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The Magic of Words

What Is It Supposed to Be?

Simon J. Evnine | ORCID: 0000-0001-5592-3142

University of Miami, Miami, USA

sevnine@miami.edu

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Abstract

Many people, at various times, places, and cultures, have believed that language has special magical power. Spells, enchantments, blessing and curses, exorcisms and summonings, have all been thought to rely on certain distinctive uses of language. In this article, I examine three ways of understanding the alleged magical power of language, as illocutionary, as perlocutionary, and as something analogous to mechanical. I argue that none can work as a general account of the magical uses of language, as seen from the point of view of those who engage in such practices. I conclude with the suggestion that such a power is not just non-existent but conceptually impossible.

Keywords

declarations – illocution – performatives – perlocution – spells – language magic

1 The Powers of Language

Uses of language (hereafter “language,” unless context demands otherwise) have power to produce effects in the world. As Margaret MacDonald says, there are utterances that “exemplify a use of language not as a vehicle of information about nature, but as, itself, one of the powers of nature” (MacDonald 1963, 198). In fact, language has several different kinds of power. Moreover, it is sometimes

believed to have powers to produce effects in the world that it may not, or even could not, in fact possess.

One power that language has is in virtue of its physical properties. A verbal utterance may make someone's hair flutter or, at the right pitch and volume, shatter a wine glass. This is the physical power of language. It does not depend in any way on the properties of utterances in virtue of which they are language. Powers of language *as such* are more interesting. One such power is the one that led Austin (1975) to observe that sometimes using language is doing something such as arguing, asserting, ordering, marrying, or naming. This is illocutionary power. Some scholars distinguish, within the category of illocutionary acts, those that require social conventions (naming, opening meetings, rendering legal rulings, etc.) from those that, they claim, don't (saying, ordering, and requesting).¹

Austin also characterized a notion of perlocution which engenders another kind of power language can have, the power, for example, to startle someone by telling them there is a poisonous snake near them or to convince them by giving an argument. He describes it thus: "Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons" (1975, 101). Later (113) he adds (emphasis mine):

The sense in which saying something produces effects on other persons, or causes things, is a fundamentally different sense of cause from that used in physical causation by pressure, etc. *It has to operate through the conventions of language and is a matter of influence exerted by one person on another.*

In a social context, exerting influence on other people is probably the most important power language offers us. The paradigm of such exertions of influence considered by Austin, as evinced in the examples just given, is the

¹ See Strawson (1964) for the classic distinction between conventional and non-conventional illocutionary acts. To make matters more complicated: Searle considers all illocutionary acts to involve convention, but distinguishes our first category as "institutional"; Reiland (2024) argues that some of what Strawson calls non-conventional illocutionary acts and Searle calls conventional but non-institutional acts should all be classified as locutionary rather than illocutionary; and Searle collapses the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts but introduces the notion of a propositional act (uttering a sentence meaningfully but without any force at all) to do some of what others take locutionary acts to do! Sorting all this out will, thankfully, not be necessary for present purposes.

intentional bringing about of changes through the performance of illocutionary acts. We warn in order to alert, argue in order to convince, request in order to elicit. Alerting, convincing, and eliciting are perlocutionary acts, ways of exerting influence over others, and we exert this influence by warning, arguing, and requesting, which are illocutionary acts. These are among the civilized ways of exerting influence on others, civilized at least in the sense that they work via people's capacities as rational, social, and linguistic beings.

There may, however, be further ways of using language to exert influence on others. Consider this passage from an early work in which Freud defends the "talking cure," the use of language to heal (1905, 292):

Words are the most important media by which one man seeks to bring his influence to bear on another; words are a good method of producing mental changes in the person to whom they are addressed. So that there is no longer anything puzzling in the assertion that the magic of words can remove the symptoms of illness.

Where Austin has "one person's exerting influence on another," Freud has the nearly identical "bringing one's influence to bear on another." Taking this paragraph out of context, therefore, one might think that Freud is talking about "bringing our influence to bear" on others in exactly the ways Austin intends in paradigmatic cases of perlocution by means of illocution. No other species can do as much! It is hard to look around at human societies, so dependent on complex interactions between persons, and remember that we are just an animal species, doing our animal thing. If the power of language to enable such societies doesn't merit the description "the magic of words," it is hard to know what does.

Putting the passage in its context, however, it turns out that Freud is referring to something quite different by the expression "the magic of words," namely, the use of words in magic.² Magic, if it worked, would certainly give us a way of bringing our influence to bear on others. Consider, for example, this representation of an enchantment from the *Second Shepherds' Play*, part of the 15th-century Wakefield cycle. The character Mak draws a circle around some sleeping shepherds and says these "words of might" in order to ensure that they stay asleep till next noon, giving him time to steal a sheep, take it home, and swaddle it in a cradle, an echo of the Nativity that is the subject of the play:

2 I follow up the implications of Freud's views on "the magic of words" in psychoanalysis in my (forthcoming).

Outt go youre een, fordo your syght.
 'Out go your eyes! Blind be your sight!'³

By uttering this charm, Mak is using language (along with some ritual) in order to “bring his influence to bear” on the shepherds. How are we to understand this alleged magic power of language? Should it be assimilated to physical power, illocutionary power, perlocutionary power, or is it a further, *sui generis* kind of power that language is believed to have?

