

Between Austin's Speech Acts and Performative Utterances

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Abstract. This paper is an attempt to delineate Austin's theory of speech acts which specifies the conditions, under which certain speeches can constitute 'speech act'. The theory of speech acts constitutes what J.L. Austin puts forward in his work "How to do things with Words", detailing the conditions that must be met for a given speech act to be performed felicitously. In this case, failures of felicity may lead to: misfires or abuses; which may be because, the person uttering such a felicitous speech lacks the authority to do so or he is an imposter. Austin later came up with a more general theory of speech acts, which include Locutionary, Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Acts.

1. Introduction

The first philosopher of language to initiate discussion on speech acts and performative utterances into philosophy was J. L. Austin (1912 – 1960), during the course of his 1955 William James Lectures at Harvard University. During these Lectures, it was obvious that Austin never intended the contributions he made in his theory of speech acts to be taken as a theory of meaning or what Bernard Harrison later prefers to call "the constitutive Mechanisms of a natural Language" (Harrison, B.; 1979, 168). Austin was not simply making the distinctions he made in our ordinary idioms just for the fun of it. Rather, Austin's primary aim was to debunk the verificationist's assumption that the only meaningful sentences are those which express true and false statements as well as to dispel their mistaken view that if

we are to regard any sentence as meaningful, then we must find some way of expressing it in the garb of descriptive statements, like, for instance, by taking promises to be statements expressing some kind of inner, mental state of commitment on the part of the promiser (Austin, J. L.;1962, Lecture 1). Against this, Austin launched a most powerful attack and pointed out that even grammatically indicative sentences are by no means always used in making statements; that their utterance may be proper otherwise than by being true; and 'infelicitous' in countless ways other than that of being false. He paid special attention to what he calls variously 'performative sentences', 'performative utterances', their varieties and peculiarities, that is, utterances always in the indicative mood, which have more of the character of action than statements, which are 'operative', by the making of which something is done.

Austin's theory of speech act is one of the main theories which attempt to identify the study of language as part of intentional action based on the fact that it is rule governed form of behavior and which tries to elucidate the rules in question. It is the objective of this paper to examine how Austin's philosophical understanding of performative verbs could serve as a theory of meaning that could do justice to the communicative and intentional aspects of language.

2. The Main Features of Performative Utterances

According to Austin, the main features of performative utterances are best explained by distinguishing them from such verbs which are mainly used to describe or to report state of affairs or something. For example, such verbs like:

- To write
- To work
- To eat or
- To look

These are verbs very frequently used to describe or to report that somebody is:

- Writing
- Working
- Eating or
- Looking at something.

All these verbs are frequently used in the first person progressive tense (see Paul Edwards: 1967, 5, 90) One can therefore give grammatically correct descriptive answers to such questions as: “what is it you are doing?”, when one says for example:

- I am writing
- I am working
- I am eating or
- I am looking at something.

These answers will be either true or false depending, of course, on the fact of the situation at hand, that is, whether or not I am doing any one of these things mentioned above, at the time I answered the questions.

When we compare those verbs with these other set of verbs, like:

- To invite
- To promise
- To swear
- To apologize
- To guarantee
- To name
- To plead, etc.

We will discover that these later set of verbs are non-descriptive when in use in their present tense. If, for instance, one is in a law-court

answering to some charges, he may say – “I swear I did not do it”. In this context, the sentence does not describe or report that one is swearing, it is used instead to swear. The sentence does not describe or report the performance of some act, but rather it is used to perform an act, “I swear ...”. The sentence ‘I swear ...’ has a performatory use and therefore, it is a performative utterance – within the context of use. The use of the sentence is his swearing. Utterances like these cannot be either true or false. Saying anyone of them constitutes performing some act or doing something. As performative utterances they are always in the first person present tense. Other sentences such as: “He invited” or “He was sworn-in”, are not performative utterances. Very frequently too, the use of such sentences are meant to report that the people talked about either invited or was sworn-in. As reports therefore, they are either true or false. In proper contexts the person who says: “I swear...” is not saying anything either true or false.

Although such performative utterances can be neither true nor false, Austin says that they can be “infelicitous”. According to Austin, infelicities can take the form of “misfires” or “abuses”; which go to show that the use of performative sentences does not always lead to the intended result, that is, to the performance of an act. If, for instance, Mr. Bello takes Miss Iyabo to the altar for marriage and says to her, “I do take you Miss Iyabo to be my lawful wedded wife”, what results as an act of that performative utterance – “I do take ... “ will be a happy wedlock. But as for Mr. Bello’s friend, who attempted, taking Mrs. Nathan equally to the Altar and says to her, “I do take you ...”, no marriage takes places, in which case, their marriage misfires because of the existence of a previous unannulled marriage involving Mrs. Nathan or it could be that their marriage was abused because the clergyman or the registrar who officiated at their wedding was an imposter. In this context, the right words were said but no marriage took place. Another situation may be the case where the conventions of speech – acting were abused; for instance, a promise was made in words, but because the promise was

made insincerely, it was, though still a promise, hollow and worthless.

