

**Phil 435: Philosophy of Language**

**[Handout 4]**  
Austin & Searle  
The Speech Act Theory

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**§ Background**

**I. The Linguistic Turn**

\_\_\_ It began with Frege at the turn of the century.

\_\_\_ The Logical Positivist movement, influenced by Frege through Russell, Carnap, and Wittgenstein, had propagated the view that the study of linguistic meaning was the proper starting point for philosophy. Language and meaning were supposed to elicit initial agreement better than other traditional starting points.

**II. Pre-1950s**

**Logical Positivism**

**A. The Principle of Verification**

\_\_\_ The meaning of a sentence is its method of verification or confirmation.

**B. The Principle of Analyticity**

\_\_\_ Statements of logic and mathematics, together with statements that spell out meaning relations, are true purely in virtue of their meaning and provide no information about the world. They are called analytic statements.

**Therefore,**

**For a statement to be cognitively meaningful, it must satisfy one of the following conditions: Either**

- a. it is an analytic truth or falsehood (self-contradictory statements), or
- b. it is capable of being verified as true or false by experiential means (procedures which ultimately can be reduced to what can be directly ascertained to be true or false by means of the senses).

\_\_\_ **Most philosophical claims are meaningless by this standard, since they lack methods of verification.**

**III. 1950s**

\_\_\_ **Quine's rebuttal: Two Dogmas of Empiricism**

**Quine's claim:**

\_\_\_ There is no ground for claiming that analytic statements are vacuously true, with no dependence on the way the world is. “Our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually, but only as a corporate body.”

\_\_\_ The web of sentences (confirmation holism): sentences cannot be confirmed or falsified singularly, they can be confirmed or falsified *only in relation to other sentences*, in the context of theories.

**The overthrow of Logical Positivism marks the beginning of the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind.**

**IV. 1950's-1960's: Pragmatics (speech act, utterances, etc.)**

**V. 1960's-1970's: Semantic (meaning, reference, truth, etc.)**



**J. L. Austin**

***Performative Utterances (1961)***

Austin's primary target was the verificationist presumption that the only meaningful sentences are those which express true or false statements, together with the supplementary error that if we are to regard a sentence as meaningful we must find some way of cramming it into the mold of 'descriptive' statement.

Austin concentrates on a category of non-descriptive sentences which he labels 'performative utterances', or just 'performative.' Such utterances do not describe or report anything; they cannot be true or false.

**§ A challenge to the Verificationist**

**[Verificationism]:**

**\_\_\_ Any non-analytic declarative statement must be either verifiable or falsifiable *n* principle to be a meaningful sentence; otherwise, it is simply nonsense.**

E.g. ‘An invisible gardener is tending the garden.’

**“descriptive fallacy”:**

**\_\_\_ It is a fallacy to treat all utterances as declarative statements and view those that don't have a truth value as nonsensical.**

**§ The \* different uses of language” movement**

**\_\_\_ There are as many as infinite uses of language, for instance, some statements are made to influence people; some are made to let off steam, etc..**

**\_\_\_ We need a framework in which to discuss these uses of language.**

§ Performative:

\_\_\_ a kind of utterance which looks like a statement and grammatically would be classified as a statement, which is not nonsensical and yet is not true or false.

\_\_\_ When a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something.

Examples:

I do (take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife).

I apologize.

I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.

I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.

\* It is absurd to regard the thing that I say as a report of the performance of the action. In saying what I do, I actually *perform that action*.

Q: What is the difference between reporting a performance and performing itself?

\_\_\_ In contrast: 'I named that ship Queen Elizabeth. I married that woman. I apologize to him. I made a bet with him.'

§ Implicature of the performative

\_\_\_ saying these things does very often imply that certain things are true and not false.

Example: I do.

\_\_\_ I am not already married.

Q: What else?

§ Infelicity of the performative

→ Statements are to be true or false; performative utterances are to be felicitous or infelicitous.

\_\_\_ The various ways in which a performative utterance may be unsatisfactory are called the infelicities.

\_\_\_ An infelicity arises (i.e. the utterance is unhappy) if

\_\_\_ a) **[rule]**: certain rules, transparently simple rules, are broken.

\_\_\_ b) **[sincerity]**: when the speaker is insincere.

\_\_\_ c) **[consistency]**: when the performative utterance commits the speaker to future conduct of a certain description and then in the future he does not behave in the expected way.