Before tackling this question, a few disclaimers will be in order. First, at least since the work of Frazer, the relation between magic and religion has been controversial. Nothing I say here depends on whether and how to distinguish them. I am interested in the role of language in what may be loosely called supernatural contexts, however classified. Secondly, the field of human behavior involving magic and ritual is enormous and heterogenous, both through space, time, and culture. The chance of saying anything reasonably compact that will apply to everything in this field is vanishingly small. Everything that follows should be understood as within the scope of the operator “sometimes” or “in some cases.” Thirdly, the scholarship on the topic includes a very large part of the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology, as well as much in linguistics, psychology, religion, folkloristics, and archeology. I make no pretense to have mastered even a small part of it.

Fourthly, we must always be aware that explanations of what is going on when language is used in magic may come from within a practice (i.e. how the people who use, or believe in, the magic view it) or from without (i.e. how observers who either do not believe, or who are neutral, view it).⁴ This distinction is itself further complicated by the fact that many people manage to stand both within and without such practices at the same time.⁵ In what follows,

3 The words come at line 284. The translation into modern English is from Child (1910, 41). See Harlan-Haughey (2022) for a discussion of language in magic in the *Second Shepherds' Play* as a whole.

4 See Nordblom (2021) for a thoughtful treatment of *historiolae*, narrative charms, by one who describes himself as a “practitioner of magic charms” (9).

5 Compare Peter Geach's Japanese astronomer “who seemed to succeed very well in treating the sun alternately as an inanimate natural body whose properties can be investigated by the techniques of mathematical physics, and as a divinity, the ancestress of the Japanese imperial dynasty; when challenged about the matter by a European colleague, he said ‘Here in Europe I know it's all nonsense, but in Japan I believe it’” (Geach 1976, 9). See also the contemporary Italians from Abruzzo studied by Lia Giancristoforo. “Put simply,” she writes, when they get sick, they “consult their doctor but they also consult a charmer to be on the safe side” (Giancristoforo 2022, 55). I discuss this kind of mental partitioning, with specific reference to Geach's example, in Evnine (2008, ch 4).

I am principally interested in how academics (i.e. mostly outsiders) would characterize, in their own theoretical terms, how those within the practice must implicitly understand it, even if they would not use those same theoretical terms to articulate their understanding.

Fifthly, and perhaps most importantly for the discussion to follow, the ways in which language features in magical contexts is itself very heterogenous. There are spells, charms, hexes, true names, *historiolae*, and no doubt many more linguistic forms involved. It is particularly across these divisions, I think, that the attempt to say something general will falter.

2 Magic as Illocution

The most common description of the way language functions in magic, at least since Austin's work, is as "performative."⁶ As Seth Sanders (2004, 162) says:

In the history of religion, performatives offered the promise of understanding how supposedly irrational "magical" utterances could be effective and thus allowed new ways of interpreting both ritual and myth.

Austin originally introduced this term as part of a distinction between what he called performative and constative utterances. In his later *How to Do Things with Words*, however, he came to problematize this distinction and elaborated the framework of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts instead. This leaves a problem of how to commensurate the term "performative" with the more elaborate, 'official' theory. I shall assume that when scholars use the term "performative," they are referring to illocutionary acts (also referred to simply as "speech acts") or to some subset thereof that clearly involve social conventions, things like "I name this ship the Generalissimo Stalin" or "the meeting is adjourned," as spoken by appropriate persons in appropriate contexts.⁷

I shall examine two examples of this approach in some detail. Most of what I say in relation to them could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the many other cases to be found in the literature.⁸ The first case study is from a paper by Alice

⁶ Before Austin, Malinowski (1935) provided a widely-used framework.

⁷ As a claim about what Austin's view is, this may be controversial. See Green (2021) and Recanati (1988, chapter 3) for some discussion. As a claim about what the authors I am examining here mean, I think it can be supported by textual evidence but I shall not engage in close reading here.

⁸ Here are some examples of invocations of performativity in relation to magic that I have consulted but do not have occasion to refer to anywhere in the main text: Ceravolo (2022),

Mandell (2012) concerning two inscriptions found on pottery at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, an Israelite outpost in the Northern Sinai from around the ninth century BCE. The two inscriptions have in common the phrase "I have blessed you to YHWH."⁹ She explains it in this way (Mandell 2012, 150–51):

Blessings and curses are also rooted in speech, as they are essentially performative utterances, i.e., "speech acts." Austin's classic work *How to Do Things with Words* describes performative utterances as statements and / or actions that come into existence as they are spoken ... Blessings and curses are performative by their very nature, as the act of speaking or writing a blessing or a curse is what "activates" its power.

This is a difficult passage to make sense of owing to the complexity of the notion of blessing. Blessing is something that people can do to other people, that people can do to God, and that God can do to people and it is hard to grasp a single notion that fits all these contexts. In some of them, blessing seems to be a performative while in others not. The performative sense is illustrated by "I bless myself. I bless my family," where the blessing just is the saying of that sentence in the appropriate context.¹⁰ Where blessing is not performative, it would seem to consist in the actual conferral of benefits such as health, long life, and prosperity on the object of the blessing. To be blessed, in that sense, is to be the recipient of these things as a result of an act of blessing.

