

Habermas on Intelligibility

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I.

In his paper, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning,"¹ Habermas proposes a way out of the difficulties of theories of meaning that will do justice to "all three aspects of a speaker coming to an understanding with another person about something."² In his view, language should be understood to be the medium in which a speaker expresses her intentions, represents states of affairs, and establishes relations with an addressee. His theory of meaning seeks to show that these three functions of language are all intertwined in speech: what we do when we speak to one another is attempt to come to an understanding with someone about something. It is from the perspective of this view of communication that Habermas criticizes other theories of meaning and defends his own formal pragmatic account.

Linguistic meaning, according to Habermas's formal pragmatic approach, is what we understand when we understand an utterance. We understand an utterance when we know what makes it acceptable,³ that is, when we know the conditions under which it could properly be affirmed. This theory of meaning provides the basis for Habermas's theory of communicative action, in which he wants to show through the "model" of speech that "a communicatively achieved agreement has a rational basis."⁴ If it can be shown that, in making an utterance, one also commits oneself to justifying it through the giving of reasons, then it can also be shown that there is a rational basis to our communication and that an agreement achieved through communication can be rational. The meaning of an utterance, then, is rooted in the reasons that would convince someone that it is valid. Habermas writes that "the com-

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prehension of a speech act already points to the conditions for a possible agreement about what is said,"⁵ since, for him, to comprehend a speech act is to understand the reasons that would make it acceptable to all participants in communication.

A criticism of Habermas's theory of meaning would thus imply a criticism of his theory of communicative action, for which it is the basis. In this paper, I will suggest such a criticism by showing that his theory of meaning does not sufficiently prove that the use of language is necessarily oriented toward mutual understanding.⁶ In order for Habermas to be able to show that inherent in our use of language is the possibility of reaching an agreement motivated by the acceptance of reasons and free from manipulation or force, he must be able to defend a corresponding description of the essential nature of the use of language. Thus, Habermas's claims that the use of language with the orientation to reaching understanding is "primary"⁷ and its "original mode"⁸ are not to be understood as temporal claims, but as claims about the nature of language use in its pure form, free from any other use to which it might be put. Consequently, he can argue that non-communicative, or strategic, uses of language are contingent, or parasitic, upon the original, communicative use.

If, however, it can be shown that Habermas's theory of meaning excludes an aspect of language that is equally as fundamental to or more fundamental than the other aspects that he describes in his theory of meaning, and if it can be shown that this aspect is not necessarily oriented towards reaching understanding, then it is possible that the linguistic grounding for the theory of communicative action is still incomplete. I hope to demonstrate this possibility by arguing that Habermas excludes an aspect of language use which he had once acknowledged. This is the claim to intelligibility which, in his article, "Theories of Truth," Habermas has stated is one of the validity claims that speakers must make with each of their speech acts.⁹ The claim to intelligibility is the (usually implicit) counterpart to the question "what does that mean?"¹⁰ Yet, in his "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," discussion of the intelligibility claim is absent. This is a noteworthy shift since the meaning that is redeemed in interpreting the mere intelligibility of an utterance need not be a pragmatic meaning oriented towards reaching an agreement.

II. HABERMAS'S THEORY OF MEANING

The specific difficulties of theories of meaning to which Habermas refers in his "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning" and which his theory is meant to resolve are those that arise when one or another of the three aspects of how

speakers reach an understanding is considered in isolation. The *intentionalist* approach to language attributes the meaning of an expression only to the intention of its utterer. According to Habermas, this approach is inadequate for showing how intersubjective knowledge is possible. It assumes that language is used by a speaker basically to convey her intentions to another. Yet, according to Habermas, here "the phenomena that actually come into view are categorically different from those that are putatively being reconstructed."¹¹ The phenomena that come into view are the assumptions of a shared understanding of the language that the speaker is using, and not the particular intended meaning of the speaker. In order for one's intentions to be conveyed through language, the condition that "both sides, speaker and hearer, already conceive the shared natural meaning of such a symptom (expression) ... in the manner of the intersubjectively known, nonnatural meaning of a conventionally regulated sign"¹² must be fulfilled. *Truth-conditional semantics* is also inadequate for explaining how mutual understanding is achieved through language. By referring only to the state of affairs in the world which could make a sentence true, it ignores "the circumstances under which a hearer *is in a position to recognize* when the truth conditions of a sentence are satisfied."¹³ In other words, according to Habermas, a statement can only be understood when one understands the reasons a speaker would have to cite in order to convince someone that her claim is in fact a claim to truth. Thus, reference to the objective world alone is not enough to be able to understand an utterance; epistemic conditions also play a role. One must be able to understand what it is about the objective world that is being claimed to be true. The *use-theory of meaning*, which describes meaning in terms of conventional language use, is also inadequate according to Habermas; understanding becomes dependent merely on conventions between speakers and it loses its relation to a validity that would transcend the context of a given social practice. Here language loses its relation to the objective world.

