

Imprecation *as* Divine Discourse

*Speech Act Theory,
Dual Authorship, and
Theological Interpretation*

Kit Barker



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Imprecation as Divine Discourse

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Imprecation as Divine Discourse

*Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship,
and Theological Interpretation*

KIT BARKER

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Abbreviations

AJET	<i>Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology</i>
ATI	<i>American Theological Inquiry</i>
BAGD	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
BDB	<i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
BibInt	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ChrCent	<i>Christian Century</i>
CSR	<i>Christian Scholar's Review</i>
Chm	<i>Churchman</i>
CTR	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
CurBS	<i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i>
DTIB	<i>Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible</i>
DBI	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i>
DBWC	<i>Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture</i>
Dir	<i>Direction</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ERT	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
ExpT	<i>Expository Times</i>
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
IJPR	<i>International Journal for Philosophy of Religion</i>
IJST	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JHebS	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JPT	<i>Journal of Psychology and Theology</i>
JPC	<i>Journal of Psychology and Christianity</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JTI	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>

<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>ModTheo</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>
<i>MT</i>	Masoretic Text
<i>PoeTo</i>	<i>Poetics Today</i>
<i>Presb</i>	<i>Presbyterian</i>
<i>PSB</i>	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
<i>ProEccl</i>	<i>Pro Ecclesia</i>
<i>PEGLMWBS</i>	Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>ReIS</i>	<i>Religious Studies</i>
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Introduction

Aims

My desire is to provide clarity to the task of theological interpretation. This will be achieved through the development and application of a speech act theory based hermeneutic that accounts for how Scripture functions as divine discourse. In Part I, I develop the theological hermeneutic and, in Part II, I demonstrate its usefulness for theological interpretation by applying it to a specific set of texts. I have selected the Psalter for this application, and the imprecatory psalms in particular, as they have proved particularly problematic for theological interpretation. I employ the hermeneutic at a number of literary levels within the Psalter: the Psalter as a whole, the imprecatory psalms as a genre, and finally, Psalms 137 and 69 as representative communal and individual imprecations.

Rationale

The interest in theological interpretation has risen markedly in the last several years with a number of authors providing surveys of the current practice and offering various expressions of it.¹ This interest is related to the shift in

1. For an introduction to theological interpretation and a discussion of the emergence of its recent iteration see D. J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). The recently formed *Journal of Theological Interpretation* by Eisenbrauns and the SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible series written by systematic theologians are also products of this renewed interest. This focus is also reflected in both the *Scripture and Hermeneutics* series edited by Craig G. Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz and Al Wolters. The volume of writings has also inspired a dictionary dedicated to the interdisciplinary field: K. J. Vanhoozer et al., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005).

For a survey of this practice throughout Christian history see S. E. Fowl, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997). For a discussion of theological interpretation in Patristic and contemporary theology see D. Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Exploration* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

general hermeneutics from matters “behind the text” to those “in, and in front of the text”, often referred to as the “literary turn.”² The movement towards a canonical interpretation of Scripture in the second half of the last century is also demonstrative of this influence. This inevitably led to the question, “whose canon is it?” or, more specifically, if the canon is an intentional product, what are its contents, how is it shaped, and who is communicating through it?³

While theological interpretation has enjoyed this recent attention, there is little consensus regarding its defining qualities. Beldman and Bartholomew observe that, “this remains a diverse movement, and much work remains to be done in it.”⁴ They also note that Old Testament scholars are still not trained to think and work in these categories with very few seeing the goal of theological interpretation as the identification of God’s voice. Bartholomew comments on his co-edited volume:

The unique feature of this book is that it makes the telos of reading the Old Testament *listening for God’s address*. The bifurcation of theology and biblical studies is well documented, and recent decades have witnessed welcome attempts to overcome this chasm. Nevertheless, the renaissance of theological interpretation of the Bible is still in its early years, and it remains rare to find scholarship on the Old Testament that embodies the kind of integrated theological hermeneutic that retains critical rigor while aiming throughout to hear God’s address. This volume aims to fill that gap.⁵

Various monographs have also been influential in the past twenty years: R. S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation: Toward a Hermeneutic of Self-Involvement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001); A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); K. J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (1st ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); F. Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

2. This interdisciplinary focus is exemplified in a recent collection of essays edited by Firth and Grant: D. G. Firth and J. A. Grant, *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (Downers Grove: IVP 2008).