As Mandell (150–153) realizes, the fact that her examples are written rather than spoken complicates the question of illocutionary force. Austin ties illocutionary force to what he calls "the total speech act in the total speech act

Fadeyeva (2022, 39), Faraone (1991), Frankfurter (1994), Häberl (2015), Lesses (1998), Miller (2010), Ray (1973, 17), and Tambiah (1973, 199). The list could be multiplied many times over.

9 The title of Mandell's work uses the phrase "I bless you to YHWH," rather than, as the text appears in the body of her paper, "I have blessed you to YHWH." Semiticists are agreed that performatives can appear in ancient semitic languages in a variety of morphological forms, including the perfect (*qatal*) tense. See Sanders (2004). To speakers of English, translation of the original with the English perfect makes it seem as if it cannot be performative, but this is a reflex we should try to suppress. (Shaul Shaked (1999, 177, 179), in our next case study, also moves indifferently between the present and perfect tenses in the translation of a single sentence that may be a performative.)

10 The text is from a Facebook post in the group GOD Over Everything where, interestingly, it is immediately preceded by the instruction to "say this out loud" and an emoji of a person speaking out loud. www.facebook.com/GODOverEverythingPage/posts/say-this-out-loud-%EF%B8%8F-i-bless-myself-i-bless-my-family-i-condemn-every-single-nega/1208910794615948.

context" (1975, 147). A total speech act context typically involves a speaker and at least one addressee; it occurs at a determinate time and place that may be essential parts of the total speech act context; and it renders the illocutionary act complete and final. (By "complete and final" I mean that, although illocutionary acts can be retracted, this requires special work, perhaps involving a second-order speech act (Caponetto 2020)). All of these things have to be finessed in the case of written language.¹¹

Setting this complication aside, here is what I think is going on in the passage from Mandell. She takes blessing to involve, in the beliefs of the participants, the actual bestowal on the one receiving the blessing of goods such as health. In the beliefs of the participants, saying the blessing is causally connected to the receipt of these gifts. Saying the words, as she puts it, "activates their power." By activating their power, the blesser ensures (or at least makes more probable) that the person is blessed, in the sense of receiving good things. If speaking the words activates their power, then speaking makes it so that the recipient is blessed. The idea that saying makes it so (I assume this is what is meant by "coming into existence as they are spoken") is one of the things that characterize declarative performative utterances (such as "the meeting is adjourned"). And, as we have seen, there *is* a performative sense of "bless." Hence the utterances under discussion are performative.

If my reconstruction of Mandell's reasoning is correct, her description of the utterances in question as performative is, I believe, based on a misunderstanding. Not any utterance that makes itself true is a performative. ("I am now speaking" is not, for example.) For Austin, it is essential, in a performative, that the way in which uttering a sentence makes it true is conventional.¹² Yet when Mandell says that "speaking or writing a blessing ... is what 'activates' its power," she is implying that the way in which the utterance brings about its own truth (the actual conferral, according to the participants, of goods) is

11 See Frankfurter (1994), Häberl (2015), and Waller (2019) for the issue of writing and its connection to performativity in the context of ancient magic. (Danet and Bogoch (1992) are very good on the issue of writing and performativity, though in connection with wills, not magic.) In contemporary philosophy of language, these issues are dealt with in the literature on the "I am not here now" answering-machine recording, where audio recording serves a similar function to writing of detaching language production from the context of communication. See, for a sampling of that literature, Predelli (1998; 2011) and Bianchi (2014).

12 This requires some qualification. It is true for the performative acts that I think most people have in mind when discussing these issues. However, if one includes things like assertion in the category of performatives, then it may be (though this is disputed) that some performatives don't require conventions. But blessing, if it were supposed to result in the accrual of goods, could not be like assertion, so I ignore this complication here.

non-conventional. After all, how could people be made sick or well by mere convention in the way that they can be married by mere convention?¹³ This is precisely why we are dealing with magic here. Conventional power doesn't need "activating" in this sense.

Mandell, however, can invoke good precedent for this conflation. The idea that we are still dealing with performativity, even when the way in which saying something makes itself true involves factors other than convention, can be found in Searle. In one brief discussion, he writes that even though "Austin sometimes talks as if all performatives (and in the general theory, all illocutionary acts) required an extra-linguistic institution" (and therefore must work through convention), there are cases where this is not so (Searle 1979, 18). One of the cases is what he calls "supernatural declarations" and he gives as an example God's utterance "Let there be light." I will discuss this example in section 4. But for now, we can note that if "I have blessed you to YHWH" is a supernatural declaration, then Searle would agree with Mandell that it might be a performative. (For Searle, it would depend on how the speaker intended it.) And if speaking or writing it did activate some (supernatural, causal) power that resulted in the bestowal of goods on the one blessed, it would be a successful one at that.

In another place, summing up a longer (and from our point of view, very interesting) discussion, Searle (1989, 557) says (emphasis mine):

it turns out that there is no such thing as a semantic property which defines performative verbs. Unless there is some special feature of the verb which implies nonperformativity (as with "hint," "insinuate" and "boast") *any verb at all which names an intentional action* could be uttered performatively. The limitations on the class that determine which will succeed and which will fail derive from facts about how the world works, not from the meanings of the verbs.

