Meaning Without Intention: Lessons from Divination

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1 Speech Act Theory and Ritual Speech

To speak of responsibility necessarily brings out, if only indirectly and covertly, our conceptions of the nature of action and of actor -- as well as of certain auxiliary notions, which for many will include intention. Thus, an actor will be judged responsible or not responsible for an action, depending, perhaps, on his or her intention. In the domain of speech, the theory which puts itself forward in this connection is that of speech acts, as developed in the well-known work of Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and others. From the outset many scholars saw in this theory an opportunity to shift attention from language as an abstract system or descriptive device toward speaking as an action in the social world, an action for which an actor (the speaker) was responsible. Given commonplace conceptions of action and responsibility, it is not surprising that soon enough the notion of the actor's intention had taken up a prominent place in the theory. Intention, though it appears incidentally in Austin's work, first took on its critical role in speech act theory through the work of Grice (1957) as adapted and developed by Strawson (1964) and Searle (1969).

Among the many who began to make immediate application of the new performative theory, students of ritual were especially keen. This is no accident, perhaps, given that the first two utterances which Austin selected to illustrate his theory were drawn from the rituals of marriage and ship-christening (Austin 1962:5). One might have thought that speech act theory had been developed with the theoretical needs of ethnographers of ritual speaking in mind, to judge by their ready adoption of it. Tambiah invoked Austin's categories to conclude that

ritual acts and magical rites are of the 'illocutionary' or 'performative' sort, which simply by virtue of being enacted (under the appropriate conditions) achieve a change of state, or do something effective (e.g. an installation ceremony undergone by the candidate makes him a 'chief'). (Tambiah 1973:221)

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But the extent to which the full dimensions of speech act theory were drawn on, or even taken account of, varied considerably. Some scholars, in making use of the implicit license provided by the theory to elaborate lists or taxonomies of indigenously labeled (or unlabeled) speech acts, either left the rest of the standard Searlean speech act theory implicit in their application of it, or perfunctorily repeated those elements which they saw no reason not to endorse. Among the foundational assumptions of Searle's theory which sometimes came into play by this route was that of intention, the intention which was supposed necessary to undergird the speech act -- and now, the ritual act. For example, Wheelock concludes that ritual speech acts are "those speech acts whose intention is to create and allow the participation in a known and repeatable situation" (Wheelock 1982:59; italicization reversed). In this as in many such cases of the invocation of speech act theory, the use of the word "intention" seems almost incidental. Often enough it could easily have been factored out through a paraphrase (for example by substituting the word "function") without losing whatever real insights had been gained in the application of speech act theory. Nevertheless, even when intention was not explicitly mentioned, it was often implicit in the reliance on the concept of the responsible speech actor, a role which is naturally hard to avoid if one is using speech act theory.

In the present paper I will challenge the view that intention is a criterion of meaningful language use. While the traditional appeal to the intentions of a responsible speech actor may seem reasonable or at least harmless, I will suggest that it actually limits our understanding of language use. Not only is it incorrect to set up intentionality as a criterion of linguistic communication, or of meaningful language use -- pace Grice, Searle, and others -- but in certain types of language use, I will propose, the point is precisely to create meaning without intention. Producing meaning independently of the intentions of a responsible speech actor is actually the motivating goal of much of traditional ritual procedure,
including ritual speech. There are specific semiotic mechanisms which make intentionless meaning attainable, and these are especially prominent and well developed in ritual speech varieties. For this reason, the present critique of intentionality will focus on the category of ritual speech, especially as employed in rituals of divination in traditional societies. The choice of a relatively formalized speech category is significant, since its distinctive formal properties and specialized conditions of production constitute, I will propose, crucial components of the semiotic mechanism for intentionless meaning.

In the following section I will outline briefly the place of intention in the existing theory of speech acts (Section 2). I then recapitulate a potent critique that has already been launched against intentionality, which can be termed the anti-personalist critique (Section 3). Following a look at how intentions have fared in literary theory (Section 4), I examine one scholar’s claim for intentionality in ritual speech (Section 5). I then take up several case studies of the use of language in divination (Section 6). Based on these studies, I then examine the phenomenon of apersonality, through which meanings produced are regarded as lacking a personal origin, and as not depending on a responsible speech actor (Section 7). I then consider the social function of intentionless meaning (Section 8). Finally, I take another look at the implications of the divinatory mode of meaning production for intentionality and speech act theory (Section 9).

2 Intention as the Basis of Linguistic Meaning

The speaker's volition, or something like it, has been around for a long time as an ingredient of linguistic meaning. Sapir used the involuntariness of inarticulate cries (as of pain or surprise) to exclude them from the domain of language, putting them on a par with clouds as portents of rain (Sapir 1921:5). Intention took on its current central role for meaning in the theory of "meaning-nn" ("non-natural meaning") put forward by Grice (1957) (see also Grice 1968, 1969, Wetterström 1977). If a speaker A produces an utterance x, according to Grice, "A meant-nn something by x' is (roughly) equivalent to 'A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of a recognition of this intention" (1957:442). Even the meaning of expressions (as opposed to
utterances of them) is thought to be grounded somehow in intentions, though here Grice evinces some doubts. "'\(x\) meant something' is (roughly) equivalent to 'Somebody meant-\(\bar{x}\) something by \(x\)" (1957:442). Even in the case of a red traffic light indicating that traffic should stop, Grice says tentatively, "there seems to be some sort of reference to somebody's intentions" (1957:442).

Searle, though he made important modifications to Grice's "meaning-nn" theory, continued to give central status to intentions (cf. Searle 1983). Upon posing the question, "What is the difference between regarding an object as an instance of linguistic communication and not so regarding it?", Searle observed that

> When I take a noise or a mark on a piece of paper to be an instance of linguistic communication, as a message, one of the things I must assume is that the noise or mark was produced by a being or beings more or less like myself and produced with certain kinds of intentions. If I regard the noise or a mark as a natural phenomenon like the wind in the trees or a stain on the paper, I exclude it from the class of linguistic communication, even though the noise or mark may be indistinguishable from spoken or written words. (Searle 1969:16-17)

It is instructive that Searle should select, as a challenging case, a disembodied and decontextualized mark or sound, cut off from any obvious connection with an intending actor. But even here, according to Searle, if no actor is immediately present we must postulate one, in order to be able to interpret the phenomenon as a linguistic communication at all. Grice and Searle are both committed to the view that linguistic communication (effectively, linguistic meaning in use) is always part of an act, so that the disembodied word (or proposition) does not in itself mean, in the sense of communicating. According to Searle, "The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word, or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (1969:16). This statement, couched as it is in terms of "linguistic communication", is somewhat difficult to challenge in its own terms, because of the presuppositions which ride along with the word "communicate", given its derivation from the active verb "communicate". But we will have reason to question its adequacy for the more general
theory of language in use. While many would assume that a theory of language use is equivalent to a theory of linguistic communication, we will be looking into some phenomena which suggest that this assumption is unwarranted. Given the usual assumptions which accompany the word, communication presupposes communicators. However, on certain kinds of occasions in social life, linguistic materials may be "used" without necessarily constituting speech actions, and without necessarily being the products of responsible speech actors. The significance of a category of language use which is not linguistic communication will be developed below.

It is well to recall that Grice from the outset did allow for one kind of meaning without intention, namely "natural" meaning. The English word "means" can be used in sentences like "Those spots meant measles", where an interpreter can observe the fact that someone has spots, and draw significant conclusions. Yet of course there is no question of invoking intentionality here; thus, the verb "to mean" is predicable of subjects quite incapable of intending anything. Though Grice quickly enough set aside such cases as not constituting "meaning-nn", we may wonder whether the polysemy of the English verb "to mean" should alert us to some significant commonality. That discriminable "signals" as "found" phenomena in nature or culture should be said to mean something is perhaps not without significance.