3. Brevard Childs championed this shift during the last century and offered the following conclusion regarding the significance of canon, “But irrespective of intentionality, the effect of the canonical process was to render the tradition accessible to the future generation by means of a ‘canonical intentionality’, which is coextensive with the meaning of the biblical text.” B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 79.

4. C. G. Bartholomew and D. J. H. Beldman, “Preface: The Love of the Old Testament and the Desire for God” in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address* (ed. C. G. Bartholomew and D. J. H. Beldman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), xvi.

5. C. G. Bartholomew, “Listening for God’s Address: A Mere Trinitarian Hermeneutic for the Old Testament,” in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address* (ed. C. G.

This lacuna in theological hermeneutics, particularly with respect to Old Testament scholarship, inspired my own work. While there are a number of definitions of theological interpretation,⁶ I agree with Bartholomew that the definition and the goal of theological interpretation is to explain how a text functions as divine discourse.⁷

This idea, of course, is not new, nor is it without representation in the contemporary expression of theological interpretation.⁸ My contribution relies substantially on the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff and Kevin Vanhoozer, who agree that the goal of theological interpretation should be the clarification of how the text functions as divine discourse. Both authors have also employed speech act theory to explain the nature of communication, defend the role of the author in the production of meaning, and highlight the inherent challenges to a hermeneutic of dual authorship. However, the significant contributions of both authors and the subsequent responses to their proposals have not produced a detailed hermeneutic.⁹ Consequently, a sustained application of their

Bartholomew and D. J. H. Beldman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 12.

6. Davis and Hays identify nine defining features, one of which may be understood as a reference to divine discourse, "Texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author. In accord with Jewish and Christian traditions, we affirm that Scripture has multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole drama." E. F. Davis and R. B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 305.

7. For a defence of reading the text as a product of God's prior and continual agency in opposition to Enlightenment epistemology see M. A. Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). He comments, "To attempt to remove ourselves from the divine agency in, with and under this text as an instrument of God's gracious judgment, salvation, guidance and comfort is, from this perspective, an act of denial or resistance; even defiance." (Bowald, *Rendering the Word*, 19.) He concludes that the way Scripture is read needs revision: "contemporary frameworks for understanding the act of reading Scripture need a thorough revision. A model that comports with the above analysis and which we suggest offers great potential corrective power is proffered by way of the ancient study of rhetoric. Thus the act of reading will be initially framed by the acknowledgment that the primary author of this text, God is present and "speaking"; as "divine rhetoric." It compels us to not lose track of the priority of God's agency as we consider all the other various aspects of reading that follow." (Bowald, *Rendering the Word*, 174.)

8. Writing 25 years ago Greidanus proposed the same definition and goal: "Theological interpretation seeks to hear God's voice in the Scriptures; it seeks to probe beyond mere historical reconstruction and verbal meanings to a discernment of the message of God in the Scriptures; it concentrates on the prophetic, kerygmatic dimension and the theocentric focus." (S. Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 102-103, emphasis original.)

9. Vanhoozer notes the need for further work on his proposed hermeneutic, "Yet God may be doing new things with Jonah and other biblical texts too by virtue of their being gathered together in the canon. Could it be that certain illocutions come to light

proposal to the biblical text is also lacking. Treier comments on both the lack of hermeneutic detail and exegetical application:

Briggs notes that Wolterstorff does not explain very well how to adjudicate between conflicting interpretations of the divine discourse in a given biblical passage. And Vanhoozer's notion of a "canonical illocution"—happening not in any one text but in terms of the whole Bible, or Scripture serving as the larger context for a particular passage—has not yet offered proof of the pudding in much interpretive eating.¹⁰

This deficiency is not unique to Wolterstorff and Vanhoozer. Writing in 2009, Moberly comments generally on the project of the theological interpretation:

There tends to be more discussion about the nature of theological interpretation and theological hermeneutics than there is demonstration in persuasive and memorable readings of the biblical text.¹¹

The reasons for this deficiency are undoubtedly many, but I suggest that significant factors are an insufficient comprehension of speech act theory and a confusion regarding its role in theological interpretation. In the following chapter I offer a more detailed survey of its acceptance and appropriation, yet its neglect is notable as Briggs comments:

Despite a slow trickle of articles over the past 25 years, there have been only a handful of more extensive works making exegetical use of speech act insights. This 'undeserved neglect,' which may be observed not just in biblical studies but in systematic theology as well as the philosophy of religion (Thiselton, 1997: 97), is doubtless

only when we describe what God is doing at the canonical level? *More work needs to be done in this area*, but for the moment let me offer the following as possible candidates for the divine canonical illocutions: instructing the believing community, testifying to Christ, and perhaps most obviously, covenanting." (K. J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 194, emphasis mine.)

10. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 145-146. This is despite previous calls for such a project. Scott Blue, writing more than a decade ago, comments on the lack of application in the work of both Francis Watson and Kevin Vanhoozer, "While both Watson and Vanhoozer incorporate speech act theory into their hermeneutical programs, they disregard one important area in their discussions. Neither writer adequately demonstrates how speech act theory can be *practically* included in the process of interpretation. Watson does analyze texts within his biblical theological approach, but does not explicitly show any difference that speech act theory makes in his interpretations. Vanhoozer lays a literalist hermeneutical foundation for interpretation, but, again, fails to demonstrate how speech act principles are to be practiced within that framework." (S. A. Blue, "Meaning, Intention, and Application: Speech Act Theory in the Hermeneutics of Francis Watson and Kevin J Vanhoozer," *TJ*, no. 23 (2002): 161-184.)

11. R. W. L. Moberly, "What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?," *JTI* 3, no. 2 (2009): 169.

due in part to the forbidding complexity of much of the philosophical literature, with the inevitable result that biblical critics are sometimes at a loss to say just what exactly constitute the resources of speech-act theory for the task of interpretation. There is confusion over whether speech-act theory is a tool for exegesis as it is already practised, or whether in fact it indicates that exegesis itself needs to be reconceptualized (Buss 1988: 125).¹²

Both Wolterstorff and Vanhoozer believe that theological hermeneutics would benefit from the resources of speech act theory and their proposals rely heavily upon it. Perhaps this pervasive incorporation of speech act theory in their hermeneutics and its relative neglect in theological scholarship has deterred significant development of their thought.

I am convinced that a speech act theory based hermeneutic can offer a significant way forward for theological interpretation. In particular, it can provide a level of terminological clarity previously lacking in descriptions of what it means for Scripture to function as divine discourse, and consequently it can provide both hermeneutic and teleological clarity to the task of theological interpretation. This conviction guides my argument, the results of which, I believe, indicate the value of the approach.

Returning for a moment to the comment by Beldman and Bartholomew regarding the nature of theological interpretation, they noted not only that the goal of theological interpretation should be “listening for God’s address”, but that such interpretation is necessarily interdisciplinary. They observed that this necessity is not matched by the focus of current Old Testament scholarship, “it remains rare to find scholarship on the Old Testament that embodies the kind of integrated theological hermeneutic that retains critical rigor while aiming throughout to hear God’s address.”¹³ It is into this interdisciplinary void that I hope to make a contribution by both clarifying a theological hermeneutic and demonstrating its application in exegesis.

Presuppositions

There are a number of presuppositions that shape the aims and methodology of this book. First and foremost is the conviction that all Scripture is, by definition, the continual word of God. As mentioned above, I hold this to be both the basis for and the goal of theological interpretation.¹⁴

12. R. S. Briggs, “The Uses of Speech-Act Theory in Biblical Interpretation,” *CurBS* 9 (2001): 230.

13. Bartholomew, “Listening for God’s Address,” 3, emphasis original.

14. The defence of such a presupposition is beyond the scope of this book. For a discussion of Scripture as divine discourse see: H. N. Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Bartholomew, “Listening for God’s Address; P. Adam, *Hearing God’s Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality* (16; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge,

A second presupposition concerns the boundaries of Scripture and the identification of canon. I am writing within the Protestant tradition that accepts the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament together as its canon.¹⁵ Therefore, when I refer to canon, this is the reference. While my methodology could conceivably be applied to different conceptions of canon, I am primarily concerned with developing a hermeneutic that is consistent with and useful for my own tradition.¹⁶

My third presupposition is that speech act theory correctly describes the anatomy of communication and rightly prioritizes the illocutionary act in the construction of meaning. While I will be providing a detailed discussion of speech act theory and its application to theological hermeneutics, I will not offer an explicit defence of it.¹⁷ Implicitly, the theory will be judged in the final

Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon (Nottingham: IVP, 1986); Vanhoozer, *First Theology*; Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*.