Habermas proposes a formal-pragmatic analysis of speech acts that incorporates elements of all three theories of meaning, each of which he has shown to be insufficient on its own. The focus on speech in this analysis is to account for what is valuable in the use-theory of meaning, while the pragmatic aspect of this analysis is to remedy the monological tendency of intentionalistic semantics. Formal semantics is retained for explaining how language relates to the world.

The key notion in Habermas's theory of meaning is that of a validity claim. Validity claims are claims that can be redeemed or found to be acceptable by others through the giving of reasons. Thus, meaning is not determined by the objective relation of language to the world as such, but by the reasons

that could be given in support of claims of various sorts. In this way, the meaning of an utterance, the reasons with which it can be redeemed, is something which must be understood intersubjectively, in terms of the giving and accepting of reasons. Habermas writes,

Validity claims aim at being acknowledged intersubjectively by speaker and hearer; they can only be redeemed with reasons, that is discursively, and the hearer reacts to them with rationally motivated "yes" or "no" positions.... Mutual understanding aims at consensus formation. The attempt by S to reach an understanding with H about something in the world terminates in the agreement brought about between them, and this agreement is sealed by the acceptance of a comprehensible speech act.¹⁴

When we understand a speech act we understand the conditions under which it could be valid or the reasons which could be given to support its validity. We can then either accept or dispute the likelihood of these conditions being met or the persuasiveness of these reasons and by means of discursive exchange come to an agreement on the validity of what has been said.

Habermas stresses that the validity of a *speech-act* differs from that of a proposition. By taking into account the "illocutionary force" of a speech act, one must take into account what a speaker is *doing* with her speech act. In this way, "the attachment of the validity conditions to the propositional component is loosened. Room is thus made for the introduction of validity claims that are *not* directed toward truth conditions or tailored to the relationship of language to the objective world."¹⁵ Indeed, room is made here for the introduction of two other "worlds" to which our validity claims can be directed. Along with the objective world that truth semantics regards as the domain that our validity claims are about, Habermas introduces the "subjective world" (the experiences of the speaker to which she has privileged access) to which the intentions expressed belong, and also the social world (of interpersonal relations), which provides the context that determines the normative rightness of one's claims. To each of these worlds corresponds a different kind of validity claim and a different kind of illocutionary force with which the claim is raised. While the objective world is what is referred to in order to justify the truth of a validity claim which is made in the form of a constative speech act, the subjective world is what is referred to in order to determine the truthfulness of the speaker's expressive speech act. The intersubjective social world is what is referred to in order to determine the appropriateness or rightness of those speech acts which are regulative.

These three worlds each contain the possible conditions that could make their respective validity claims acceptable. A speaker refers to these worlds in order to give reasons to justify her claim. The understanding of a speech act thus requires that speaker and hearer both come to share an understanding of these worlds as they are disclosed by the respective forces of speech acts. Habermas writes,

We understand a speech act when we are acquainted with the kind of reasons that a speaker could cite in order to convince a hearer that he (the speaker) is entitled under the given circumstances to claim validity for his utterance. For this reason, familiarity with a language is interwoven with knowledge of how things stand in the (linguistically disclosed) world.... Understanding an expression means knowing how to make use of it in order to reach an understanding with someone about something.¹⁶

By explaining mutual understanding in this way, Habermas intends to show that communicative action, that is, action geared towards reaching understanding, is fundamental to human interaction and that strategic action, action for the purpose of exerting influence, is secondary. In order to make a meaningful utterance or to understand what an utterance means, one must have access to the world of reasons that could support the truthfulness, truth, or rightness of the utterance. These reasons must be such as to be acceptable to both speaker and hearer on the basis of their own judgments so that the mutual understanding arrived at is free from influences external to the communication itself. Habermas writes, "whatever manifestly comes to be through external influence (gratification or threat, suggestion or deception) cannot count intersubjectively as an agreement."¹⁷ Strategic action is secondary, or parasitic, upon communicative action because, according to Habermas, any deceitful use of language rests upon the presupposition of a shared understanding.

Habermas writes, "like all action, communicative action is purposive. But here the teleology of the individual action plans and of the operations for carrying them out is *interrupted* by the action coordinating mechanism of mutual understanding."¹⁸ The "interruption" that Habermas is here referring to is the revealing and questioning of the conditions for one's validity claims that must first take place if the utterance is to be accepted as valid. In cooperative interaction, for a speaker to reach the goal intended by her speech, she must take into account and respond to the objections or qualifications that are presented to her by the listener. Only when mutual understanding has been attained with respect to the meaning of the utterance, could it achieve its desired effect;

that is, the effect which both speaker and hearer understand that the utterance is to achieve.