[A]. Rules governing the performative:

[1] The convention invoked must exist and be accepted.

\*Q: What is the importance of convention?

\_\_\_ It is obvious that the conventional procedure which by utterance we are purporting to use must actually exist.

\*Q: Why? What would happen if there weren't such a convention?

[This provides a support for Wittgenstein's theory of the language-game.]

**[2] The circumstances in which we purport to invoke this procedure must be appropriate for its invocation.**

\_\_\_ the right object, the right circumstance, the right procedure, etc.

\* **Examples:**

\_\_\_ Saying "I divorce you" in public does not succeed in divorcing in our country.

**[B]. Insincerity:**

e.g. 'I congratulate you' when I don't mean it; 'I promise' when I don't intend to carry it out.

\***Q: What does this do to our performance? Does it invalid it?**

\_\_\_ Austin: We should not say that I didn't in fact promise, but rather that I did promise but promised insincerely; I did congratulate you but the congratulations were hollow.

**[C]. Inconsistency:**

e.g. I say "I welcome you" but then proceed to treat you as though you were exceedingly unwelcome.

\***Q: How is this different from insincerity?**

(They are not mutually exclusive; they never are. The list is also not exhaustive.)

**The way we should classify infelicities in different cases will be perhaps rather a difficult matter, and may even in the last resort be a bit arbitrary.**

**[D]. Misunderstanding**

\_\_\_ You may not hear what I say or you may understand me to refer to something different from what intended to refer to.

\*Q: Should complete understanding (the hearer gets the intention of the speaker) be a requisite of the "felicity" of performative?

**[E]. Non-responsibility**

\_\_\_ There is a general overriding consideration that, as we are performing an act when we issue these performative utterances, we may of course be doing so under duress or in some other circumstances which make us not entirely responsible for doing what we are doing.

**§ The Grammatical Criterion for Performative**

\_\_\_ **[1] The utterance begins with the verb in the**

**first person**  
**singular** (What about 'We promise.?.')  
**present tense**  
**indicative**  
**active voice**

\_\_\_ [2] **There is a typical asymmetry between the use of this person and tense of the verb and the use of the same verb in other persons and other tenses.**

Q: What is the asymmetry that Austin talks about here?

\_\_\_ "When we say "I promise that..." we do perform an act of promising.... What we do no do is to report on somebody's performing an act of promising. But if I say 'He promises," or in the past tense "I promised," I precisely do report on an act of my own."

**Exceptions:**

\_\_\_ "Passengers are warned to cross the line by the bridge only"

\_\_\_ "You are hereby authorized to do so-and-so."

**We still can't possibly suggest that every utterance which is to be classed as a performative has to take one or another or these two standards forms.**

\_\_\_ Example: 'This bull is dangerous'; 'Dangerous bull'; 'Bull'; 'You are hereby warned that this bull is dangerous'

\_\_\_ Or: 'Watch out!'

**§ The distinction between the performative and descriptions of the performative**

**We must distinguish between the function of making explicit what act is we are performing, and the quite different matter of stating what act it is we are performing.**

...to say "I promise that..." or 'I order you to...' is not to state that you are doing something, but makes it plain that you are -- it does constitute your verbal performance, a performance of a particular kind.

**§ Ambiguous Utterances:**

**Example: 'Hurrah!'; 'Damn!'**

\_\_\_ Q: Should these be classified as performative?

**Example: 'I am sorry'.**

\_\_\_ Q: Is it a performative like 'I apologize', or a description of the speaker's frame of mind like 'I feel awful about it'?

We often find cases in which there is an obvious pure performative utterance and obvious other utterances connected with it which are not performative but descriptive, but on the other hand a good many in between where we're not quite sure which they are. On some occasions of course they are obviously used the one way, on some occasions the other way, but on some occasions they seem positively to revel in ambiguity.

### § The Breakdown of the Distinction Between Performative and Statement:

In general we may remind ourselves that "I state that ..." does not look so very different from "I warn you that ..." or "I promise to ...". It makes clear surely that the act that we are performing is an act of stating, and so functions just like "I warn' or 'I order.' So isn't 'I state that ...' a performative utterance? But then one may feel that utterances beginning 'I state that ...' do have to be true or false, that they *are* statements."