It is worth marking at the outset the distinction between two kinds or levels of semantic phenomena that go by the name "meaning". Linguists in the traditional mold were usually satisfied to consider meaning as fully encompassed within the domain of the language system (langue), that is, in dictionary meaning and propositional (system-sentence) meaning. But with increasing awareness of pragmatic issues in the last several decades, additional levels of meaning have been recognized as present in pragmatically grounded language use -- including what has been called "speaker's meaning". It should be obvious that if the sense of "meaning" is restricted to the language system, there exists no substantive issue regarding "meaning without intention" -- since intention was never in the first place posited as a component of the language system per se. Only in the domain of language use has intention ever been at issue, and only here does the possibility of intentionless meaning become interesting.
It is of course within this latter realm of meaning that the issue is pursued here.

3 The Anti-Personalist Critique

Although the attractive performative theory (later speech act theory) was soon widely embraced, it was not long before qualms about its Trojan horse aspects began to arise. Anthropological linguists (and their acrostic siblings the linguistic anthropologists) began to question whether the posited framework of speech act types and roles was intrinsic to human speech, and whether it was applicable universally to every culture. Silverstein argued that even the role of "speaker", being indexically created by the instance of speaking (e.g. of the word "I"), partakes of a "theory of the types of roles in types of events socially recognized in a society" (1977:42), a theory necessarily belonging to social anthropology. Rosaldo, who aptly qualified speech act theory as "at once my inspiration and my butt" (1982:203), emphasized that both the taxonomy of speech acts and the social principles underlying them must be subject to open-ended ethnographic investigation in each new culture. Where Searle took the performative verbs of English to be guides to "something like a universal law" (Rosaldo 1982:228), in fact a culture's assumptions about how language works are likely to reflect local folk theories of human agency and personhood (Rosaldo 1982:203, Silverstein 1979).

Students of Austronesian languages have been especially critical of the influence of personalist theories of action on theories of language use. According to Rosaldo, Western linguistic philosophy overemphasizes the psychological state of the speaker, while giving inadequate attention to the social sphere (1982:227-8). Acquaintance with other cultures can counter this parochialism. The Ilongots of the Phillipines "lack 'our' interest in considerations like sincerity and truth; their lives lead them to concentrate, instead, on social bonds and interactive meanings" (Rosaldo 1982:222; cf. also Brown 1984:556, fn. 8). Duranti says of Samoans that they "practice interpretation as a way of publicly controlling social relationships rather than as a way of figuring out what a given person 'meant to say". Samoan interpretation is a cooperative, if hierarchical, achievement (Duranti 1984:2). Especially in formal discourse like that used in oratory and ritual, responsibility for speech may refer
to a generalized role rather than an individual personality (cf. Irvine 1979).

According to Rosaldo, speech act theorists take speech acts to be accomplishments of autonomous selves, whose actions are relatively unconstrained by their social relationships. Speech act theory fails insofar as "it construes action independent of its reflexive status both as consequence and cause of human social forms" (Rosaldo 1982:204). Duranti, addressing primarily the relatively formal oratory of the Samoan fono meeting, stresses that the Western ideology of meaning based on the intentions of an autonomous actor is not matched among the Samoans: "the Samoan ideology and practice of doing things with words cannot be explained on the basis of the notion of 'intentional meaning'" (1984:2). Instead, consequences are what matters: the Samoan speaker has to deal with the circumstances that his words bring about. The Samoan speaker "cannot hide behind his alleged intentions. In Samoan, one cannot say 'I didn't mean it!'" (1984:3).

Western and Samoan ideologies of meaning are further contrasted in the character of their caregiver-child interactions, as Ochs' research shows. When a young child has said something unintelligible, American white middle class caregivers express a guess at what meaning the child intended; Samoan caregivers normally do not. The American caregivers' linguistic interactions conform to "a cultural theory of communication in which speakers' personal intentions are critical to the interpretation of an utterance or action" -- a folk theory which grounds the philosophical theories elaborated by Searle, Grice, and others. Again, Ochs concludes that

The emphasis on personal intentions in Anglo society and scholarship is tied to a cultural ideology in which persons are viewed as individuals, i.e. coherent personalities, who have control over and are responsible for their utterances and actions (Ochs 1984:338)

This individualizing or personalist view of speaking and meaning, decried by Voloshinov (1930), Holquist (1983), and others, appears deeply ingrained in traditional speech act theory, so that it is not a trivial problem for the theory to accommodate non-personalist language use, should such a move be attempted.
The anti-personalist critique, as persuasively mounted by Duranti, Ochs, Rosaldo, and others, demonstrates the culture-boundness of the intentionality criterion through specific ethnographic evidence. Since intention counts as a genuine factor of interpretive procedure in some cultures more than in others, intentionality-dependent theories are not equally adequate to all cultures. While a theory which elucidates a single culture (e.g. white middle-class Anglo-American) is certainly something of value, clearly a more general theory of meaning in language use cannot hitch its wagon to the intentions of autonomous actors.

4 Intention in Literature?

While the focus of this paper is on oral discourse, it will be useful to look at what has been said about intentionality in written discourse, since literary scholars have long experience of the difficulties surrounding this matter. In their efforts to provide a general framework for the interpretation and criticism of works of literature, some literary scholars have entertained views of the book as an objectivized entity. This raises the question of whether and in what sense intentions (i.e. authorial) may lie behind the work, a problem which has remained consistently controversial in literary theory.

Some literary theorists have concerned themselves greatly with what the author "intended" in writing a particular poem or novel, or with what the author "meant", while others have sharply challenged the usefulness to criticism and interpretation of this line of inquiry. In their famous thesis attacking the "intentional fallacy", Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that critical judgments of a literary work cannot properly be based on the author's intention, since "the meaning of a work resides within the work; no judgment of intention has relevancy unless corroborated by the work itself, in which case it is supererogatory" (Beardsley and Wimsatt 1942 [1953]:232; cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946). Stallman concurs, reiterating the objective character of the literary work: "Once the work is produced, it possesses objective status -- it exists independently of the author and of his declared intention" (Stallman 1974:399).

But the idea that the meaning of a literary "object" must be referred to the personal efficacy of an author, who
in effect plays the role of a sort of speech actor, does not die easily, and has never really disappeared from the theoretical scene. Hirsch challenges Wimsatt and Beardsley's critique of intention by invoking, somewhat incongruously, Saussure's distinction between langue and parole (as though this were somehow given as an exhaustive and universally applicable taxonomy of semiotic ontologies). According to Hirsch, "since only individuals utter paroles, a parole of the speech community is a nonexistent, or what the Germans call an Unding." Hirsch insists that "A text can represent only the parole of a speaker or author, which is another way of saying that meaning requires a meaner" (Hirsch 1960 [1971]:1189). More recently, the debate has been rekindled with Knapp and Michaels' claim, in terms echoing Searle's, that for a sentence to be recognizable as a sentence "we must already have posited a speaker and hence an intention" (Knapp and Michaels 1982:726). Language without intention is not really language at all, but only resembles it. Hirsch himself set as a key task of literary interpretation "the imaginative reconstruction of the speaking subject" (Hirsch 1960 [1971]:1193), but cautioned that this "speaking subject" was not equivalent to the historical person of the author, but rather represented just that part of the author which defined the verbal meaning of the work. Likewise, some scholars who have endorsed the criterion of intention nevertheless stress that it is not to be equated with "the prior psychological state of a deceased author" (Dowling 1983:788), but with what is formally defined by and recognized in the work, as a sort of abstracted intention attached to the abstracted role of speaker or author. (See also Foucault on the "author-function", 1977:125.) Formalist literary theories can accommodate this if they reconceive the literary work in dramatic terms as containing its own "internal speaker", "internal audience", etc. (Dowling 1983:788). Ricoeur attached great importance to the "dissociation of the verbal meaning of the text and the mental intention" of the author (Ricoeur 1971:534), but maintained that this dissociation was limited to writing, which was objectified in ways that speech was not. Olson, among the few to recognize the importance of the function of textual authority (in the sense of validation), maintains that writing, insofar as it "provides a means of separating a speaker/writer from 'text'", tends to encourage "the differentiation of intention (what was meant) from the expression (what was said) and an emphasis on the latter". Nevertheless, he still wants to hold on to the author's intentionality,
observing of school textbooks that they are "attempts to construct statements in which the literal meaning is an adequate reflection of the speaker's intention" (Olson 1980:190). This equivalence of literal meaning and intention is supposed to contribute to their constancy of meaning across contexts. Again, intentionality is retained almost as a matter of course, while the potential intrinsic function of intentionless meaning per se is overlooked.