Habermas writes in "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning" that "every speech-act as a whole can always be criticized as invalid from three perspectives: as untrue ... as untruthful ... and as not right."¹⁹ But are these the *only* three validity claims that speech acts make? In his earlier article, "Theories of Truth," Habermas writes, "I want to defend the view that there are at least *four* classes of equally primordial validity-claims, and that these four—namely intelligibility, truth, rightness, and truthfulness—display a coherence that we can call rationality."²⁰ Apparently, in his later paper, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," Habermas believes that a class of validity claim is no longer significant for his theory of meaning. This is the intelligibility claim by which subjects aim at understanding through making intelligible "the pragmatic meaning of interpersonal relations (which can be expressed in the form of a performative sentence) as well as the meaning of the propositional content of their utterance."²¹ When the intelligibility of an utterance becomes problematic, according to Habermas, we raise questions such as "How should I understand that? What does that mean?" The answers to these questions are explications or interpretations.²² The illocutionary force with which such claims are made can be called "communicatives" (e.g., say, express, speak, ask, mention) which express the pragmatic meaning of utterances qua utterances.²³ These identify what an utterance is doing as a spoken organization of words. The "world" that a speaker would refer to in order to give reasons for the use of a certain word or a certain ordering of words, or to give reasons for the claim that an utterance is to be taken in a certain way or to have a certain effect, is the world of language, which provides the reasons for why the language used in an utterance functions the way that it does and produces a meaning that can be understood. In redeeming a claim to be intelligible, one reflects upon the utterance itself. In "Theories of Truth," an utterance whose intelligibility is problematic is *not* understood by Habermas as *ipso facto* a meaningless utterance or one that is impossible to understand and would bring communication to a halt. Instead, an initially unintelligible utterance may be one that is obscure and which requires deciphering.²⁴

In what follows, I will attempt to show that the intelligibility claim has an important status in speech which should not be neglected. My purpose will be to suggest that the omission of intelligibility as a claim is not innocuous and that the inclusion of such a claim could affect Habermas's current theory of communicative action.

III. INTELLIGIBILITY

In "Theories of Truth," Habermas already begins to differentiate intelligibility from the other validity claims. Although intelligibility is included among Habermas's list of four validity claims, it is described as *more* "primordial" than the other three. Habermas writes,

Truth-claims and rightness-claims function in everyday speech and interaction *as claims* that they are accepted with an eye to the *possibility* that if need be they *can* discursively be made good.²⁵ Intelligibility, on the contrary, as long as a communication in general proceeds undisturbed, presents a claim that has already factually been made good; it is not merely a promise.²⁶

Yet, this discussion of intelligibility is not adequate to distinguish it from the other claims made in communication. According to Habermas, validity-claims become the object of discussion when they appear to be problematic. What is redeemed in a theoretical discourse is the truth of a fact. He writes, "it is only when a particular bit of information is called into question and the content of the information is brought under discussion under the viewpoint of the possibility that something can be the case but also might not be the case that we speak about facts."²⁷ But, as long as communication proceeds undisturbed with respect to *any* class of claim, one assumes that the claim has already been factually made good. And, just as truth and rightness claims can be made problematic and the object of discourse, so indeed does intelligibility itself require redemption *within* communication.

Habermas's point here seems to be that the fact that there is communication is itself the validation of a claim to intelligibility. If utterances were unintelligible, there would just be no communication. But the fact that we can communicate about the intelligibility of an utterance implies that this is not so. If *all* utterances were unintelligible, then perhaps communication would come to a halt. But the same goes for situations in which all rightness claims are wrong. If I say that I am going to rob the bank, the intelligibility of my utterance here is the "condition" for the ensuing discourse over whether this is the right thing to do. But if I say that I am going to swim to the bank, it is the intelligibility of my utterance that now requires discursive explication. Intelligibility claims should be considered to be just as much "promises" for possible discursive redemption as claims to truth.

According to Habermas, our understanding of a speech act begins with the assumption that there are reasons which could be given to support it and that these reasons can be supplied

by the utterer. Habermas writes, "one would hardly know what it is to understand the meaning of an utterance if one did not know that the utterance can and should serve to bring about an agreement."²⁸ In other words, one must assume that a speaker means what she says and is capable of justifying her utterance in a way acceptable to another. One comes to understand the utterance when one knows how it was meant to bring about an agreement, and this can be decided intersubjectively through the raising of questions and the giving of reasons. It is in this way that Habermas can claim that intelligibility is a condition of communication. In order for *what* is meant by an utterance to be understood, it must be assumed that *something* was meant, that there is some content in the utterance that is understandable.

Habermas's view of the intelligibility of an utterance would then make it a part of our lifeworld, the taken-for-granted background within which we act. He writes of the lifeworld;

The fundamental background knowledge that must tacitly supplement our knowledge of the acceptability conditions of linguistically standardized expressions if hearers are to be able to understand their literal meanings, has remarkable features: It is an *implicit* knowledge that cannot be represented in a finite number of propositions; it is a *holistically structured* knowledge, the basic elements of which intrinsically define one another; and it is a knowledge that *does not stand at our disposition*, inasmuch as we cannot make it conscious and place it in doubt as we please.²⁹

Habermas would thus defend his later view that the intelligibility of an utterance should not be seen to be a validity claim by saying that only *by means of* intelligible utterances are we able to use language to make claims in the first place. The lifeworld provides the common background with respect to which speakers can make claims about the objective, social and subjective worlds. It is the "transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they can reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, or subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements and arrive at agreements."³⁰ This "site" consists of the language shared by the speakers with respect to which they cannot achieve the same distance as they can to the totality of facts, norms, and experiences about which they can achieve mutual understanding.

