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The following two extracts are from the opening section of

## **HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS**

**by**

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that husbands are oftentimes backward in comprehending the indirect speech acts of their wives. This phenomenon is very widespread, and cannot fail to have been already noticed, at least here and there, by others. Yet I have found attention paid to it specifically only in the writings of some of our novelists. There seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, but I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom, so common with critics, as to suppose that no truths are to be found there, as a moment's consideration of the following example will show.

A wife might say to her husband: "My dear, have you heard that the house across the fields is let at last?", and her husband might reply that he had not.

"But it is," she might return. "Do you not want to know who has taken it?"

"You want to tell me. What is his name?"

"Biggles."

"A most unfortunate name. Is he married or single?"

"Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? How can it affect them?"

"My dear, you must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

Now, whilst this example is perhaps disappointing, in so far as the husband is pretending in an unworthy fashion to misunderstand what is neither obscure nor

difficult, it is by no means easy to distinguish the true function of even statements or questions from the few jejune grammatical marks available.

[.....]

The first error and the worst is plain enough: it lies in the failure to recognise that the purpose and intent of a disclosure lies not in its grammar but in its relation to its truth and relevance, and this in its turn is a model of neither steadiness nor constancy. To catch and comprehend the exact truth of a whole utterance, that strict adherence to truth and principle, which a man should display in every transaction of his life, is hardly possible. Any utterance is, we might say, a rough description, and capable of bearing most rough usage.

Many further examples could justify this point and lay it down as a general rule. On one hand, the mistress of a school might say to her pupils, "Italy is shaped like a boot", and we might think this true enough and good enough for a school pupil, if not for a sea-farer sailing round its coast. On the other, an aunt, however beloved for the friendliness of her heart, would be tiresome indeed if one had to listen to the true description of exactly how little bread and butter she ate for breakfast, and how small a slice of mutton for dinner.

It is now expedient to give some principle and system to the description of these observations, that the reader may be able to judge in what manner this view of human discourse might meet his approbation.