We may ask where the literary debate fits into the schema of speech act theory (cf. Ohmann 1971, Pratt 1977, 1981, etc.). Some applications of speech act theory to literature have paralleled those directed toward ritual speech in their elaboration of new types of illocutionary acts, while leaving many of the basic assumptions of the theory intact. A special domain of literary illocution is posited, within which categories of literary illocutionary acts (perhaps paralleling traditional genre distinctions) are distinguished. Searle has responded to such attempts with skepticism, considering and rejecting the view that a "writer of novels is not performing the illocutionary act of making an assertion but the illocutionary act of telling a story or writing a novel" (Searle 1979:63). Rather than countenance a whole new domain of literary illocution, Searle invokes a notion of pretended act, a status which can apply to the ordinary established list of speech acts. He concludes that "the author of a work of fiction pretends to perform a series of illocutionary acts, normally of the assertive type" (Searle 1979:65; cf. also Ohmann 1971). If we work our way back from the literary text to the pretend illocutionary acts which bring it into existence, perhaps we should expect that their performer would be a sort of pretend speech actor, that is, the author who is implicitly reconstructible in the illocutionary acts as (pretendingly) performed. Though Searle does not draw this conclusion, the resulting abstract role would not be unlike Hirsch's speaking subject, Dowling's internal author, or the French discourse scholars' author-function or sujet de l'énonciation. In any case, Searle is not ready to give up any of the standard components of the speech act model as it stands, but only allows for two statuses of acts, real and pretended. Meaning in literary works still derives from speech acts performed by speech actors, if only in a make-believe world.4

Literary scholars as well as linguists and philosophers have returned again and again, consciously or not, to the dictum formulated by Hirsch: "meaning requires
a meaner". Though literary scholars have been among the first to recognize that intentionality is an issue to be debated rather than accepted without question, much of this critical debate has been animated, in the end, by the practical consideration of whether it is cricket or not for the critic to go rummaging about in the psyche of the author (whether a real or abstract one) in order to make interpretations. This emphasis is not so useful to the rest of us who are concerned with interpretation and meaning. It tends to obscure a more fundamental but largely ignored question, whose significance dwarfs that of the usual terms of the intentionality debate. If we stop assuming that we are dealing with a contrast of two academic positions, one or the other of which must go down in defeat, we may come to recognize that we are in fact facing a contrast of two actual phenomena. If it should turn out that there exists both meaning with intention and meaning without intention, we can start to ask: why two such contrasting types of meaning?

Below I hope to suggest why meaning without intention exists, and to make clear that it is neither an anomaly nor a given. It certainly is not something to be incuriously accepted as a fact of semiotic life; rather, it represents a special type of language use that is actively promoted for its own sake, due to the unique sociocultural functions that it alone can fulfill.

5 Intention in Ritual Speech?

Turning to ritual speech, we must ask: Is it intentional? Ironically, while ritual utterances of a certain type (marrying, christening) have been favorite performative examples among speech act theorists, it is precisely in this domain that a few anthropologists and sociocultural linguists, even those most sympathetic to speech act theory, have begun to question the speech act theorist's reliance on intentionality. In "trance speaking", as Becker (1979:232f) has pointed out, the utterer of the shifter pronoun I is "speaking involuntarily or nonintentionally" -- and thus, paradoxically, in another sense is not "speaking", if we understand by this acting as a responsible speech actor. In conventional rituals like marriage, as Tambiah (1981:127) observed, the sacrament remains valid even if one is being forced to marry for having made one's partner pregnant, or if the ceremony is performed by a drunken and immoral priest -- as long as
appropriate conditions such as the ordaining of the priest have been met (cf. Wierzbicka 1985:500). On a continuum of behavior types, formalized ritual would be closer to the conventional end than to the intentional end. Yet, while Tambiah raises some questions about applying the intentionality criterion to ritual, he nevertheless fundamentally accepts the philosophers' conception of the performative act. He even toys with the possibility of retaining intentionality, through attributing to the ritual actors a set of conventionalized and culturally defined intentions. Application of the word "intention" to such conventionalized attitudes would seem to beg the question, however. And the concept of speech act itself, in presupposing the speech actor, tends to invoke the model of the actor that is most ready to hand in Western thought: the individual as autonomous causer, the "author" of his or her own actions.

6 The Language of Divination

Perhaps the most direct illustration of how meaning can exist in the absence of intention occurs in the language of divination. This is especially so in mechanical divination, as opposed to "mental" divination, where the diviner may speak in the role of a medium, often in an inspired or trance state. Viewed literally, divination is a process for obtaining information which is (typically) unavailable by ordinary means, that is, which cannot be gotten by the usual techniques of indigenous practical epistemology, such as seeing, hearing, being told by another person -- the commonplace categories of evidential coding systems (Chafe and Nichols 1986). Viewed in its social aspect, however, divination is not so much a means of obtaining information as a means of establishing social facts, facts which command a consensus and can form the basis for legitimate, recognized social action. Nevertheless, the crisis which leads to divination typically presents itself in epistemological terms: an illness lingers inexplicably, game cannot be found, crops fail unaccountably, a venture is entertained whose outcome is uncertain. Ordinary evidence is unavailable to support propositions about the case, such as, "So-and-so (or such-and-such) is responsible for this situation." In the absence of such evidence, help is sought in securing (or socially establishing) the facts of the situation at issue, as well as in determining what is to be done about it in the way of ritual or other act. In mechanical divination,
the meanings arrived at are determined by something other than a volitional, human act. Since the oracle cannot in a direct sense vocalize, it may be left to the diviner (or the petitioner) to carry out the uttering of the words. But which words are selected, and which meanings, are in principle beyond the utterer's control. To show this, I now examine three cases of the use of language in divination.

6.1 Sixteen Cowrie Divination (Yoruba)

For the sixteen cowrie divination of the Yoruba of Nigeria, a diviner shakes a flat basket containing sixteen small cowrie shells. The number of shells that come out facing mouth up (i.e. from zero to sixteen) defines a named figure, which has several divination verses associated with it. These verses are then recited by the diviner in sequence, until the client finds the one that is appropriate to his case. (Or, additional cowrie throws can be used to select further among the verses.) For example, if six of the sixteen cowries come face up, this defines the figure called Obara, for which the first divination verse would then be recited as follows:

K'á kó'lé kotó d'ajé;
K'á yó'ódé dé'lé d'óó;
K'á r'asó tun tun'lé d'óó Amóódún
Dá f'Oóbárá
Tí ní 'oko áloró òdún.
Ósá w'pé on pé i ré ajé;
On pé i ré óó.
Níbi t'á gbé dá Agbágbá méfá
L'óó ré óó.