One point he is making here is that "there is nothing linguistically wrong with the utterance, 'I hereby make it the case that all swans are purple'" (Searle 1989, 554) and that is surely correct. Someone who utters this has not made a linguistic error, even though she fails thereby to make it the case that all swans are purple. But Searle is also implying that if she uttered it, delusionally thinking

13 I set aside here, as not relevant, the phenomenon of what Hacking (1996) describes as "looping effects." Diagnostic concepts, for example, are at least partly conventional and their ascription to someone may indeed bring about changes in that person that make them fit the concept applied better (or worse).

that the utterance would make all swans purple, then it would be a performative utterance, albeit a failed one. And if God were to utter the sentence and *thereby* actually make all swans purple, that would be a successful performative utterance. This goes well beyond the linguistic propriety of the sentence “I hereby make it the case that all swans are purple.”

Basing herself on these statements from Searle, Amina Kropp (2020), in a very illuminating discussion, takes the next logical step of recognizing a new category of (alleged) performatives, to add to Searle's own taxonomy of assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, a category that she calls, taking a cue from Rambelli (1993), *transformatives*.¹⁴ These are, precisely, utterances that make themselves true through extra-conventional, often causal processes rather than through the existence of conventions and institutions. As it happens, puny creatures that we are, humans aren't able, in the normal course of events, to make all that much true by uttering something except with the help of conventions. “I am now speaking” or “I am now disturbing the air around me” would be some meager examples. But supernatural beings may be able to accomplish a lot more, depending on the details of their powers (“how the world works”). They may, for example, be able to turn all swans purple merely by saying “I hereby make it the case that all swans are purple.” And magic would be, where it involved the making of certain kinds of utterances, a way for humans to enlarge the range of transformatives available to them.

I suppose one can, as Kropp does explicitly and Searle and many of the other authors discussed here do implicitly, extend the term “performative” (or “declaration”) to apply to transformatives. But this comes at the cost of a very important conceptual loss (and raises further problems I shall discuss in section 4). Speech act theory was developed by Austin to capture the ways in which language is an instrument of social and communicative action. The failure to attend to “magical contexts” wasn't just because they are weird and possibly disreputable. It was surely because they would depend on mechanisms that have nothing to do with the nature of language as a communicative and social tool, the original object of study. As we have seen, a class of transformatives could have been introduced without resort to magic, via simple examples like “I am now disturbing the air around me.” The fact that cases like that were of no interest to Austin is evidence that he would not have seen the addition of

14 Perhaps it would make better taxonomic sense to treat transformatives as a sub-category of declarations since they are, after all, a super-class of Searle's “supernatural declarations.”

transformatives to speech act theory as welcome. Transformativity should not be seen as a kind of *illocutionary* force at all.¹⁵

Searle, Mandell, and Kropp might raise the objection that since the utterances of “I bless you to YHWH” studied by Mandell are clearly not instances of assertives, directives, commissives, or expressives, they can only be (supernatural) declarations or transformatives. My reply would be precisely that these utterances, and others like them, have *no* illocutionary force. Although they are actions performed via speech, they are not speech acts at all in the theoretical sense. Not all significant uses of language need be illocutionary acts.¹⁶ (I would argue that this is the case for language use in fiction, but I cannot examine that here.)

Here is the second case I will examine, which I hope will underline what I have been arguing. In late antique Mesopotamia, Jews would have bowls inscribed (probably by scribes or others presenting themselves as religious authorities) with different forms of language and bury them under their houses to exorcise and ward off demons. (See figure 1.)¹⁷

Shaul Shaked (1999, 174), writing of these bowls, says that

the spells are like legal documents ... in that they have the tendency to use formulaic language, and that the language that they use creates, by its mere utterance, a new legal situation. To use the terminology of J. L. Austin, these are performative statements.¹⁸

15 This, I believe, is what Marina Sbisà is getting at in a note added to a reprinting of her paper “On Illocutionary Types.” Commenting on a discussion of Christian baptism in the original version of the paper, she says she “was considering baptism qua illocutionary act, not qua sacrament. When assimilating the ritual formulas of sacraments to performative utterances, and therefore sacraments to illocutions, it should be considered that what is believed to bring about their specifically sacramental effects is not the minister’s words, but God’s grace” (Sbisà 2023, 33).

16 Many thanks to Enrico Terrone for help in understanding this.

17 There is a large literature on these bowls. See, besides Shaked, Häberl (2015) and Waller (2019) for just two texts.

18 Ahern (1979, 3) notes similar appeals to legal models in China, where charms “are efforts to confront evilly disposed beings with the superior authority of gods, through the ordinary bureaucratic medium of written messages. Many characteristics of the charm make sense in this light: they often have the characters *chih-ling* (M) or *ming* (M) ‘to command’ written at the top ... they often contain the expression, ‘Let the law be obeyed’, a phrase formerly used at the end of official decrees ... they are frequently written on yellow paper (the imperial colour) in ink of cinnabar (the brilliant red used by emperors and officials to mark their writing as authentic), thus producing the most powerful kind of mandate from the most powerful office in the land ... A charm, like any official document, must be properly marked with a seal to have validity.”



FIGURE 1 Incantation bowl with an Aramaic inscription around a demon, from Nippur, Mesopotamia, 6–7th century

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One form such spells took was that of a *get*, the document by which a Jewish man divorces his wife. The text of a *get* includes language like the following: “And now I do release, discharge, and divorce you to be on your own, so that you are permitted and have authority over yourself to go and marry any man you desire.” And to be effective, the document must be delivered to, and received by, the woman. This is a paradigm example of a performative use of language, one in fact discussed by Austin with reference to its Islamic counterpart. If such text is part of a spell to banish demons from a home, won’t it follow that such spells are performatives after all?