15. Exegetical discussion of Old Testament texts will be based on the MT, with reference to the LXX where appropriate. There is continued debate over the nature and content of the Old Testament canon. For a selection of recent essays on the topic see C. A. Evans and E. Tov, *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

For a defence of the priority of a proto-Masoretic text while recognizing the importance of various translations see S. G. Dempster, "Torah, Torah, Torah: The Emergence of the Tripartite Canon," in *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (ed. C. A. Evans and E. Tov; Grand Rapids: Baker 2008).

For a discussion of the canonicity and authority of the LXX see M. Hengel, R. Deines, and M. E. Biddle, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: Its Prehistory and the Problem of Its Canon* (North American paperback ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker 2004). For a recent defence of the priority of the LXX see T. M. Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

16. For a discussion of the authority of the canon and its place in theological hermeneutics see: Carson and Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*; D. J. Treier, "Canonical Unit and Commensurable Language: On Divine Action and Doctrine," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics* (ed. V. Bacote, L. C. Miguélez, and D. L. Okholm; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); C. R. Seitz, "The Canonical Approach and Theological Interpretation," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. Bartholomew, et al.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); C. Bartholomew et al., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); M. N. A. Bockmuehl and A. J. Torrance, *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2008).

17. Speech act theory has been developed and promoted by philosophers, theologians, and biblical scholars. For its defence see Briggs, *Words in Action*; W. P. Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); J. R. Searle, F. Kiefer, and M. Bierwisch, *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics* (10; Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980); Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*; N. Wolterstorff, "The Promise of Speech-Act Theory for Biblical Interpretation," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. G. Bartholomew, C. J. D. Greene, and K. Möller; Carlisle: Paternoster

product. If the subsequent theological hermeneutic is cogent and its application to specific texts is beneficial, then the benefits of speech act theory will be evident. So while I assume speech act theory to be correct, this book is a demonstration of its descriptive and explanatory capacity.

The final presupposition is derivative of the above three and is epistemological in nature. Accepting that Scripture is divine discourse and that meaning is a product of illocutionary stance suggests that the meaning of a biblical text is determinate. Therefore, I align myself with hermeneutic realists in my conviction that the task of theological interpretation is to uncover, rather than create, meaning. I am not suggesting that meaning is necessarily *single and determinate*, nor am I suggesting that ancient texts function as divine discourse solely in their original contexts. Rather, I presuppose that all Scripture continues to function as divine discourse, and subsequently, it is the task of theological interpretation to describe this function by attributing illocutionary stance to the divine author.

Methodology

The methodology is reflected in the structure of the book. In Part I, I develop a theological hermeneutic that accounts for the dual authorship of Scripture and in Part II, I apply the hermeneutic across the various literary levels of the Psalter with a particular focus on imprecatory psalms. I begin Part I with a description of speech act theory and its application in biblical interpretation. This chapter provides the requisite language for investigating the dual authorship of Scripture. Utilizing the descriptive power of speech act theory, I then survey various approaches to dual authorship and *sensus plenior*, offering critique and demonstrating that the issue is more ubiquitous than is often recognized. In the final chapter of Part I, I provide an outline of a theological hermeneutic. In this chapter I use speech act theory to explain the goals of theological interpretation and propose a corresponding hermeneutic. In particular I employ the theory to provide a nuanced explanation of dual authorship and discuss how the canon functions as communicative action.¹⁸

Press, 2001); S. L. Tsohatzidis, "Ways of Doing Things with Words," in *Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives* (ed. S. L. Tsohatzidis; London: Routledge, 1994); V. S. Poythress, "Canon and Speech Act: Limitations in Speech-Act Theory, with Implications for a Putative Theory of Canonical Speech Acts," *WTJ* 70, no. 2 (2008).

18. Dan Treier notes that the affect of the canon is one of the most important contemporary questions for theological interpretation and that the answer to this will have implications for conceptions of biblical authority, "I take it that the way in which divine, canonical speech acts supervene on the Bible's human, particular speech acts remains the most challenging question for evangelicals concerning biblical authority . . ." (Treier, "Canonical Unit and Commensurable Language," 223.)

In order to demonstrate and assess the validity and usefulness of the proposed hermeneutic, I apply it to a particular book and to specific texts within it. This is the burden of Part II. Initially, I examine how the Psalter functions as divine discourse in both its original and canonical contexts. Then, after surveying the various approaches to the imprecatory psalms, I explain how they functioned as divine discourse in the context of the Old Testament and how they continue to function as God's contemporary speech acts. Finally, I apply the hermeneutic to individual imprecatory psalms in order to demonstrate its usefulness in exegesis.

