particular context. It is nevertheless clear that the implied author has effected something with the

words: he forced the implied reader to use implicature to resolve a gap in the text.

In this instance, it is clear that SAT offers a somewhat different perspective on the interpretation of John 4:16, and in terms of the discourse taking place it clarifies why the statement is experienced as abrupt (maxim of relevance flouted), and also why the conversation continues (CP still in force).

SAT has in its arsenal some additional explanatory tools in analysing speech exchanges in narratives which can help us to understand the perlocutions of utterances better and to look at them not merely as information bearers, but as acts which have effect on the hearers/readers. It offers us a more sophisticated way of looking at and using narrative principles as well, and helps to explain, better than previously, exactly why certain texts have certain effects. It also explains something of the reception of the text in terms of rule-governed behaviour: we can now see why the text has been read in a certain way by, for example, commentaries. To illustrate this from another angle: we all laugh at jokes, but we seldom realise why jokes are funny, and what is being done by the use of language to elicit a laugh response (it usually has to do with the flouting of maxims of felicity conditions). SAT offers us a useful and sophisticated way of looking at words in action.

3.2 Neufeld's SAT interpretation of 1 John

Neufeld's 1994 examination of 1 John in terms of speech act is a good example of how diverse applications of SAT in biblical literature can be, compared to the much more rigorous approach above. Neufeld analyses a number of passages in 1 John in terms of SAT and focuses on the prologue, the slogans of the opponents, the warnings about the antichrist and the confessions and denials. For purposes of illustrating Neufeld's approach, we will look at his discussion of the slogans of the opponents. They are the following: 1 John 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9; 4:20.

1:6: If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

1:8: If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

1:10: If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

2:4: The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

2:6: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

2:9: Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.

4:20: If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

Neufeld (1994, 30) correctly criticises the inability of historical critical endeavours to come up with a unified view of who the opponents were, what they believed and what exactly the nature of the conflict was. His programme is aimed at reconceiving texts as speech acts, in other words, he argues strongly that the ethical exhortation and the slogans of the opponents should not be viewed as mere words on a page but as embodied communication which in itself is already an act.

“‘Text’ may be understood as communicative event or act between the writer and his/her audience. The language of the text has the power to perform acts. The Christological confessions and ethical exhortations may be viewed as written effective acts intended to change the content of the readers’ confessions in order to bring about a proper alignment of speech and conduct” (Neufeld 1994, 41-42). This means that these utterances should not be viewed merely as descriptive, as they were viewed in the past, but should be seen as performatives, that is acts, designed to achieve a specific effect in the readers. “Specific speech acts of the directive, commissive, representative and expressive kind shift the critical task from determining the meaning of the statements to understanding what they do” (Neufeld 1994, 134). This is clearly a different approach to the language of 1 John and the “slogans of the opponents”.

The traditional way of viewing the “slogans of the opponents” was to look at them as real claims made by real opponents. The task of the exegete was to find out who exactly these people were and what their doctrine was. Neufeld views these statements in a different light. He does not see the

statements as mere informative statements, but as speech acts which have an effect, and postulates that these slogans are purely hypothetical. “Expressed as hypothetical speech acts, the author engages the audience, committing them to a confessional and ethical stance common to them both” (Neufeld 1994, 82). He further remarks (1994, 84) that the “slogans” should rather be viewed as antithetical “boasts”, deliberately composed by the author and set into a specific context, because it is hard to believe that a real life situation existed where such antithetical claims could in sincerity be made. He therefore terms them hypothetical speech acts with which the author creates a world for the readers, which, if it is to be emulated, would have severe consequences. Neufeld (1994, 88-89) continues:

The author formulates the slogans with the illocutionary forces of commissive, expressive and representative types to make explicit how he intends that his utterances should be taken. The commissive implies that he is committed to the negative ethical implications that are inherently part of the antithetical form of the utterances. The expressive implies that each of the antithetical utterances represents accurately a state of affairs under certain conditions. The representative implies that he desires to engage his reading audience in a consideration of the religious and ethical implications of the slogans To achieve this end, the author deliberately formulates a series of written speech acts that function as rhetorical devices by which he engages the audience to carefully consider what he has to say with the hope of persuading them to accept his views.

By contrasting positive behaviour with negative behaviour he is not describing the beliefs of the opponents; he is rather bringing his own beliefs and attitudes in relief to show what is deemed proper in the particular context of the community. “The fact of the matter is that these statements are not sterile assertions to correct false views, but to prevent them” (Neufeld 1994, 93). He is not reporting on a state of affairs, but through his speech acts he is creating a world in which the readers are persuaded to follow his views. “This it could be said that the slogans enabled the author to make the world rather than simply mirror it. They enabled him to bring about states of affairs rather than simply report on them and correct them. The power of the written word enabled him to constitute and give shape to the thinking of the readers, rather than simply to serve them by correcting erroneous Christological ideas” (Neufeld 1994, 95).

To my mind, Neufeld has made a convincing case to show how texts can indeed be viewed as acts with context determined and intended effects. Briggs (2001a, 249) is also very positive about Neufeld’s contribution and

remarks that Neufeld succeeds “in ‘reconceiving texts as speech acts’, as the title of his book has it, and in demonstrating just how such a text is performative.”

4. Conclusion

Over the last decade and a half the interest in SAT has been growing slowly but surely. As exegetes begin to appropriate aspects of SAT in their (mostly literary) readings of biblical texts, its potential for biblical interpretation will become increasingly evident. We agree with Briggs (2001a, 230) that it is perhaps the complexity of the philosophical literature surrounding SAT that has hampered its appropriation by NT scholars over the last twenty five years or so. Admittedly, the theory has been applied to biblical texts in diverse ways and the examples we used portray some of that diversity. But at the same time this also reflects the diverse potential of SAT as supplementary interpretative tool. As a matter of fact, SAT has hardly been applied in all its diversity to biblical texts. Upton’s (2006) study is a good example of how SAT can be applied to other ancient popular texts as well. She has focused attention on texts which were intended to be read aloud to an audience, texts which were intended to be performed. Studies in the field of orality have also begun to emphasise the oral and the aural nature of NT texts and SAT could be a very useful additional tool to utilise in the analysis of such texts. There is indeed still a lot to explore and discover in the utilisation of SAT, and we can but agree with Briggs (2001a, 230) that “especially with regard to biblical texts, it seems to be an underutilized resource.”

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