Habermas's point is that an utterance, which is the *use* of language, cannot itself make explicit the language that is being used in the utterance. It cannot become an "intersubjective object." In order for language to be able to be *used* to make a redeemable claim, its function as a medium able to convey the shared meanings of signs cannot be questioned.

But what happens when words or sounds come out of a speaker's mouth that are bizarre or perhaps incomprehensible? Here we must ask what was meant in such an utterance, for surely it is not what was said. Or we must ask what was said, for surely it cannot be what was meant. It seems that in situations such as these, a claim is made that these sounds be rendered intelligible.³¹ Along with the intersubjective communication required to reach an understanding on claims of truthfulness, truth and rightness, claims to intelligibility, to there being something intelligible in what the speaker says, can also be the subject of discourse to the extent that agreement can be reached on the meaningful formation of the uttered words.

The world of reasons to which the speakers must refer in order to support such a claim to intelligibility is what I call the world of language itself. Once it becomes clear that the claim to intelligibility is a validity claim in communicative action just as are the claims to truth, truthfulness, and rightness, then the domain referred to for its validation is that of language. By the world of language, I mean that world which makes it possible to form any utterance at all. It is what makes it possible to distinguish an utterance from mere arbitrary sounds. This is not the social world of linguistic norms that might be represented in a dictionary or grammar book, since these norms would merely refer to isolated aspects of an utterance. Rather, it is the world that makes it possible to understand the meaning of an utterance as a linguistic unity.³² For example, whether or not a pun, a joke, an ironic statement, or an allegory is intelligible in an utterance can be intersubjectively redeemed by referring to the linguistic forms into which language can be shaped as well as to the way an utterance can highlight and even alter an aspect of the context in which it is spoken. Whether or not an insult is intelligible can also be intersubjectively redeemed by making explicit the meaning of a word or expression and the history which has endowed it with a certain pejorative force.

Habermas writes to such linguistically obscure utterances that "the linguistic construction of a fictive reality, wit and irony, transposed and paradoxical uses of language, allusions and the contradictory withdrawal of validity claims at a metacommunicative level—all these accomplishments rest on intentionally confusing modalities of being."³³ But this is not quite right. Habermas here implies that understanding these utterances would require discourse about the *intentions* of the speaker, about what she actually meant in confusing these modalities of being (such as a discourse which would decide whether someone wanted to tell the truth and describe reality or to tell an entertaining story). These intelligible uses of language, however, should not be understood merely with re-

spect to the subjective world of *intentions* of a speaker, but chiefly with respect to the world of language itself. I can be ironic, witty, or paradoxical in my speech *without* intending to be. The discursive redemption of the intelligibility of such utterances will not appeal to my intentions, or to the social or objective world, but to the forms of language to which these tropes pertain.

Making language itself a world and a reference system for that *about which* mutual understanding is possible, distinguishes it from the lifeworld which is constitutive for understanding *as such*. The intelligibility of an utterance should thus not be considered to be the condition of communication or the taken for granted background in which we act—this condition could perhaps be said to be language itself *before* it is used *in* speech and before a meaning is claimed to be intelligible in it. Intelligibility is therefore not a condition for communication. Indeed, it is only when language is put into use (that is, formally presented) that there can be a question of intelligibility at all. Instead, the condition for communication is just the mere existence of a language. In fact, if communication is understood as a process of making meaning intelligible in an utterance, then it can be said that communication presupposes the possibility of unintelligible utterances as much as intelligible ones.

The claim to intelligibility is the claim that an utterance is formed out of language in a specific way so that it can serve some communicative use. The claim to be intelligible is redeemed by analyzing the utterance with respect to the possible linguistic formations that can be found in it. If “understanding an expression means knowing how one can make use of it in order to come to an understanding with someone about something,”³⁴ then the understanding of an utterance must also involve deciphering what is intelligible *in* it in order for those involved to be able to come to an understanding that something funny, ironic, or offensive was said. A claim to intelligibility should thus be considered to be a claim that is equally contestable and just as much open to discursive verification as the other three validity claims that Habermas describes. The claim to be intelligible, like the other three validity claims, has its own world, that of language, to which we refer when we want to make intersubjectively valid such a claim.