"We should build a storehouse for money in advance;
'We should make a verandah for riches in advance;
'We should buy new clothes for next year's child in advance'"

Cast for Obara
When he was going to his year-round farm.
Orisha says that he says, 'A blessing of money;
He says, 'A blessing of children,'
Where we cast Six Elders
On the tray." (Bascom 1980:494-5)

This verse continues for another 101 lines, and there are eighteen more verses corresponding to the divination result
of six cowries. A different number of cowries facing up will select a different set of divination verses. For example, if five cowries come face up, the figure is called Oṣe, and the first verse begins

\[
\begin{align*}
A \ g'\text{erin} \ ja'\text{ri} \ ag\text{ada}; \\
A \ g'\text{agada} \ ja'\text{ri} \ er\text{in}; \\
A \ se'\text{gi} \ ok\text{o} \ m\text{a} \ w\text{e} \ 6\text{ko} \\
D\text{A} \ f'\text{Oṣe} \\
T\text{i} \ 6l\text{o} \ t\text{oro}'\text{wA} \ gbogbo \ l'\text{ọwọ} \ O\text{lọdùmárà}.
\end{align*}
\]

" 'The iron that will spoil the sword;
'The sword that will cut the iron;
'The tree in the farm that can swim like a canoe'
Cast for Oshe
When he was going to ask for all destinies from Olodumare" (Bascom 1980:388-9)

The language employed for divinatory utterances is distinctive. The texts are recited in short verses, and contain allegedly archaic words and formulas, whose meanings are in some cases unknown even to their reciter (in this case, a diviner knowledgeable enough to recite for Bascom more than 10,000 lines of divination verse from memory). The verses are often highly figurative, appearing, to the outsider at least, as opaque metaphorically in places: "the tree...that can swim like a canoe". Some portions are parallelistic: "We should x a y for z in advance", iterated thrice; "the p that will/can g", thrice; etc. The verses incorporate a great deal of ostentatiously marked quotation: "Orisha says that he says ...". These quotations are generally ascribed to myth figures and deities, or to divinations performed for these individuals in myth times: "Cast for Oshe / When he was going to ask for all destinies from Olodumare". The mythical instance of divination acts as a "precedent" for the current divination. As such, it constitutes a case of speech role doubling within a represented duplex speech event, a phenomenon which I have described for ritual speech elsewhere (Du Bois 1986:321). All of these features are such as to locate the origins of the speech in a distant place and time, and to emphasize its separation not only from everyday life in the present moment, but from the diviner's own ordinary mode of speech, as expressed in the ordinary persona which he or she presents outside the divination context, in the role of neighbor, etc. (Du Bois 1986).
If we ask about intentionality here, it should be clear that these utterances are outside the control of their utterer in two respects. First, they are traditionally specified texts, memorized from the oral teachings of a senior diviner over the long years of study required to master such a large corpus of divination texts. Second, the verse that the diviner utters on a particular occasion is specified by the aleatory mechanism of the cowrie toss, whose result is quite out of the control of the diviner. Although the client selects among the several verses presented the one which he or she considers relevant to the case, what is relevant for our purposes is that the diviner's recitation is governed by an aleatory mechanism.

Similar features also characterize the other major Yoruba oracle, the Ifa divination (Bascom 1969), though its techniques are rather more complex.

6.2 Poison Oracle (Azande)

Among the Azande of the Sudan, the most revered and authoritative of all oracles is benge, the poison oracle. The poison, derived from a certain creeper by ritually specified processes, is administered to chickens kept specifically for divination purposes. Great care is taken to ensure that the oracle is operating properly, that is, that it kills some fowls and lets others live. Evans-Pritchard assured himself, after much close observation and participation in actual divinations, that the outcome is not manipulated. After the chicken has been forced to swallow some of the poison, the questioner addresses the poison oracle inside the fowl for as long as five minutes, if the fowl lives so long, explaining the background of the matter he has come to consult about, and reiterating the question so as to be clearly understood. In this speech, presented in a style special to oracle-questioning, he will incorporate a specific proposition whose truth he links verbally to the death of the fowl, and an opposite proposition whose truth he links to the survival of the fowl. For example, a man who wished to marry a certain woman sought to find out if his project would go well, or if the woman would die should he marry her. Upon administering the oracle poison to the chicken he addressed the oracle as follows:

Poison oracle, that woman, since I intend to marry her, she is my wife? We will make a homestead
together? We shall count the years together? Poison oracle listen, kill the fowl. It is not so, mine is the weariness of piercing boils -- a man pierces a boil and can eat nothing -- such is the affair of that woman. I must do without her and may not marry her, poison oracle listen and spare the fowl.

The addresser continues, framing again the pair of opposed propositions, and again linking them to the death or survival of the fowl:

It is not so, poison oracle, refuse to be deceived; you are marrying her to me, she is truly my wife. I will praise this verdict of yours, poison oracle, about that affair of my wife. Straight be your utterance like Zakiri, like Moragbändi. Poison oracle kill the fowl. It is not true, poison oracle, she is not my wife; although you are as fierce as Gbudwe if you see that that woman will not be my wife, poison oracle spare the fowl. (Evans-Pritchard 1937:298)

(The questioner goes on in this vein.) Because of the way the questioner has linked propositions and oracular outcomes here, the fowl's death will be interpreted as meaning that the marriage will go well, while its survival will mean that the woman would die if he marries her. The speech employed to address the poison oracle must be adaptable in order to frame the question currently at hand, so that it cannot consist entirely of traditionally specified text. But it does have distinctive stylistic characteristics. The address to the oracle characteristically employs a "special phraseology" and incorporates "traditional refrains, pieces of imagery, compliments to the oracle, ways of formulating a question", etc., usually including many "analogies and circumlocutions" (Evans-Pritchard 1937:297-99), such as "making a homestead together" and "counting the years" for marrying happily. Speakers from myth times (e.g. Zakiri and Moragbändi, ancient Zande kings) are invoked as models for the current divination.

In Evans-Pritchard's translation of the Zande original, there are clauses which are presented as questions, some which look like assertions, and some which are given in the form of a conditional (if x is true, do y). (Of course a conditional interpretation may be implicit even in places where Evans-Pritchard has not expressed an 'if'.) Considered in illocutionary terms,
these utterances of the oracle questioner present a curious aspect. Assertions, we are told, have speakers with intentions behind them, as responsible speech actors. But to maintain that the questioner's utterances here are backed by his intention would be to ascribe manifest contradiction to him and incoherence to his utterance. Taken at face value, the oracle texts would look almost like text-book cases of the contradiction that philosophers and linguists like to cite as not coherently utterable by a single sentient being. Moreover, the propositions refer to states of affairs of which the speaker is patently ignorant, and of which he publicly recognizes himself to be ignorant.

But such an evaluation is clearly not warranted by indigenous axioms of interpretation. We can only ask in what sense the utterer is "saying" these sentences at all. Clearly, in uttering these propositions (whether they are taken as assertions or conditionals) the petitioner leaves open the question of their truth, and so cannot be said to provide them with any specific illocutionary force. The decision as to which of the uttered propositions is true is rendered by an event outside his control, the death or survival of the fowl. This holds true even if some of the propositions are viewed as conditionals, since participants take the divinatory signal (death:life) as providing the truth value for the (perhaps originally conditional) proposition.

But is it fair to speech act theory to perceive speech act status in a binary signal that in effect counts as no more than a "yes" or "no"? Actually, speech act theory itself has long recognized that even a simple yes-or-no response can, in the appropriate context, commit a speaker to a full-fledged speech act -- one that in another context would be performed using a full sentence, such as the assertion "Yes, I am going to the movies" (cf. Searle 1969:19). Thus the binary character of this and other divinatory responses is not in itself a hindrance to application of speech act theory.