The answer is no. We have a text (that of the *get*) which, in certain circumstances, is used performatively to bring about a change in legal status between a husband and wife. But in the case of the bowl spells, Shaked (1999, 176) explains (emphasis mine):

Although the divorce is enacted to all appearances with perfect decorum, there is a *strong fictitious element* in it.¹⁹ This starts with the underlying fact that the demon cannot really be assumed to be married to the master of the house. ... Add to this the fact that it is in practice difficult, if not impossible, to serve a deed of divorce on a demon ... The deed of divorce for the demons is thus, *even in the eyes of the society with which we are dealing, largely a fiction, a theatrical act, a metaphor*, and yet it is not a mere sham. We may take it that it was taken seriously by its practitioners and was considered by them to be highly effective.

It is evident from this that whatever effectiveness the words of the spell were taken to have could not have been accomplished, was not even believed to have been accomplished, in the same performative way in which it would in the case of a normal *get*. That is, the power of the spell was not, and was not believed to be, illocutionary or performative in nature. Despite its use of clearly performative language, the spell would have to be regarded as working by way of a “mechanism of transfer” (Tambiah 1968, 180) or by an “activation of a power within the words.” And yet, as Shaked says, it was not a “mere sham.” It was, one presumes, of the utmost importance to the ceremony that although the words do not function performatively in it, nonetheless they are the words of the *get*, in which those words do function performatively. There is a kind of correspondence between a divorce and an exorcism. Each is a severing of a connection. But the kind of power needed for the severing is different in the two cases. In one, the connection is legal and it is severed by the use of performative language to change the legal situation. That is exactly the kind of work performatives are suited to. In the other, the connection is supernatural and must be severed by magic. Yet the language used is the same in both cases.

When I say that the connection is supernatural, I do not mean just that it is a connection with supernatural beings. One might believe that one can, in fact, enter into legal relations with such beings. The idea of a contract with

19 It is an exaggeration to say it is carried out with all legal decorum since that would require the actual presence of both parties.

the Devil is at least as old as the Faust legend.²⁰ In such a case, one might be able to use legal means to invalidate the contract and performative utterances might have some role to play in those legal means.²¹ But this is all just ordinary, non-magical use of language that happens to be with supernatural beings. Likewise for the use of language to entreat, cajole, flatter, or threaten powerful supernatural entities to help us accomplish our ends. But this kind of language use is not what is going on in the case of the bowl spells and their use of the language of the *get*. The point is not that one of the parties to the situation is supernatural but that the nature of the connection between the parties is. It is the connection's being supernatural that *implies* that it is not susceptible to change through illocutionary means.²²

3 Magic as Perlocution

Austin describes how both illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts are connected to effects in the world, but the nature of those effects is quite different. He offers three ways in which “illocutionary acts are bound up with effects” – “securing uptake, taking effect, and inviting a response” – and notes that “these are all distinct from the producing of effects which is characteristic of the perlocutionary act” (Austin 1975, 117). These illocutionary ways of being “bound up with effects” do not in any way approach the kinds of effects sought for from magic, such things as affecting health, increasing prosperity, and so on.

It is, therefore, perhaps somewhat curious that so many thinkers should have associated language use in magic with illocutionary power. I conjecture that the reason lies in the word “performative,” which naturally seems to conjure up the idea of a performance, something like a ritual within the context of which spells and charms are spoken. Those rituals might be thought to resemble things like marriage or ship-naming, where the use of the language

20 See Swais (2001) for an amusing draft of such a contract, in all its legal details.

21 See the story *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, by Stephen Benét. The contract between Jabez Stone and Scratch (as the Devil says he is called in New England) is invalidated through a trial in which a jury of damned souls finds in favor of Stone. They agree that the letter of the law favors Scratch but, in effect, perform an act of jury nullification, a performative utterance, persuaded thereto by the great oratory of Daniel Webster.

22 I believe Shaked would endorse this verdict since he uses the terms “a fiction, a theatrical act, a metaphor” to describe the utterance and says that “there is ... little to be gained from trying to apply Austin’s terminology to the magic act more rigidly than this, at least in so far as the Aramaic spells of Late Antiquity are concerned. ... It will not do to label all magical utterances ‘performative,’ without further specification” (Shaked 1999, 174).

is characteristically performative. But however much like performances rituals may be, it does not follow that they involve performative utterances in the sense characterized by Austin. And, as I have just tried to show, illocution is not a happy way to think about at least some instances of the magical use of language. Perhaps, then, we ought to consider whether such uses manifest perlocutionary power rather than illocutionary power.

Perlocution is about making things happen in the world in ways that involve real causal processes. However, as we have seen in section 1, utterances can have purely physical effects, such as extinguishing a flame or, through the utterance's loud and unexpected volume, alarming someone. The class of perlocutionary acts, on Austin's conception, is not supposed to include instances like these. Paradigm examples, given above, include such things as alarming someone by warning her (as opposed to unexpectedly shouting in her ear). The warning is an illocutionary act, but that act must bring about a change in the hearer's mental states if the speaker is to count as having alerted the hearer. This change in mental state is part of the real causal processes I spoke of a few lines above. Perlocution, in other words, involves both linguistic convention and real extra-conventional (causal) effects.