What is found to be “valid” in the claim to be intelligible concerns, in the first instance, language itself, and not the worlds of intentions, objects, and norms. We do in fact make such claims to be intelligible, to phrase language in our speech by the very act of speaking. And this phrasing can be made comprehensible to all through the giving of reasons; for example, the reasons why someone saying “iced ink” is funny, or

why calling someone a "W.O.P." is offensive. Yet, the speaker has no "privileged access" to the reasons for the intelligibility of her claim. Words have come out of my mouth.³⁶ Although I may claim that they are intelligible, once they are uttered they are in the nonsubjective territory of language. Unlike subjective intentions for the truthfulness of an utterance, my reasons for why my utterance is intelligible are no better by virtue of being mine. In everyday discourse, if nothing remotely funny is intelligible in my utterance, my claim to have spoken with wit cannot be redeemed.

Habermas implicitly refers to the intelligibility claim in another early article when he writes; "speech is the medium of communication which already presupposes a tacit consensus about what it means to communicate and an awareness of the possibility of misunderstanding, as well as of error and deception."³⁶ The tacit consensus built upon the possibility of misunderstanding is the agreement to be intelligible in our utterances, to be as clear as possible so that our utterances can be understood. The possibility of misunderstanding points to not only the possibility that one might not understand the intentions of another's speech, but to the fact that the utterance itself can be understood in many different ways. That an utterance can be understood in different ways, that many different meanings can be intelligible in one utterance, makes it *prima facie* obscure or unintelligible. What it means to communicate, therefore, involves being aware that various meanings can be intelligible in one's utterance and being prepared to discuss which meaning should in fact be attributed to it. Indeed, here again one can say that the possibility of *unintelligibility* is just as much a "condition of communication" as is intelligibility, since it is with respect to this possibility (as well as that of error and deception) that the consensus about communication is made.

If we assume that Habermas was once aware of the problem of misunderstanding and of systematically distorted communication, we must now ask why, then, in his recent "Theory of Meaning," he no longer refers to the claim to intelligibility to which it would relate?

I believe that the reason for dropping the claim to intelligibility from his "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning" is that language and its structures cannot themselves become objects of understanding in speech if Habermas is to say that language is the "medium" through which people come to reach an understanding, and that the telos of reaching understanding is "inherent in linguistic structures."³⁷ Habermas writes,

Orientations and action processes are at first egocentrically tailored to the various actors, but communicative "switching" via candidly executed illocutionary acts places (actors) under the

structural limitations of an intersubjectively shared language. The telos of reaching understanding, inherent in linguistic structures, compels the communicative actors to alter their perspective.... (The) grammatical form of the performative sentence mirrors the attitude of a speaker who takes up an interpersonal relationship with a hearer in order to reach an understanding with him about something, whereby the speaker is reflexively oriented to the possibility that the hearer may dispute the validity of what was said.³⁸

But if the grammatical form of the performative is unintelligible, no one knows what position to take. If one does not even know whether it is an intentional utterance, then one does not know how to find reasons for redeeming it, or if there are any reasons at all. Here, the understanding of the utterance involves not "knowledge of what makes it acceptable,"³⁹ but an interpretation of what the utterance is saying in the first place.⁴⁰ What is agreed to with respect to the intelligibility of an utterance is an acceptable interpretation of what it is saying. But unlike social norms or the objective world, or even truthfulness which, according to Habermas, "must show up in (a speaker's) actions if only we interact with him long enough,"⁴¹ the reasons through which what is intelligible in an utterance could be agreed upon are only other utterances which are potentially just as open to different interpretations as the utterance that is being contested. If this is so, then the language used in an utterance cannot be the "transcendental" medium for reaching agreement as Habermas claims. Here, language itself becomes an object and calls for yet another ground which could provide the basis for agreement *about it*—a ground which itself would also involve the utterances of communicators.

IV. THE POETIC FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

There is another, more obvious, reason why Habermas no longer finds it necessary to include the claim to intelligibility in his theory of meaning: questions of intelligibility are irrelevant to meaning as Habermas now construes it. For Habermas, what is *intelligible* in an utterance is not the same as what one *means* by it. Let us take a paradoxical statement as an example, for instance, "a man is a woman." One does not say that the *meaning* of such an utterance is *that* it is paradoxical, the sentence just *is* paradoxical, and it can be so without having been meant to be. Perhaps Habermas could say that a paradox is intelligible *in* the utterance, but that the form of an utterance does not constitute its meaning.⁴² Nevertheless, it would be difficult to argue that a paradoxical utter-

ance has no meaning. Indeed, often an utterance is meaningful *because* it is paradoxical. But, of course, that would be to talk of meaning in an altogether different sense than that which Habermas construes.

Because claims to intelligibility pertain to language itself and not to states of affairs, they are not claims that can be redeemed when one understands the “meaning” of an utterance in Habermas’s sense, i.e., the subjective, objective, or social conditions that would make it acceptable. Instead, they are claims that are redeemed when one attempts to understand how the specific form of an utterance works to produce certain effects on a listener. In such a case, one attends to an utterance not as that which can represent something in the world or that through which an intention is transmitted, but as something in itself which directly confronts the communicators and can evoke a range of interpretations.