The problem derives not from the simplicity of the binary signal, but from the manifest absence of personal intention. In effect the divinatory signal anaphorically incorporates the linked proposition originally uttered by the diviner, but now provides it with a pragmatic backing -- of a sort usually thought to require an intending speech actor -- which is both mechanical and aleatory.
6.3 Symbol-Spinning (Sisala)

Among the Sisala of Northern Ghana, a divination session begins with the diviner opening a bag from which he takes out several ritual instruments. He then utters an invocation of gods and ancestors in a distinctive tone of voice, while slowly shaking a ceremonial rattle:

God! What have I called? Savai [an ancestor] is the god. Which gods should I call? I should call Jevaha and Forkorbawie. They should call Gominabaah and Navrije. They should call Salfuo and Jallo. Jallo should ask Janawia, the eldest river, and he should ask Dajare. Dajare is the eldest farm, and he should ask grandfather, who will ask God. (Mendonsa 1982:121)

(The diviner continues.) For the divination proper the specialist removes, one by one, each of a set of symbolic figures contained in his divining bag, each of which has a specific meaning associated with it. The diviner suspends the symbolic figure by two strings that are attached to it, rubs the strings together in his palms to make the object spin round, and watches to see where it points. The two knots in the string are said to be "eyes", and if these end up pointing to the client, this indicates that the symbol is potentially pertinent to his case. Symbols which "look" away from the client when spun are set aside as irrelevant. (Further divination using another technique may be used to select among the objects picked out by this procedure, as well as to choose between pairs of opposed propositions framed by the client, etc.) In one seance, among the symbols picked out by the spinning technique were the following (Mendonsa 1982:124):

a notched piece of gourd with two protrusions, carrying the traditional signification, "You knew the truth but spoke in two different ways" (that is, "you lied");

a dried black fruit from the bubinga tree, signifying "It will be a black (bad) thing if you continue";

a single cowrie shell, signifying "You made a promise to a shrine and asked it for some things, but now you have forgotten your promise."
These words are uttered by the diviner to the client, in accordance with whichever figures have pointed to the client. The diviner's statements are thus selected by the symbol-spinning, an aleatory process which puts the result -- at least apparently -- outside the control of the diviner.

Again, if we consider this speech event from an illocutionary standpoint, we must find ourselves reluctant to ascribe to the diviner the responsibility of a speech actor exerting volitional control over a series of assertions. Propositions are indeed being uttered, but apparently without support of, or dependence on, personal intention.

Some readers may remain skeptical even when ethnographers present evidence that a divinatory signal is outside the diviner's control. But the real issue here must be kept sight of: not control, but the indigenous perception of control of the divinatory process. Members of divining cultures typically believe that a legitimate divination produces a definite signal by means other than through personal volitional control. Divinatory devices are often selected, it appears, precisely because they can provide the appearance (at least) of such independence. The significance for pragmatic theory comes when the diviner's client construes as meaningful an utterance which he or she believes is not backed by personal intention.

For the present these three cases will be sufficient to give an idea of how language is used in divination. I turn now to problems of interpretation.

7 Apersonality

What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking.

-- S. Beckett (1974:16)

Speech act theory, confronted with the aleatory mechanism's apparent intention-suppression function, might hope to rescue the criterion of intentionality by recourse to an imagined intender behind the oracle. Surely, one must reason, if oracle-users believe they have received meaningful information about their present affairs from an
oracle, they at least must assume that this information was communicated by someone, by some speaker or addressee -- perhaps a deity, spirit, or other such anthropomorphistic figure. This deeply ingrained reaction on our part, reflecting the strength of the personalist ideology of language use, was experienced already by Evans-Pritchard, when he would try to present to his countrymen the Azande view of the poison oracle:

I have described to many people in England the facts [about how the Azande employ oracles] and they have been, in the main, incredulous or contemptuous. In their questions to me they have sought to explain away Zande behaviour by rationalizing it, that is to say, by interpreting it in terms of our culture. They assume that Azande ... attribute a personality to the oracle, a mind that judges as men judge, but with higher prescience ... (1937:313)

If we could believe that the Azande personify their poison oracle, perhaps we could then comprehend their faith in it: "Given a mind the Zande oracle is not much more difficult to understand than the Delphic Oracle." But, Evans-Pritchard insists, "they do not personify it." While it might seem to us that they must take the oracles to be personal beings, since they do address them directly, this question appears absurd when framed within the Zande language. The poison oracle

is not alive, it does not breathe or move about. It is a thing. Azande have no theory about it; they do not know why it works, but only that it does work.

Oracles work, now as always, simply because that is their nature (Evans-Pritchard 1937:320).

The Azande are not alone in their reluctance to seek a personal or personified source for the meanings derived from divination. In his analysis of divination among the Tiv, Bohannon evinces some frustration in his attempt to apply a "communication model" (a Jakobsonian variant received from Sebeok 1964) that assumes, along with message, code, referent, and channel, the existence of an addressee and an addressee. He calls divination "a sort of quasi-communication" (1975:151) at first, but has doubts.

To call the 'interaction' between the diviner and his oracle a 'quasi-communication' because diviners like
Koson cock their heads and 'listen' may be to interpret the Tiv point of view a little too literally. (Bohannon 1975:166)

Divination might better be compared to the use of an artificial extension of the senses, like a Geiger counter. In any case, the "addresser" that the communication model asks for cannot be validated in native terms: "the Tiv do not and will not speculate about the nature of any thing, person, or force that 'sends' the message" (Bohannon 1975:166). As with the Azande, the refusal to personify genuinely confounds our attempts to apply either a speech act model or a Jakobson-Hymes type communication model, given their insistence on speech actors or addressers.

Some traditions, on the other hand, may postulate a more personal figure behind the divination, though this may be little more than a sort of "supervisor", or a source of undifferentiated power or epistemological efficacy. The divination procedure may have a deity or set of deities associated with it; for example, the Quiché Maya diviner invokes a long list of deities and other powers in order to ensure that a seance goes well (Bunzel 1952; cf. Tedlock 1982), as do the Ixil Maya diviner (Colby and Colby 1981:278ff), the Sisala diviner (Mendonsa 1982:121), and many others. But most of these deities are apparently not specific to divination, and would be invoked in performing other kinds of ritual or magic as well. Further, there is no indication that any one of the list is thought of as the actual speaker of the divinatory message.

In contrast, in the Ifa divination of the Yoruba, a closer relationship is indicated: Ifa is the name not only of the divination process, and of a major Yoruba cult, but also of the deity "responsible" for divination. Before the first divination of the day, the diviner invokes Ifa "to make sure that Ifa supervises the divination and sees that the correct figure is selected" (Bascom 1969:37). Bascom maintains that the divinatory mechanism is designed to enable reception of a message "which Ifa wishes the client to receive" (1969:30). But supervising is not speaking. There remains some question whether the Yoruba would tend to think in terms of ascribing the character of a speech actor responsible for intentions underlying the specific divination "message" produced on a particular occasion, to a deity speaker addressing the diviner and client -- however much we might think such conclusions rationally necessary. Certainly, many of the traditional Ifa
divination texts explicitly present some statements as quotations from Ifa: for one example among many, in the fourth divination verse for the figure Oveku Ogbe (corresponding to palm nut throws 2, 2, 2, 2; 1, 1, 1, 1), a demand for a sacrifice is attributed to Ifa: *Ifa ni ki eni-kan ru-(e)bo nitori oye ti a nje ni idile re* 'Ifa says someone should make a sacrifice because of a title that is to be taken in his lineage' (Bascom 1969:232-3), etc. But there are several points to take into consideration here. First, these are fixed traditional texts, so that the client knows that this same text may have been uttered the day before to someone else. Second, the directness of contact is mitigated by the fact that a significant portion of most of the Ifa divination verses consists in a quotation of utterances made by some myth-time diviner -- a hero or deity -- to another myth-time personage. This is what I have spoken of as a duplex speech event (Du Bois 1986:321); in this type, a prior (postulated) speech event is presented as a precedent to the present divination. In this context, there is often an ambiguity as to whether the attribution of saying refers to a present saying or to the original myth-time saying. This ambiguity is anything but accidental, of course, and might be expected to be actively cultivated. Third, the words "Ifa says..." often alternate, seemingly interchangeably, with the indefinite attribution "they say..." (e.g. Bascom 1969:233). Fourth, we need to recall English usages like "the label says...", "what that kind of behavior says about you is...", "those spots mean...", "Scorpio rising means...", etc., in evaluating statements containing verbs of saying or meaning. Finally, even if an ethnographer's questions were to prompt statements about deities as speakers of divination messages, we may still need to distinguish any secondary rationalizations from deep-seated, basic modes of interpretative behavior with respect to divination mechanisms.