Austin's own attempts to delimit the class he was interested in are inconclusive. I will examine an attempt at reconstructing Austin's notion made by Steven Davis (1979). Before doing so, there are a couple of things to note. First, Austin was clear that the category he was interested in was the bringing about of effects *on other people*, in virtue of the linguistic competence of both speaker and hearer. Supernatural beings may count as people in this sense, but saying something that has the effect of making the crops grow, without either the intervening agency of some person-like entity or the anthropomorphization of the object to be affected, cannot count as perlocutionary on Austin's notion. Secondly, although he allows that perlocutionary acts, like all acts, can be performed unintentionally, he clearly takes as paradigmatic cases in which we intend to bring about the effects we achieve with our words. Finally, the term "propositional act," in the ensuing, is not Austin's. It is used by Davis to mean an act of referring or predicating, something that can be done without any illocutionary force being involved in an utterance.²³ Here then, finally, is Davis' (1979, 239) attempt to give necessary and sufficient conditions for perlocution, where S is a speaker, H a hearer, p a sentence, and φ and ψ are action types:

23 The usage is introduced by Searle (1969, 23–24).

S's φ -ing H (to ψ) by uttering p is the performance of a perlocutionary act if and only if

- (i) S performs an illocutionary act or propositional acts by uttering p.
- (ii) S means by p what p means in the language of which it is a part.
- (iii) H understands S to mean to perform some illocutionary act or propositional acts by uttering p.
- (iv) H understands S to mean something by p.
- (v) What H understands S to mean causes H to ψ or be φ -ed.

Given this characterization of a perlocutionary act, what are we to say about some of our examples? Consider the sleep spell uttered by Mak in the *Second Shepherds' Play* that I quoted above. Sure enough, the speaker, Mak, performs some illocutionary or propositional acts when he says "Outt go youre een, fordo your syght." And he means by his words what those words mean in his language. He is not speaking ironically, for example. But none of the other conditions are satisfied for they all require the shepherds, H, at least to have heard the utterance and, since the shepherds are already asleep when Mak speaks these words, they have not. Hence Mak is not performing a perlocutionary act even though his illocutionary or propositional acts have certain (intended) consequences, ψ , the shepherds' failure to wake up.

How about the bowl spells discussed in the previous section? S is the officiant who utters or inscribes the text, H is the demon who is to be exorcised or kept away, p is the text of the *get*, φ is to exorcise, and ψ is to be gone or to leave the house. S, I argued in the previous section, does not in fact perform an illocutionary act in uttering p, even though p is standardly used in illocutionary acts. However, he does seem to perform various propositional acts, so the first clause is satisfied. Let us stipulate that clauses (ii)–(iv) are also satisfied. The key issue is over (v). Is it thought that the demons leave the house, or are exorcised, *because* of what they understand the speaker to mean?

If the speaker had said, and the demons had understood him to say, "if you don't leave, you'll regret it," and the demons were worried about the harm the speaker could do to them (perhaps by calling on a bigger, badder demon for help), then they might indeed leave because of what they understood the speaker to mean. This, however, would be inconsistent with the idea that there is anything special about the use of language here. No magic would be involved. Getting people (even demons) to do things by threatening them is an entirely mundane instance of perlocution. And in the imagined case, the perlocution would be effected by the performance of an entirely mundane illocutionary act, an act of threatening. And of course, in the actual bowl spells, the speaker does *not* threaten the demons. He simply recites the text of a divorce

decree (perhaps along with other ritual actions). If the demons want to stay, why would their understanding of what the speaker was saying induce them to leave? Furthermore, surely the point of an exorcism is somehow to *compel* the demons to leave rather than induce them to leave.²⁴ If it only involved inducement, we would be back in the realm of ordinary speech, albeit directed at supernatural entities. That is why exorcism is often represented as a kind of struggle between the exorcist and the demons. I conclude, therefore, that clause (v) fails and we cannot consider the priest's utterances in this case as (an attempt at) a perlocutionary act, at least as understood by Davis.²⁵ If language could actually be used magically, we could not, at least in many cases, assimilate its power in that regard to perlocutionary power any more than we could assimilate it to illocutionary power.

4 Magic as (Super-)Physical Power

What about physical power? Obviously not, but perhaps something analogous to physical power but not susceptible to physical understanding – super-physical power, let us call it. This is a common view, expressed nicely by the fantasist George MacDonald, or at least by one of his characters, who says that the recitation of a spell is “merely the setting in motion of a force as natural as any other, but operating primarily in a region beyond the ken of the mortal who makes use of the force” (MacDonald 1924, 243).²⁶ This may indeed

24 “The term magic I would restrict to those practices intended to secure some definite gain by coercitive action ... Although magic never makes an anthropopathic appeal, it frequently brings to bear its peculiar coercitive virtue upon feeling beings. It aims, then, at compelling souls, spirits, or gods to do the operator's will, or at preventing them from doing their own” (Leuba 1912, 350). I take it that by “never makes an anthropopathic appeal,” the author means that magic is not supposed to work in virtue of flattering, threatening, and so on. See also, for a more recent statement: “what we distinguish as magical and religious attitudes correspond closely to coercive or performative [*sic*] attitudes [i.e. magic] and supplicative or negotiative attitudes [i.e. religion]” (Versnel 1991, 92).