But perhaps this type of claim is accounted for by Habermas in his discussion of poetic language. Habermas writes,

insofar as language occurs in *communicative functions*, it has to produce relations between linguistic expression and speaker, hearer, and the state of affairs represented However, when language fulfills a poetic function, it does so in virtue of a reflexive relation of the linguistic expression to itself. Consequently, reference to an object, informational content, and truth value—conditions of validity in general—are extrinsic to poetic speech; an utterance can be poetic to the extent that it is directed to the linguistic medium itself, to its own linguistic form.⁴³

In this way, the “world-creating” discourse of poetry and literature and not the world(s)-referring discourse of communicative action could be said to be what Habermas would describe as discourse concerning the “intelligibility” of an utterance. Habermas writes that “the space of fiction that is opened up when linguistic forms of expression become reflexive results from suspending illocutionary binding forces and those idealizations that make possible a use of language oriented toward mutual understanding.”⁴⁴ In other words, one can say that in focusing on the “intelligibility” of an utterance we “suspend” or do not take into account its expressive, regulative, or constative force. We assume that a claim is being made other than a claim to truthfulness, rightness, or truth. Here the world to which we refer is not the subjective, social, or objective world, but is another world altogether. It is the world of language in which “words stand out as words (even as sounds) rather than being at once assimilable meanings.”⁴⁵

It is important to recognize that in the previous paragraph, “intelligibility” had to be discussed with the use of scare

quotes. For what Habermas means by "poetic language" is precisely the opposite of what he means by intelligibility. Intelligibility, for Habermas, as I have shown, is a *condition* of communication. The poetic function of language is here described in *contradistinction* to communication. Yet, insofar as a claim to intelligibility is a claim that can be redeemed with respect to an understanding of how language itself functions as language (and not merely as a medium for expressing intentions or referring to objects), discursively making good such an utterance would require the same attention to language that one gives to literary language. It would seem, then, that making explicit the "condition" of communication (that an utterance be well formed), becomes, for Habermas, literary discourse. When this condition is not called into question, discourse proceeds according to the mechanisms of communicative action. But the fact that intelligibility, which for Habermas is the linguistic condition for communicative action, can, in fact, be called into question, implies that what Habermas considers to be the foundation for communicative action is not as stable as he claims. And, if the questioning of this condition, the request for a further condition or justification of intelligibility, involves us in a discourse other than that of communicative action, then it is possible that communicative action, which "interrupts" strategic interaction, can itself be interrupted. The fact that language itself can become the object of discourse implies that it can just as easily be the condition for the possibility of misunderstanding as that of understanding.⁴⁶

Habermas writes, "To the degree that the poetic world disclosing function of language gains primacy and structuring force, language escapes the structural constraints and communicative functions of everyday life."⁴⁷ I believe, however, that it is *with respect to* the structural constraints and communicative functions of everyday life as Habermas has described them, that the force of the poetic function of language can be revealed. Indeed, can Habermas really claim that my communicating something, such as irony, wit, anxiety, or despair in my speech is really a use of language that "escapes the ... communicative functions of everyday life"? This use of language is in fact created by these functions and manifests itself precisely when they constrain everyday communication and make it problematic. Habermas writes, "often we lack the words to say what we feel; and this in turn places the feelings themselves in a questionable light." But the relation of feelings to language is not merely that we are uncertain of the nature of those feelings that we cannot express in words. I believe that the intractability of words and our difficulties in using words as a medium to convey exactly what we mean can create the moods that are inadvertently expressed in our

speech—moods which do not originate in our vague subjective feelings, but which are the result of the awareness that language is not adequate to express them. The despair or anxiety that often is communicated in our speech can be understood to be that very frustration with those structural linguistic constraints of everyday life which demand that we be able to provide acceptable reasons for our claims. Poetic use of language is not an escape from the structural constraints of everyday life, but is the effect of being trapped within them. Irony, for example, is often intelligible in our speech when the communicative situation constrains us from “literally” representing a state of affairs.

The reference to the world of language in order to understand the intelligibility of an utterance is no more outside the communicative functions of everyday life than is the reference to the world of objects to understand a truth-claim. Attention to the linguistic medium itself does not deny everyday communicative functions of their force. Often such attention is what gives communication its force. In conclusion, I believe that discussion about the intelligibility of an utterance is not only that which occurs in literary criticism, it should also be considered to be part of our communication.