The choice of text was, to some degree, arbitrary. I believe that such a hermeneutic could be successfully applied to any text within the canon. However, it was my desire to explore how Old Testament texts continue to function in the context of the canon. The Psalter was, therefore, a natural choice. It is here that the problematic of dual authorship is acute. Furthermore, in order to provide an application with sufficient detail, it was necessary to exegete particular psalms within the Psalter. For this application I chose the imprecatory psalms. Again the choice was natural as these psalms are often rejected in part, or *en masse*, as divine discourse. Psalms 137 and 69 were chosen as representative communal and individual laments respectively. Exegesis of both psalms allowed for an investigation of any differences in how they function as divine discourse. The exegesis of Psalm 137 was required due to its notoriety and its presence in discussions of both imprecation and theological interpretation. Psalm 69 was chosen because of its explicit use in the New Testament. Consequently, it also provided opportunity not only to examine an individual lament but also to engage discussions regarding the Christological interpretation of the psalms.

Part I

In Pursuit of Theological Interpretation

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Chapter 1

Speech Act Theory

Introduction

The aims of this chapter are to explain the basic features of speech act theory, to provide a survey of its acceptance and utility in both theology and biblical studies, and finally to introduce questions highlighted by speech act theory concerning meaning and the goals of interpretation.

The past century witnessed major changes in philosophy and in linguistics in particular. The “linguistic turn”, as this shift in emphasis came to be known, involved structuralist and then poststructuralist philosophies, both of which diminished the importance of the author. Structuralists focused their attention on the text itself and saw all language as a self-referring system. Poststructuralists doubted the existence of such uniform systems and instead were interested in how texts were received in new contexts. Both philosophies considered interpretation based on authorial intention to be unworkable and ultimately uninteresting.¹ Speech act theory represents one line of resistance to this shift in philosophical thought and defends conceptions of reality and language that prioritise the role of the author in determining linguistic meaning.²

1. For a survey of influential contributors and a discussion of key concepts during this shift in hermeneutics, see Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*.

2. Speech act theory has also been employed by non-realists and these applications will be discussed below. See S. E. Fowl, “The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); S. J. Grenz and J. R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); S. J. Grenz, “The Spirit and the Word: The World-Creating Function of the Text,” *ThTo* 57, no. 3 (2000); P. Ricœur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

A Brief History

John L. Austin

Speech act theory is a sub-discipline of the philosophy of language and falls under the broader category of pragmatics³ or “ordinary language” philosophy. Its history has been widely documented and requires only a brief survey here.⁴ In 1955 John L. Austin delivered the William James lectures at Harvard, which were subsequently and posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words*. His central thesis was that speaking is more than simply uttering words or sentences; it also performs an action. While the idea that language accomplished more than just reference or representation was beginning to surface,⁵ it was Austin’s work that founded speech act theory.⁶

Austin’s initial concern was to demonstrate that even “constatives” are “performative.” That is, sentences which were held to be simply fact stating or descriptive (i.e., “constatives”) are actually still “performances” by an author. Austin developed an anatomy of communication using the terms *locution*, *illocution*, and *perlocution*. The *locutionary act* is the uttering of the words; the *illocutionary act* is what we do in uttering the words; and the *perlocutionary act* is the effect we bring about by uttering the words. In his own words:

We first distinguished a group of things we do in saying something, which together we summed up by saying we perform a *locutionary act*, which 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. Second, we said that we also perform *illocutionary acts* such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, &c. i.e., utterances which have a certain (conventional) force. Thirdly, we may also perform *perlocutionary acts*: what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading.⁷

3. In the sense that differentiates semantics, syntactics and pragmatics rather than the philosophy of American “pragmatism.”

4. Briggs, *Words in Action*; B. Smith, “Towards a History of Speech Act Theory,” in *Speech Acts, Meaning, and Intentions: Critical Approaches to the Philosophy of John R. Searle* (ed. A. Burkhardt; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990). For a discussion of the usefulness and limitations of speech act theory as a philosophy of language see D. Gorman, “The Use and Abuse of Speech-Act Theory in Criticism,” *PoeTo* 20, no. 1 (1999).

5. E.g., L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (3rd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1968). For a collection of essays by Paul Grice who adopted speech act theory to develop notions of meaning, see P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

6. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (1955; 2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

7. Austin, *How to Do Things*, 109.