**\* Q: How do we mark the line between a statement and a performative then?**

**[A] Statements can also be infelicitous (besides the question 'is it true or false?' we can also ask 'is it in order?')**

**Example: 'The cat is on the mat but I don't believe it is.'**

\_\_\_ Is it self-contradictory? Why not?

\_\_\_ Austin: it's like making a promise without the slightest intention of keeping it.

\_\_\_ Is it a false statement?

Austin thinks this statement is "nonsensical".

**Example:**

**(i) 'All John's children are bald but John hasn't got any children.'**

**(ii) 'All John's children are bald' --when John has no children but the speaker doesn't say so.**

\_\_\_ Q: How are these two statements different?

\_\_\_ A: (i) is making an outrageous utterance which is nonsensical; while (ii) is void for the lack of reference.

**➔ Stating, describing and reporting are also to be viewed as speech acts.**

**[B] Performative also has a general dimension of correspondence with fact.**

**e.g. how is the content of the verdict or estimate related to fact?**

### § Conclusion

'True' and 'false' are just general labels for a whole dimension of different appraisals which have something or other to do with the relation between what we say and the facts. If, then, we loosen up our ideas of truth and falsity we shall see that statements, when assessed in relation to the facts, are not so very different after all from pieces of advice, warnings, verdicts, and so on.

What we need besides the old doctrine about meanings is a new doctrine about all the possible forces of utterances, towards the discovery of which our proposed list of explicit performative verbs would be a very great help.



### **John Searle: The Structure of Illocutionary Acts**

John Searle developed a pragmatic view of communication in the late 1960's. Searle believed that a theory of language must be a theory of communication, and that language theory must analyze the communicative utterances in terms of their intentions. These intentions can be inferred through a series of conventional rules. In this sense, human communication is a rule-governed activity, and Searle attempts to discover the nature of these rules.

#### **§ The importance of speech act:**

\* It is not the token of the symbol or word or sentence, but the production of the token in the performance of the speech act that constitutes the basic unit of linguistic communication.

\* The production of the sentence token under certain conditions is the illocutionary act, and the illocutionary act is the minimal unit of linguistic communication.

#### **[Searle's argument]:**

1. For something to be an instance of linguistic communication, it must have been produced by a being with a certain intention.

\_\_\_ e.g. a drawing of Churchill's face on the sands by ants.

2. The production of a symbol with a certain intention is a speech act.

3. Therefore, to construe symbols under the category of linguistic communication necessarily involves construing their production as speech acts.

#### **§ Searle introduces speech act theory as follows:**

**(a) uttering words (morphemes, sentences ) = performing *utterance acts***

**(b) referring and predicating = performing *propositional acts***

**(c) stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc. = performing *illocutionary acts***

**(d) producing subjective effects on the hearer = performing *perlocutionary acts***

Illocutionary acts can be categorized according to their meaning or illocutionary point. As identified by Searle (1975) there are five fundamental illocutionary points:

#### **(1) Assertive: Statements, predictions**

— **The point is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition.**

e.g.: "This new technology shall revolutionize the computer industry..."

#### **(2) Commissive: Promises, agreements.**

— **Deals with a further course of action from the speaker (the speaker is committed to...) or hearer depending on the circumstances of the conversation.**

- \_\_\_ **Commissives are those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker (again in varying degrees) to some future course of action.**  
e.g.: In response to the question "can you help me with this?" a reply of "probably" or "I guess" would be a commissive speech act. Facial gestures with the intention of similar meaning also qualify.
- (3) Directive: Orders, requests.**
- \_\_\_ **The illocutionary point of these consists in the fact that they are attempts (of varying degrees) by the speaker to get the hearer to do something.**  
e.g.: "I'd like to buy that gray anorak, please."
- (4) Declaration: Stating a reality which affects the world by saying so.**
- \_\_\_ **Cases where one brings a state of affairs into existence by declaring it to exist, cases where "saying makes it so."**  
e.g.: "I am wearing a blue colored shirt today."
- (5) Expressive: Feelings and attitudes regarding a situation**
- \_\_\_ **The illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content.**  
e.g.: "I apologize for the other day."

It should be noted that speech acts take effect through mutual acknowledgment of the speaker and hearer that a speech act has been made. So if one were to say something and it was not heard by anyone it would not in this case justify a speech act until someone were to actually hear it.