V. CONCLUSION

If it is possible to discursively redeem the intelligibility of an utterance through the giving of reasons regarding the structures and workings of language, then the dropping of the claim to intelligibility in Habermas’s “Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning,” might be seen as a mere oversight that would only require some technical modifications.⁴⁸ But if, as Habermas claims, rationality is intrinsic to the structures of language-use itself, then it would seem that questioning the structures of our utterances would either involve a questioning of rationality, or the positing of a distinction between rationality and language. According to Habermas, rationality is embedded in the communicative use we make of language. Making an utterance implies being prepared to back up the claims implicit in it through the giving of reasons such that another can become convinced of the utterance’s validity. Habermas writes,

communicative action distinguishes itself from strategic action through the fact that successful action coordination is not traced back to the purposive rationality of action orientations but to the rationally motivating force of achieving understanding, i.e., to a rationality that manifests itself in conditions for communicatively reached agreements. The manner in which mutual understanding in language functions as a mechanism for coordinating action is

that the participants in an interaction agree about the validity claimed for their speech acts, that is, they recognize criticizable validity claims intersubjectively.⁴⁹

For Habermas, the possibility of rationally reaching understanding is embedded in the structures of language, since our use of language commits us to being able to intersubjectively redeem the validity of our utterances. Language thus becomes the condition for the manifestation of rationality; by using language our rationality becomes manifest.

But what happens if language has a "rationality" of its own? What happens when we consider that language does not necessarily function according to our intent, as a medium through which our implicit rationality manifests itself, but that language can function on its own, and can sometimes work against us? If language is not the *medium* through which our claims to truth, truthfulness and rightness can be rationally made good, but is instead itself a world to which we appeal in giving reasons for a validity claim, then rationality cannot be intrinsic to the use of language, but must be outside of and contingent to it.

Since the claim to intelligibility is a claim made with respect to language itself, one's own subjective reasons for what is to be found intelligible in one's speech will not suffice to make it intelligible. This implies that one must always be aware that one does not have complete control over how one's utterance will be understood. Thus, even if the *original mode* of language use is the use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding,⁵⁰ this orientation must presuppose the ever present possibility of misunderstanding—that the interpretation of an utterance can be other than what is intended by the speaker, and that the *use* of language is dependent on language itself, which might not succumb so easily to being "used." In this way, communicative action can be said to be parasitic upon the possibility that one can be influenced by an unintended and unforeseen understanding of one's speech—including the possibility that language can indeed be manipulated and used strategically.⁵¹

NOTES

¹ Jürgen Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. W. M. Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 57–87.

² Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 73.

³ Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol 1, T. McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 297.

⁴ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 287.

⁵ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 74.

⁶ "Verständigung." As Earling Skjei has noted in "A Comment on

Performative, Subject and Proposition in Habermas's Theory of Communication," *Inquiry* 28 (1985): 87–105. Habermas seems to play on "the fact that the concept of *Verständigung* is ambiguous. Its minimal meaning is that at least two persons understand a linguistic expression in the same way. Its maximal meaning is that two persons reach a rationally based agreement" (104n3). To this, Habermas, in his "Reply to Skjei," *Inquiry* 28 (1985): 105–112, replies, " '*Verständigung* ' is the name I give to the mechanism that actually coordinates actions forming an interaction," (106). "*Verständigung*" in Habermas's usage is thus to be understood in the pragmatic sense of a mutual understanding (or agreement) that is to be achieved between speakers and not merely as an understanding of something that speakers already happen to have in common.

⁷ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 86, note 33.

⁸ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 288.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," in Helmut Fahrenbach, (Hrsg.) *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion* (Neske: Pfullingen., 1973), 220 (translations are mine).

¹⁰ Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 221.

¹¹ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 65.

¹² Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 65.

¹³ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 67.

¹⁴ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 74.

¹⁵ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 75.

¹⁶ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 78.

¹⁷ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 79.

¹⁸ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 81.

¹⁹ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 77.

²⁰ Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 220.

²¹ Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 220.

²² Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 221.

²³ Thomas McCarthy, "A Theory of Communicative Competence," *Philosophy and Social Science* 3 (1973): 135–156, 138. McCarthy is here referring to Habermas' article "Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der Kommunikativen Kompetenz," *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie—Was Leistet die Systemforschung?* (Frankfurt-Main, 1971), 101–141.

²⁴ The claim to intelligibility is also present in Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* as what becomes the subject of explicative discourse. Habermas writes, "*explicative discourse* is a form of argumentation in which the comprehensibility, well-formedness, or rule correctness of symbolic expressions is no longer contested, but is thematized as a controversial claim" Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 22.

²⁵ Habermas also differentiates truthfulness claims from truth claims and rightness claims. For Habermas, someone's claim to be truthful cannot be redeemed discursively, but can only be shown through his actions if we interact with him long enough. Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 221.

²⁶ Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 222.

²⁷ Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 216.

²⁸ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 78.

²⁹ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 336.

³⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol 2, T.

McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 126.

³¹ See, Jonathan Culler, "Communicative Competence and Normative Force," *New German Critique* 35 (1985), 139. Culler here suggests the norm of "significance" as opposed to that of truth with respect to his example of a line of poetry. He writes, "What are the most basic conditions of understanding that can be identified through examples of this sort? The primary norm seems to be the assumption of significance: not that something true is being said or that some speaker could prove evidence for what is asserted, but that there is something worth attending to here." I want to argue (as I believe does Culler) that this norm should be extended to pertain not only to poetry but to any utterance.