It is important to recall that magic, in some views at least, **coerces** rather than entreats action from gods and powers. As Mauss points out, the demons which are invoked in demoniacal rites "are not free agents" (1950:105). Thus, even where speaking is indicated it may not be volitional speaking, that is, speech in which choice exists -- for example, the choice between telling the truth or lying. One sometimes hears as an explanation for the failure of an oracular divination that the correct question had not been made sufficiently clear to the oracle, or that witchcraft somehow interfered with the divination
procedure, but not that an oracular "speaker" chose to lie. While the Yoruba may be recognized, given Bascom's materials, as one case where a group does postulate a relatively personified -- if not necessarily free-willed -- "speaker" for the fixed divination texts given by tradition, it seems that in most divination traditions, any associated deities or powers are at most patrons or supervisors of the divination procedure. And in most cultures, apparently, there is no sacred personality linked specifically to divination.

To draw a parallel from a Western context, a scientist who supervises a medical laboratory might have an important function in ensuring that all equipment works and that tests are appropriately carried out by laboratory personnel; yet we would not as a result take this supervisor to be the author of the diagnostic "messages" indicated by the chemical reactions in the tests. If we recall Bohannan's comparison of Tiv divination to a Geiger counter, we may be on the right track toward understanding the place of a supervising deity for divination.

Mauss, in his discussion of the place of "spirit beings" in a general theory of magic, concluded that such figures were never in themselves sufficient to account for the beliefs about magic (a category which, in Mauss' usage, would encompass divination). He emphasized that even where such spirits were invoked by native theory, there was always something left over unexplained:

The idea of spirit beings is not a sufficient representation of anonymous general forces which are the basis of a magician's power, the strength behind his words and actions, the power of his looks and intentions, spells and death. ... the idea of spirits ... cannot explain either the existence of the ritual or its special features -- sympathetic actions, magical substances, ritual prescriptions, private languages, etc.

Even in a demoniacal rite, Mauss says, "the idea of spirits is necessarily accompanied by an impersonal notion of efficacious power" (Mauss 1950:105). Unfortunately, Mauss offered no conception of a positive function for the impersonal power, but saw in it only the residual function. But in light of the foregoing, we can now see how impersonality is often sought for its own sake. Even where a divination supervisor or myth-time precedent-speaker is
invoked, in most systems of divination, it is impersonality which the signal-generating procedure serves to establish and reinforce. Like the Azande and the Tiv, most groups do not personify their oracles, and have no theory about any "speaker" or "addresser" for the oracular "messages". The oracle is simply a thing, a mystical tool perhaps, but they are content to leave it at that. We need to recognize that members of many traditional societies are willing to construe the signals that divination presents to them as meaningful without postulating any hidden speech actor. Meaning is validated otherwise, through the apersonal semiotic mechanism of divination (Du Bois, forthcoming a).

8 Functions of Intentionless Meaning

The question of what function the divinatory process has can be raised on several levels, from a first-order function where we might speak of random generation of distinctive signals, to higher-order functions where we might speak of such things as social integration. While the highest levels of functioning are largely beyond the scope of an inquiry into the workings of the divinatory mode of meaning production, we do need to consider some mid-level functions if we are to understand why intentionless meaning should be so widely sought after.

On one level, divination establishes "facts" without recourse to ordinary evidence, which facts may become the basis of a course of action undertaken by an individual or a group. Often a divinatory client faces several alternative courses of action whose relative merits cannot readily be determined (e.g. to build a house on this site or that, when either seems suitable; to go on a journey or stay home, etc.). What human source could assure one that ill fortune will not befall one in a house built on this site? In such circumstances, any well-defined course of action may serve as well as the next, even if determined aleatorily, so long as it can be confidently and resolutely followed. "Even tossing a coin can end indecision and lead to positive action" (Bascom 1969:70). But this is likely to be effective only when it is possible to believe that the result is more significant than is mere "chance". To base a large undertaking on what one believes to be an "accident" would certainly require a curious cast of mind; this is not the cast which is found among the users of divination. Bascom points out that
when decisions are left to divine guidance rather than chance, the individual has far greater assurance that he is following the correct course of action. He can proceed with greater confidence; and, accordingly, in some cases he probably has a greater chance of success. (Bascom 1969:70)

But Bascom's "divine guidance" is clearly not necessary for divination; the more basic requirement is simply the effective operation of the aleatory mechanism, which gives definite information without dependence on a (necessarily ineffectual) human source.

From the perspective of the group, facts need to become not only "known" but socially legitimated. This is especially true for facts that bear on relations between individuals, or which involve concerted action by the group. In the face of crisis the location of social responsibility for decision-making can become an embarrassment, which is preferably transferred to divination's apersonal mechanism. Among the Tiv, distrust of authoritarian roles makes it difficult for one person to impose a decision if that person has to be singled out as responsible for it. Divination means that no one will have to be the personal source of decision.

Without the divining apparatus, the Tiv mode of group decision making could not be utilized so effectively -- someone would have to take the authoritarian position of 'dictating' the answer. Sometimes influential elders can and do merely 'tell' their juniors what akombo [roughly, supernatural forces] are involved and occasionally even what relationships are to be 'repaired'. But such authoritarianism is both rare and distasteful to Tiv. (Bohannan 1975:166)

Rather than taking on the role of speech actor, one can defer to the apersonal divinatory source. And impersonally authoritative decisions can more readily attract consensus, by virtue of the fact that they cannot be attacked as proceeding from some interested person or faction. As Park observes,

divinatory procedure, whether 'objective' in quality or merely inter-subjective, constitutes a technique for establishing an effective consensus upon a rather particular project. (Park 1967:240)
It does this by the suppression of personal agency and hence responsibility:

it is the peculiar property of the diviner's role that he is able, in the public conscience, to remove the agency and responsibility for a decision from the actor himself, casting it upon the heavens where it lies beyond cavil and beyond reproach. (Park 1967:236)

In referring responsibility to "the heavens", Park wisely draws on one of the more vague and impersonal metaphors that English makes available to him; but we should not expect to read into this anything beyond those heavens, in the way of divine personages.

Divination addresses not only action and fact but emotion as well. Divination has psychological functions beyond the more apparent epistemological and sociological ones. The client is often led to delve into thoughts and feelings of deep concern; and the structure of symbolic materials and potential explanations which are offered up by the culture is likely to point in directions linked with emotion. Some divination procedures, while specifying a set of traditional texts, leave it to the individual to decide on which one is relevant to his or her case. Thus Ribeiro maintains that Ifa divination is a sort of projective technique like the Rorschach Test, since "its interpretation depends on the client's motivations and other psychological factors" (Ribeiro 1956:18-19, cited in Bascom 1969:69). The priestess of an Afro-Brazilian cult in fact considered the Rorschach Test a divinatory technique and even requested that Ribeiro "look Ifa" for her. Bascom also recognizes a projective value for Ifa divination (1969:69). Often the consultee is led to formulate concerns and fears, whether verbally or mentally. This interpretive activity is carried out in a psychologically protected environment, since the consultee is not responsible for backing the various propositions with any particular illocutionary force: the propositions are "entertained" rather than asserted. In this respect the entertained propositions resemble the psychoanalyst's category of "primary process" language, characterized by Fenichel as (among other things) "lacking in any identification of linguistic mood (i.e., no identification of indicative, subjunctive, optative, etc.)" (Bateson 1972:139).
Divination has psychological and interpersonal contributions to make from the group perspective as well. Turner was told by an Ndembu that affliction (e.g., disease, misfortune) which leads to divination and ritual is good because the ritual to remove it brings to light and so dispels the quarrels and grudges in the social group. If these go on for long, it is said, people may resort to sorcery or witchcraft and start killing one another.

