

Phil/Ling 375: *Meaning and Mind*
[Handout #5]

J. L. Austin: Performative Utterances

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§ Main Theses

1. Some utterances are “performative” in that in making them, we perform a certain action—speech act.
2. Obvious cases of performative utterances include betting, christening, apologizing.
3. These statements are typically straightforward utterances, with ordinary verbs in the first person singular present indicative active, and yet they couldn’t possibly be true or false.
4. In general, stating something is performing an ac just as much as giving an order or giving a warning. Stating, describing and reporting are also to be viewed as speech acts.
5. What we need besides the old doctrine about meanings is a new doctrine about all the possible forces of utterances and different methods of evaluating the success (true or false, good or bad, justified or unjustified, etc.) of these utterances. We need a linguistic framework in which to discuss the various uses of language other than descriptive statements.

§ 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. E.g. the performative utterance

§ Performative Utterance

___ 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.

§ Infelicity of the performative

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

Declarative statements	True
	False
Performative utterances	Felicitous
	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.

___ When we say “I promise that...” we do perform an act of promising.... What we do not 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 standard 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’?

§ The Breakdown of the Distinction between Performative and Statement:

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

[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.

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

E.g. “We found the defendant guilty” — how is the content of the verdict related to fact?

§ Conclusion

1. ‘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.
2. If 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.
3. 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.