³² See here Schatzki's "relatively neutral" description of linguistic meaning; "The meaning of a sentence is what a sentence says. It is what is specified by answers to questions such as, 'What did you say?' 'What does that mean?' and so on. Answers to such questions explicate meanings by providing words, the understanding of which is tantamount to or facilitates understanding. Questions about the meanings of words or sentences are requests that the understanding of these words and sentences be analyzed, paraphrased, and explicated in terms of other already understood sentences and words. So the concept of linguistic meaning, of semantic content, of what a sentence says, identifies the immediate, usually transparent, intellectual presence of spoken and written words which is bestowed upon language by understanding, the latter being that by means of which language coordinates, establishes, and expresses people's lives and relations between them." Theodore Schatzki, "The Rationalization of Meaning and Understanding: Davidson and Habermas," *Synthese* 69 (1986), 55.

³³ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 331.

³⁴ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 78.

³⁵ See here John McCumber's discussion of "blurts." John McCumber, *Poetic Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 343. According to McCumber, "blurts and ambiguities thus constitute two cases that Habermas's analysis does not cover: two limits to that analysis." For McCumber, these are cases of utterances whose meaning is not dependent on the intentions or "subjective world" of a speaker.

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, "A Theory of Communicative Competence," *Inquiry* 13 (1970), 370.

³⁷ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 81.

³⁸ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 81.

³⁹ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 296.

⁴⁰ See here Schatzki, "Rationalization of Meaning and Understanding," 66-67.

⁴¹ Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," 221.

⁴² In fact, Habermas opens "Toward a Critique of a Theory of Meaning" with the statement, "A theory of meaning should answer the question: what is it to understand the sense of a—well formed—symbolic expression?" (1992), 57. What exactly is implied by presupposing that an utterance be "well formed" is precisely what is at issue in this paper.

⁴³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1987), 200.

⁴⁴ Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 204.

⁴⁵ Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 200. Habermas is here citing Geoffrey Hartman.

⁴⁶ I therefore disagree with Wood's claim that "Culler is no doubt correct that Habermas has not yet provided a theory of language suitable for accounting for literary speech acts. But he has not shown that this is any defect in Habermas's program as it stands, but at most an omission to be made good in it," Allen Wood, "Habermas's Defense of Rationalism," *New German Critique* 35 (1985), 155. I believe that Culler's point is not merely to provide a "counterexample" to Habermas's *Verstandigung*'s-thesis which would show that the poetic use of language is just as, or more, primary to our use of language as that of reaching understanding. Instead, Culler wants to point out an aspect of the language we use *as such* as an "uncanny, rhetorical, inhuman force" ("Communicative Competence and Normative Force," 143), that can be said to be just as inherent in linguistic structures as is the possibility of reaching understanding. I believe that it is with respect to this point, that there is always an uncontrollability in the language we use that the best argument is made against Habermas's grounding of communicative action in the structures of language. It is with respect to this point that it does seem as if Habermas is relying more on an argument based on the subjective attitudes and intentions of speakers than on the "structural properties" of communicative action to prove that language is originally used with an orientation towards understanding. In other words, Habermas seems to be saying that we use language with the *intention* of achieving understanding, but he has not yet proved that it is a structural property of *language use* that achieving understanding is inherent within it. On this point see Skjei, 92-93.

⁴⁷ Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 204.

⁴⁸ Maeve Cooke, *Language and Reason* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), has taken this approach. She discusses types of validity claims other than those of truth, truthfulness and normative rightness such as the validity claims raised by aesthetic works which refer to a potential for "disclosing truth," 79ff. Cooke concludes that "it seems that participants in everyday communicative action raise not just three but many different kinds of validity claim. However ... this conclusion need not be a cause for concern, for it in no way undermines Habermas's endeavor to redress the logocentric bias of traditional conceptions of reason; indeed, it seems to point toward a genuinely multi-dimensional as opposed to three dimensional conception of reason. If this is so, we can conclude that nothing depends on the formulation of Habermas's further thesis as the thesis that with every speech act the speaker raises three kinds of claim simultaneously," 94. For Cooke, "one of the main aims of Habermas's formal pragmatic investigations is to redress the logocentric balance of philosophy by showing that rational action and rational processes of justification are possible in more than just one dimension of human experience The suggestion that everyday language use makes reference to not three but *many* different kinds of validity claim simply means that his proposed three-dimensional notion of reason will have to be understood in a more multi-dimensional way," 83. It has been my aim in this paper, however, to argue that the redemption of a validity claim made with reference to the intelligibility of the language used in an utterance is not necessarily rational. That is, it does not involve the giving of reasons which could lead to an agreement on what is said. Instead, if the intelligibility of an utterance can be put into question, then language itself becomes the *obstacle* for reaching an agreement. In other words, the more "dimensions" one adds to Habermas's conception

of reason, the more one risks eliminating the distinction between communicative and strategic action which his theory of meaning (that rationality is inherent in our use of language) is meant to justify.

⁴⁹ Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," 80.

⁵⁰ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 288.

⁵¹ I would like to thank Anthony Adler, Edgar Boedeker, Thomas McCarthy, and José Medina for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.