25 In a refinement of his definition, to capture what he calls a “standard” perlocutionary act, i.e. one in which the speaker intends her words to bring about the relevant effects, Davis adds a sixth condition: “(vi) S intends H to ψ or be ϕ -ed because H understands what he means.” Since a celebrant of the rite could easily reason as I have in the text, he could not reasonably intend to exorcise the demons through their understanding of the meaning of what he says. So, the case would fail doubly to qualify as a *standard* perlocutionary act.

26 I was made aware of this passage by its use as an epigraph to chapter 2 of Ritner (2008). The title of Ritner's book, and his expression “magical mechanics,” captures the notion I am after.

be an apt description for the use of language in magic in some instances (see below), but as a general account, it faces a serious problem. If we model the action of magic on mechanical force, there would be nothing internally contradictory in supposing that what causes one type of effect might have caused another. But when language is involved in magic, there is often a connection between the meaning of the language used and the effect sought. When Mak says “Outt go youre een, fordo your syght,” it doesn’t just happen to be the case that the ‘mechanical’ effect is one that prevents the shepherds from seeing the mischief he is up to. That effect would be predictable from the meaning of his utterance even in the absence of any experience of ‘magical mechanics.’

Sometimes, language magic makes use of made up, or nonsense, words. In these cases, because the words have no established meaning, there would be no way to predict what the effect of their utterance is supposed to be. Such cases would be well-suited to description in terms of super-physical forces and not at all suited to description in speech-act-theoretic terms since both illocution and perlocution are defined in relation to the established meanings of an utterance.²⁷

To understand this better, let us consider the tripartite distinction made by Moshe Idel (1995, 23) between different types of language magic:

Linguistic magic can be divided into three major categories: the fiat, the Orphic and the talismanic. The first category includes the creation of the signified by its signifier, the best example being the creation of the world by divine words. The Orphic category assumes the possibility of enchanting an already existing entity by means of vocal material. Last but not least is the talismanic, based on the drawing of energy by means of language, in order to use this energy for magical purposes.

As Idel goes on to note, in the first two kinds of linguistic magic, “meaning seems to be a crucial part.” But we need to be clear about the very different ways that meaning functions in the two types.

Mak’s sleep spell would seem to be a good example of Orphic magic, the use of language magic to “exert one’s influence on others.” Since I have discussed this at length already, I shall confine myself, for the present, just to underlining that for Idel, the addressee of Orphic magic is supposed “to understand and follow the instructions of the magician” (*ibid.*) and that instructions must be expressed by whole sentences.

²⁷ See Dickson (1994) for a very interesting treatment of nonsensical language in magic that consciously eschews speech-act theory.

It is harder to understand exactly what Idel thinks about fiat magic, but it will be worth the effort to make the attempt. It seems, initially, that he is talking about words and the possibility of making something exist by uttering a word that refers to it. This would need to involve two factors. First, there is the semantic relation between the word and its referent.²⁸ If someone could make a dog exist, for example, by uttering the English word “cat,” then it would be hard to see in what sense this would be specifically linguistic magic. (Though see my discussion of talismanic magic below.) But secondly, there must be some power in the word itself, or in its semantic relation to its referent, such that when it is uttered (by an adept, under the right circumstances), it brings about the existence of its referent. This is the magic part. If there were no power in the word or its semantics, then an adept wouldn’t need that particular word to bring into existence what it referred to.

We can thus see a contrast between the ways in which linguistic meaning features in the use of language in Orphic magic and in fiat magic. In fiat magic, meaning is relevant at the level of individual words. In Orphic magic, it is at the level of the sentence. A mere word is a subsentential unit and its utterance, therefore, cannot be the vehicle of illocutionary or perlocutionary force.²⁹ So cases of fiat magic present a special difficulty. Neither speech-act theory nor super-physical force is even superficially plausible as an explanation of the nature of the magic allegedly at work, the first because we are not dealing with sentences, the second because we are nonetheless dealing with meaning. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Idel says that fiat magic “assumes the complete superiority of the creator over the created object” (23). The magic must somehow be explained in terms of the power of the creator and an ontological difference between the creator and the created. The language is hardly necessary. And it may, in fact, be wondered why a being with “complete superiority” over something should have need of a linguistic utterance at all to bring that thing into existence.

All this is on the one hand. On the other, however, is that Idel’s “best example” of fiat magic is “the creation of the world by divine words.” He doesn’t say anything about what cosmogony he has in mind but, especially given the focus

28 I substitute “word” and “referent” for Idel’s “signifier” and “signified” since those terms invite confusion with Saussure and his followers. That cannot be what Idel intends since for Saussure, the signified is a concept and a part of the sign, not something in the extra-semiotic world.

29 There are one-word sentences but these are distinct from the single words they comprise. My claim in the text that the utterance of a word, as opposed to a sentence, cannot be the bearer of illocutionary or perlocutionary force (unless it is elliptical) may be disputed but I cannot follow this up here.

of his paper on Jewish magic, it seems likely he is referring to the creation story in *Genesis* (at least if that story is taken to describe creation *ex nihilo*, as it is in the popular imagination and by some scholars.) On this account, what God is alleged to have said, to bring things into existence, is not (mere) words but sentences, specifically sentences of the form “let there be x.” Unlike words, sentences are potential bearers of illocutionary and perlocutionary force and in fact, as mentioned in section 2, Searle says that “when, e.g., God says ‘Let there be light’ that is a [supernatural] declaration” (1979, 18). If this is how things are supposed to work, the creation is tied (according to Searle), not to any special power of the word “light,” but to the fact that God’s utterance is a declaration, taken together with the fact that God, unlike humans, is such that his declarations are effective not just for institutional reality but for all reality. This is quite a different understanding of linguistic magic from that associated with the special powers of words. And once again, we confront the puzzle of why God should need to say “let there be light” (or anything at all), in order to bring light into existence. This, in fact, is the problem at the heart of the notion of a transformative illocutionary force or a supernatural declaration. If the “way the world works” is such as to allow some entity to bring about a certain state of affairs, including the existence of something, there is no role for the declaration left to play.