## § Promise

**Q: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the illocutionary act of promising?**

**= What is the set of rules for the use of the function indicating device for promising?**

### Qualifications:

\_\_\_ I am confining my discussion to the center of the concept of promising and ignoring the fringe, borderline, and partially defective cases. I also confine my discussion to full-blown explicit promises and ignore promises made by elliptical turns of phrase, hints, metaphors, etc.

**In the utterance of  $T$ ,  $S$  sincerely (and nondefectively) promises that  $p$  to a hearer  $H$  if and only if:**

**(1) [normal input and output condition]: Normal input and output conditions obtain.**

\_\_\_ 'Output' covers the conditions for intelligible speaking and 'input' covers the conditions for understanding.

**(2) [propositional content condition]:  $S$  expresses that  $p$  in the utterance of  $T$ .**

**(3) [future act condition]: In expressing that  $p$ ,  $S$  predicates a future act  $A$  of  $S$ .**

**(4) [preferability condition]:  $H$  would prefer  $S$ 's doing  $A$  to his not doing  $A$ , and  $S$  believes  $H$  would prefer his doing  $A$  to his not doing  $A$ .**

\_\_\_ counterexample: "I promise that I'll give you a failing grade in the course"? Searle doesn't think this is a promise. 'I promise and I hereby promise are among the strongest function indicating devices for commitment provide by the English language. For that reason we often use these expressions in the performance of speech acts which are not strictly speaking promises but in which we wish to emphasize our commitment.'

\_\_\_ counterexample: "I promise you I didn't steal the money"? Searle: 'We can explain the occurrence of the function indicating device "I promise" as derivative from genuine promises and serving here as an expression adding emphasis to your denial.'

**(5) [non-triviality condition]: It is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *S* will do *A* in the normal course of events.**

\_\_\_ the act must have a point. 'It is out of order for me to promise to do something that it is obvious I am going to do anyhow. If I do seem to be among such a promise, the only way my audience can make sense of my utterance is to assume that I believe that it is not obvious that I am going to do the thing promised.'

**(6) [sincerity condition] *S* intends to do *A* .**

**(7) [essential condition]: *S* intends that the utterance of *T* will place him under an obligation to do *A* .**

\_\_\_ 'I think this condition distinguishes promises from other kinds of speech acts. It is clear that having this intention is a necessary condition of making a promise; for if a speaker can demonstrate that he did not have this intention in a given utterance, he can prove that the utterance was not a promise.'

**(8) [conventionality condition]: *S* intends that the utterance of *T* will produce in *H* a belief that conditions (6) and (7) obtain by means of the recognition of the intention to produce that belief, and he intends this recognition to be achieved by means of the recognition of the sentence as one conventionally used to produce such beliefs.**

\_\_\_ This captures our amended Gricean analysis of what it is for the speaker to mean to make a promise. The speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and he also intends this recognition to be achieved in virtue of the fact that the lexical and syntactical character of the item he utters conventionally associates it with producing that effect.

**(9) [semantics condition]: The semantical rules of the dialect spoken by *S* and *H* are such that *T* is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions (1) - (8) obtain.**

\_\_\_ This condition is intended to make clear that the sentence uttered is one which by the semantical rules of the language is used to make a promise.

### \*\*\* Insincerity:

\_\_\_ To allow for insincere promises we need only to revise our conditions to state that the speaker takes responsibility for having the beliefs and intentions rather than stating that he actually has them.

==> **(6\*) *S* intends that the utterance of *T* will make him responsible for intending to do *A***

## § Conclusion

There is not, as Wittgenstein... claimed, an infinite or indefinite number of language games or uses of language. Rather, the illusion of limitless uses of language is

engendered by an enormous unclarity about what constitutes the criteria for delimiting one language game or use of language from another. If we adopt illocutionary point as the basic notion on which to classify uses of language, then there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language: we tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes, and we bring about changes through our utterances. Often, we do more than one of these in the same utterance.

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**Focus Questions for Essay #3: [Answer both – write about 1 ½ page for each article]**

- (1) Davidson: Belief and the Basis of Meaning – What does Davidson mean by “radical interpretation and indeterminacy of interpretation”? How does this show that “Meaning and belief play interlocking and complementary roles in the interpretation of speech”? (Do not use internet quick references. Find his remark and explain it in your own words.)
- (2) Davidson: A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs – What does Davidson recommend as the correct way of interpreting another speaker’s sentences? Why does he claim that “there is no such thing as a language”?