The ritual and its associated divination thus act as a prophylactic against witchcraft in the social group (Turner 1975:245; cf. also Beattie 1967:231, Mendonsa 1982:9). Divination in its diagnostic role often mandates the performance of redressive ritual involving pertinent group members, and by this route a resolution of interpersonal conflicts may be attained. In such a divinatorily enjoined rite, we may note in passing, the ritual utterances will ultimately have been activated and backed up by the impersonal mechanism of divination.

The truth-discovering capacity of divination gives the diviner special access to otherwise private domains within the group. The Tiv diviner can ask his clients for any information he needs to carry out his work—about kin's health, grudges, political personages, etc.—including information that would ordinarily be closely guarded and might otherwise remain unaired. The petitioners readily answer these questions, saying "the oracle cannot tell you the truth if you lie to it" (Bohannan 1975:152). Similarly, Herskovits notes that the Dahomean divination context demands complete frankness between the diviner and consulters, with the result that the diviner "is able to get at the facts in a given case to an extent which an ordinary adviser would find impossible" (Herskovits 1938:II, 216, cited in Bascom 1969:68). Retel-Laurentin (1969) emphasizes that the Nzakara rubbing-board and poison oracles, with their vaunted infallibility, function as an effective "truth serum" in court cases. In sum, discourse under compulsion to honesty can of itself serve important psychological and sociological functions, even where its participants treat the discussion as merely ancillary to securing the divinatory response.

But there is room for variation across cultures in the higher-level functions which divination may serve. For example, the Yoruba reject on principle the frank approach
that characterizes the probing divinatory investigations of many other groups. It is preferable that the diviner not even know the nature of the client's problem, lest he "twist" Ifa in seeking to please (Bascom 1969:68). As a result, little in the way of revealing dialogue is likely to take place during the selection of the traditional divinatory text. This may be linked to the prominence of the fixed text, particularly in the initial stage of the Ifa session, which is especially suitable for the essentially projective function which Ribeiro and Bascom have posited for the individual's process of text selection and interpretation. In contrast, divination systems which concentrate on securing specific new information via spontaneous propositions (e.g. about which neighbor's anger is causing one's child's sickness, etc.) may tend to correlate with a commitment to frank discussion.9

In summary, what remains constant through all of these functions is the thread of reliance on apersonal authoritative meaning. Apersonality is achieved through the suppression of personal volition. Personal authority is replaced by an authority which derives from converging divinatory signals (Du Bois 1986:331-2; forthcoming, a), as supported by the symbolic effects of other formal aspects of ritual. The primary function of the aleatory is, as we have seen, to suppress intention; but this takes place in an attitudinal context which nevertheless allows meaningful interpretation of the results as authoritative validations of applicable meanings. In conjunction with other aspects of divination, the suppression of intention endows the divination result with self-sufficient apersonal authority. The results can then be put to a variety of uses in social and psychological life. Divination can produce definite information which allows the individual to resolve uncertainty; in the process it can also probe into sensitive social and psychological areas, bringing personal and interpersonal conflicts to light. It can produce social facts without leaning on the frail reed of human will, and so can validate concerted action in conditions where uncertainty and vacillation might otherwise have disintegrative effects.

To say that the language of divination lacks intentionality is not to say that it is without function. It is ironic, no doubt, that the very intentionlessness of a process should allow it to serve its characteristic function. That devices for generating random outcomes should figure in a process said to be functional, or
end-directed, may seem peculiar. Yet this is not unparalleled among semiotic phenomena. In the biological world, in the field of population genetics, the random recombination of genes is recognized as producing the genetic variation which fuels adaptive evolution, which likewise is end-directed from a certain perspective (Mayr 1982:48-49). Both genetic processes and divinatory processes are of course semiotic in character, insofar as they form components of cybernetic systems.

9 Intention and the Speech Act Reconsidered

It is time to assess the consequences for speech act theory of the status of intention in the language of divination. Intention has come under attack from several directions recently; here I have sought to reinforce the anti-personalist critique with a new argument against the appeal to intention. Anti-personalist scholars such as Duranti, Ochs, and Rosaldo have shown that for certain non-Western societies intention is relatively unimportant for the social interpretive process of construing meaning, in both everyday language use and in formal oratory. This stands in contrast to the situation in varieties of English closer to home (e.g. white middle-class Anglo-American), as enshrined in the Western personalist theories of language use. But Duranti indicates a possibility that even in Samoan, in certain kinds of everyday language use, intention might get taken into consideration (Duranti 1984:17). And, however attenuated the force of the speaker's intentions may be in most Samoan cases, it is important to recognize that the speaker's responsibility clearly remains -- with this difference, that the Samoan speaker's responsibility is not for the intention behind the words, but for the consequences of the words (Duranti 1984:3). In contrast, in the case of divination, what we have is speech for which in principle there is no speaker responsible -- neither for personal intentions behind the words, nor for the words themselves, nor for their consequences. To account for the actual interpretive orientation employed by most users of divination, we simply cannot posit a responsible speech actor, not even in the sense of an individual who bears personal responsibility only for the consequences of words. This is of course no accident, since it is precisely the absence of human responsibility for either intentions or consequences that is characteristically sought after.
In light of the criticisms now being directed against a theory that so recently was widely embraced by students of language use, it is worthwhile to look back and see what it was that speech act theory initially had to offer, and where it went wrong. Recall that Rosaldo accounted speech act theory not only the butt of her critique, but her inspiration as well. In its time, what the performative theory promised was an escape from the prevailing idealist model of pure form, abstracted away from the living world of action. This use theory offered a framework that could take language out of the Platonic world of ideal structure assumed by many structuralists, especially generative structuralists, and place it in the world of social life, which encompasses notably social action. In departing from theories of "rules acting on forms" (of themselves, it seemed), the new focus on action and intention promised to align well with the reemerging interest in function in language. In departing from views that treated meaning and "the world" as belonging to separate spheres, correlated only by processes with names like "mapping" or "verification", the new theory appeared revolutionary in placing meaning and language in the same world with persons, goals, intentions, and actions. Now words could have real consequences. Something was said, and something happened as a result: the facts of the world were changed. To commit oneself to a view that meaning was necessarily linked to action was to forcefully make a place not only for actors but for their goals and contexts. In these terms, speech act theory really did open new avenues of research and theory to sociolinguists, ethnographers of speaking, and anthropologists.  

The movement was a success to such an extent that no informed linguist or philosopher would now seriously propose returning to a theory of meaning which could not take context into account. Clearly, any adequate theory of meaning must include within it an effective treatment of the pragmatic anchoring of utterances, that is, of their connection to context. (Among other things, without this, the influence of felicity condition satisfaction on utterance interpretation could not be accounted for.) And one aspect of the context to which pragmatic anchoring may crucially make reference is the intention of the speaker. As scholars such as Grice, Strawson, Searle, and Clark have persuasively argued, it is necessary -- on at least some occasions, in some cultures -- to make reference to the speaker's (manifest) intentions if one is to succeed in apprehending the hearer's process of computing meaning. If
a hearer knows with what intentions a speaker said something (along with what he or she said), this aspect of context may be crucially taken into account in arriving at the instantiated meaning. To know only the linguistic form uttered, along with its grammatically associated system meaning, is to have access only to a limited portion of the semantic process.