As a result of these reflections, I would propose a different way of categorizing linguistic magic in which meaning is significant as an alternative to Idel’s Orphic and fiatic. There is linguistic magic that is supposed to work through the power associated with the utterance of sentences, usually theorized as illocutionary power, of which I have spoken at length in the preceding two sections. And there is linguistic magic that is supposed to operate through some power in the word and its connection to its referent. Both of these depend on facts about linguistic meaning, though in one what is central is the meaning of a sentence, and the illocutionary or perlocutionary force associated with its utterance, while in the other the key lies with the lexical meaning of individual words.

Both of these contrast with the third kind of linguistic magic that Idel postulates, talismanic magic, where the description in terms of magical mechanics seems just what is needed. As Idel says, it involves “the drawing of energy.” How, then, to reconcile this with my observation above that magical mechanics make it hard to account for the importance of the meaning of the language used and seems to be most apposite when magic is supposed to be accomplished by nonsense words? In fact, in the kabbalistic sources discussed by Idel, talismanic magic is accomplished principally through the *letters* of the alphabet. And not just the letters as elements of words, but also with respect to their shapes, their names, their numerical values, and so on. Although one

might think of letters as parts of language in some extended sense, they do not have any semantic value or, *in themselves*, contribute to the semantic values of the words and sentences in which they occur.³⁰ There is, therefore, no conflict in seeing their magic in mechanical terms.³¹ We have gone from sentences, in Orphic magic, to words, in fiatic magic, to mere letters, in talismanic magic.

5 Some Conclusions

I began with the question: when language is said to have magical power, what kind of power is that supposed to be? Bearing in mind the immense variety of uses of language in magic, and the consequent difficulty of generalizing, I have argued that the power cannot be seen as illocutionary power, although this, and the associated concept of performativity, have been the most commonly invoked way of trying to understand the magical power of words in the last half century. One could put the reason simply as this. Magical uses of language are supposed to be coercive but illocution cannot coerce anyone to do anything. It can, at most, induce them. I also rejected an explanation in terms of perlocutionary power on the grounds that this requires the effects of utterances to be based on an understanding of the illocutionary or propositional acts involved in magical utterances. Finally, I considered the idea of what I called “super-physical” power, or magical mechanics (to use Ritner’s (2008) expression) on the model of the physical power of uses of language, but operating at another level. This has also been fairly widely invoked in attempts to explain the magical power of language. I allowed that it might be useful in some cases, but not in most. There appears to be an inverse relation between the suitability of explanation by super-physical force and the importance of linguistic meaning in language magic. The more important the meaning of the words uttered, the less the model of magical mechanics seems appropriate. I conclude, then, that the magical powers attributed to language, at least insofar as the meaning of the language involved is supposed to be important, cannot be understood, from the point of view of its practitioners (i.e. those who take it to be real), in terms either of super-physical, illocutionary, or perlocutionary powers. It would have to be, therefore, a *sui generis* kind of power.

30 This is consistent with the fact that a word’s meaning can change if a letter in it is changed.

31 I am not doing justice here to the richness and complexity of talismanic magic which does, in some hard to grasp way, sometimes connect with issues of meaning but such an exploration is not feasible in this article. See Faur (1986), Rojzman (1986), and Idel (1989) for just a small sampling of work on Jewish letter magic.

What can be said about this *sui generis* kind of power? This is hard to answer but we can assemble a few conditions that would have to be satisfied by an adequate account for cases where the language itself is important (i.e. cases which cannot be explained in terms of magical mechanics):

- 1) the power must take account of the linguistic meanings of magical utterances, whether of words or sentences;
- 2) it must produce real changes in the world, such as good or bad health, good or bad harvests, and so on (as opposed to conventional changes such as of legal status);
- 3) and it must produce those changes in non-anthropopathical (Leuba 1912, 350) and coercive (Versnel 1991, 92) ways.

If (1) is not met, then we have magical mechanics. If (2) is not met, then we cannot explain the kinds of effects actually aimed for. And if (3) is not met, then we are just explaining real changes by the non-magical uses of language such as threats, promises, wagers, and so on, to enlist the help of more powerful, supernatural beings. Any magic would derive from their actions and not from the language use of humans to interact with them.

The problem is over whether all three desiderata can be met together. If (1) is met, then I suggest that (2) could only be met if the idea of a supernatural declaration made sense and I have argued that it does not. And if (3) is met, that seems to imply the insignificance of linguistic meaning, and hence a problem for (1). I do not categorically assert that there is no way to reconcile these three demands but I cannot see one.

If these reflections are right, then it seems that a special magical power of language is not just something that doesn't happen to exist, as I imagine most people reading this article would agree. There is, rather, something conceptually incoherent about the very idea.

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