One of the problems which arose, however, was that the basic features of the speech act model were taken for granted as necessary for any kind of language use. The fact that presumably foundational components like the intentionality of the responsible speech actor agreed with the "common sense" of Western folk theory about action tended to prevent recognition of the full range of ways in which language can be used. Even those who kept proposing more and more new speech act types within the existing theory were doing so in an attempt to break out of the limiting assumption that the one key function of language is to refer-and-predicate about states of affairs in the world -- to "communicate information" or to "embody thought", according to one's preferred variant. In rejecting these limitations, they sought to adequately recognize the wide diversity of language use types. But the full scope of diversity could not be adequately envisioned as long as the founding assumptions of the strongly personalist performative theory went unquestioned.

If in applying a ready-made theory of speech acts, we expected to find speech actors and intentionality at the basis of the meanings which indigenous users derive from their divinatory procedures, we would fail to apprehend the lesson which divination has to teach us. To attain an adequate theory of use of meaning, we will have to accept that in social life there is need for more than one kind of it. Certainly for much of language use it is important to recognize that addressers and addressees are involved. And it is admittedly valid to interpret some phenomena in social life as actions which are dependent on actors (of more or less autonomous character), whose intentions may be taken into account as demanded by the local canons of interpretation. But even in the world of social action, there exist other types of phenomena which may need to be interpreted as not dependent on actors. An instance of meaningful language use -- for which no speech actor is responsible -- can have validity as a construct in a model of social life if the society's participants orient toward it as such. In speaking of language use divorced from
responsible actors we are in no danger of reverting to a state where hypothesized language structure becomes a pure "object" of study divorced from action; theories of language use have taken us too far to allow for a return to such a condition of naiveté. But the time has perhaps arrived when we can safely accept that not all phenomena in the social and linguistic world need to be actions, and not all meaningful uses of words need to be interpreted as engendered by intentional, or even responsible, speech actors.

In the end, the uses of language are much more diverse than is envisioned in any existing model of language use, whether of speech-act or ethnography-of-speaking type. If in some of its uses speech has addressers and intentionality, why should there not be other uses where it has neither? When such categories are raised to the status of fixed components in a model seeking to define all use of language, a heuristic becomes a straight-jacket. Culture abounds in systems where all changes that can be conceived have been rung. We should not be surprised to find a type of language use without actors or addressers, where intentionality not only is not present to authorize meaningful utterances, but is actively suppressed.

It may be objected that in divination we are dealing with an obscure and specialized case -- which moreover is scarcely visible among the well-educated segments of technologically advanced societies. Intentionality, it might be proposed, is important enough a factor in human behavior that it ought not to be discarded lightly. On the whole, a theory of language which keeps to the intentionality criterion is adequate, perhaps more so than one which discards it. But it would be wrong to conclude this. It is true that in divination I have chosen for illustration a somewhat exotic type of language use -- but only because divination challenges most directly the limitations of existing assumptions. But divination is by no means unique as a representative of intentionless meaning. Materials ranging from calendrical ceremonials to ordinary proverbs show the same principles in operation (Du Bois, forthcoming b). Nor is intentionless meaning restricted to "primitive" or "exotic" cultures; it is prominent in all cultures including our own, if not always in transparently recognizable forms.

Most importantly, a theory which holds to intentionality as a fixed criterion of meaningful language
use is inadequate for the simple reason that it is too 
impoverished to account for the range of observed 
linguistic phenomena. Speech act theory has made 
intentionality out to be a constant when in fact it is a 
variable. Intentionality is indeed a central concern of 
most human beings -- so much so that on occasion they pay 
it the high compliment of directing great resources to its 
suppression. A theory of language should recognize this, 
and beyond this, elucidate it. In this paper I have tried 
to show that meaningful language use can occur without any 
reference to intentions, or even to responsible speech 
actors. In certain kinds of formal speech like that of 
divinatory ritual, great pains are taken to actively 
suppress personal intentionality, while ensuring that the 
instantiated meaningfulness of the utterance is retained. 
One lesson from divination, then, is that theories of 
meaning (such as those incorporated in speech act theory) 
can no longer rely on intention as a fixed component of 
meaningfulness. Intention is not a speech event constant. 
Once we see this, we are immediately in a better position 
to assess what it is that intention genuinely does 
contribute, whenever it is verifiably present in the 
meaning process.
NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented in a session on "Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse" at the 82nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago, November 18, 1983, and in colloquia at UCLA and UC Santa Barbara in May 1986. I thank the participants at those meetings for their stimulating comments. The research as presented here was supported in part by a UCLA Career Development Award, and by a UCLA Academic Senate Research Grant, which I gratefully acknowledge. For their comments on several issues addressed in the present paper, I thank Sandro Duranti, Jane Hill, Joel Kuipers, Paul Schachter, Sandra Thompson, and Elizabeth Weber.

2. However, in dealing with quotation, Searle allows for a special status for the quoted proposition, from which the speaker has distanced himself or herself in relevant ways, an issue which I treat elsewhere (Du Bois, forthcoming b).

3. As we shall see, much of ritual speech makes such "internal" speech event roles quite overt, in representing the duplex speech event (Du Bois 1986:321).

4. Postulation of a special illocutionary act of divination would naturally be heir to the weaknesses which Searle pinpointed in claims for special literary acts. Instead, the very applicability of the notion speech "act" to divination will be called into question below.

5. For a distinction between mechanical and mental divination, see Reynolds (1963:118), Mendonsa (1982:119); cf. also Rose (1911). Park classifies divination procedures as mechanical, ritual, or emotive (Park 1967:244); but a separate category of ritual divination seems of doubtful value, since it appears that mechanical and emotive divination are also in general ritual.

    Trance divination, like mechanical divination, also incorporates intentionless meaning. But to demonstrate this would require a different line of argument, which limitations of space preclude my developing here.

6. Although Evans-Pritchard originally recorded this in the Zande language, he published it only in translation.
7. Many readers will be acquainted with lore surrounding the famous Delphic oracle, and may recall some of the extraordinarily clairvoyant prophecies, so cunningly ambiguous, which are prominent in both Greek history and literature. It is necessary to state, however, that in reality most of the more impressive prophecies were never actually uttered by the oracle, but were simply fictional or legendary; this has been meticulously demonstrated by Fontenrose (1978). The sort of oracle that was genuinely pronounced at Delphi would be, for example (in response to a question from Xenophon as to what god he should sacrifice and pray to in order to assure success for his journey and a safe return), that he should sacrifice to Zeus Basileus (cf. Fontenrose 1978:248). The historically genuine Delphic utterances are much less exotic, and more like those of some African and Amerindian oracles, than are the Delphic prophecies of legend and literature.

8. The aptness of the experimental analogy for divination was already recognized by Evans-Pritchard (1937).

9. Moore (1957) has put forward original views on the function of the aleatory in divination which differ from those adopted here. Moore argues that the introduction of randomness into human behavior through divination can, under certain circumstances, have a positive survival value, and that this is what is accomplished by the randomness-generating device in Naskapi scapulimancy (shoulder-blade divination) and perhaps in other divinatory techniques as well. But Park (1967) points out that an odd crack in the heated shoulder blade would not lead its users to set off in an obviously unproductive direction on its account; this oracle was not entirely random in its behavioral effects. Rather, the value of its chance mechanism lay in its impartiality, which allowed it to give decisions of an authority that was not personal in origin. While Moore is entirely correct in stressing the nonintentional aspect of divination, his conclusion that its function is to introduce randomness into human behavior is at most partially correct.

10. Though some of what was now attracting attention had also been extractable, at least in embryonic form, from the seminal work of Malinowski (1935).

11. And, lest we conclude that the divinatory mode is quite alien to modern societies, it should be noted that several of its key features survive today: not only in
actual divinations like the flower petal-pulling that accompanies the child's refrain, "She loves me, she loves me not ...", but also in secularized forms of aesthetic and play behavior, from gambling to the enjoyment of mystery narratives.
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