3. Some Logical Distinction Between: “I shall do X” and “I promise to do X”.

Earlier in a famous essay on “Other Minds” [1946], where he introduced this concept of performative utterances, Austin tries to contrast the use of the sentence, “I know” with the performative utterance, “I promise”. In it, he holds that there is some logical distinction between saying: “I shall do X” and “I promise to do X”. In saying that “I shall do X”, I make known my intention; I inform others of my intention to do X. But in saying: “I promise to do X”, something much different takes place. According to Austin, “A new plunge is taken”, here; I have made a promise, which is like owing a debt. I have performed an act when compared with the earlier statement in which no act was performed but only disclosed my intention through the use of the sentence, “I shall do ...”

A similar logical distinction is seen between the use of the sentence: “I feel absolutely certain ...” or “I am fully convinced ...”, and saying: “I know ...”. Saying: “I feel absolutely certain ...”, may be seen as reporting the state of my psychological frame of mind. In that context, if my conviction proves to be wrong, I may be required to take the blame of being naïve, but not for having said something that is wrong, since I was in fact convinced for what I said. The story is different with the use of the sentence: “I know ...” To say that I know something automatically, places me in a position of authority or being in possession. The sentence: “I know ...” is not used to make a report or describe my psychological state. It has to be admitted here, that if what I claimed to know turns out not to be the case, then I have said something wrong. In that case I could not be said to know what I claimed to know. The use of the sentence: “I Know ...” is in many ways similar to the use of performative utterance. By saying: “I know ...”, I give other people my word; I give them also my authority for asserting the truth of the proposition I claimed to know.

4. Modification of His Earlier Distinction between Performative and Constatives Utterances:

In his William James Lectures, (which later was published posthumously in 1962 under the title: *How to do things with Words*,) Austin elaborates and modifies the earlier distinctions he made between performative utterances and utterances which he calls constatives, which are either true or false. Austin had at first supposed that performative utterances such as: “I promise to be there at 4, 00p. m.” was a special case, that is, a case in which to say something was also to do something, that is again, to perform an act. He had thought that such cases could be contrasted with more ordinary cases of simple utterances, like the sentence that: “the cat is on the mat”. But in the course of trying to make this contrast clearer and sharper, he came to the realization that while his original performative utterances were indeed special cases, they were not quite special in the way that he had supposed.

It was not that in those cases, to say something was also to do something, for this he now came to realize was true of every case of utterance; that is, that to say anything at all is always, not just sometimes, to do something, that is, to perform some “speech act”. The difference now is that, in the cases he had earlier considered, it is made more explicit in the utterances what speech act it is that the speaker is performing. This, indeed, like we mentioned above, is a special feature of certain utterances. More commonly, it is not to be discerned from the words alone what one who might utter those words on any particular occasion would be doing therein. But whatever is said, some speech act is performed. So what Austin required from this realization onwards was a general theory of Speech acts.

5. Locutionary, Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Acts:

There are, according to Austin, three types of acts standardly performed whenever one uses language, namely; Locutionary, Illocutionary

and Perlocutionary Acts. These three types of acts are characterized by Austin in the following manner:

[a] A Locutionary Act is an act of saying something; and to perform an act of saying something in the full sense of saying something is further analyzed into the simultaneous performance of a Phonic act, a Phatic act, and a Rhetic act:

(i) A **Phonic** act is that act of uttering certain sounds, and what is uttered a **Phone** .

(ii) A **Phatic** act, according to Austin, is the act of uttering certain vocables or words, that is, sounds of certain types belonging to a certain vocabulary, in a certain construction, that is, again, conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar, with a certain intonation and so on [Austin: 1962, 92ff].

(iii) A **Rhetic** act is the act of using the product of a phatic act, that is, a **Pheme** or its constituents with a certain more or less definite “reference”, which altogether are equivalent to “meaning”. Its product is a **Rheme**.

[b] Austin takes these three acts, that is, the Phonic act, the Phatic act, and the Rhetic act, as three aspects of the Locutionary act; that is, as the act of saying something in the full normal sense [Austin: 1962, 94]. When we say something, that is, when we are performing a Locutionary act, we still perform another sort of act, in this sense, we may be taken as fulfilling one or more communicative function(s): if, for instance, I say: “what is your name?” – I have performed a Locutionary act and I have also asked a question. So in performing a Locutionary act, we also succeed in performing such acts as asking questions, making promises, issuing warnings, making statements, expressing our intentions and so on. Acts of this nature were called by Austin, Illocutionary acts.

Generally, to perform a Locutionary act is also and *eo ipso* to perform an illocutionary act. Austin does not give us an explicit definition of illocutionary act. However, an illocutionary act may be taken as an act one simply performs in

saying something, in contrast to an act of saying something. Also there are certain illocutionary acts which can be performed by non-verbal means, but even here, the illocutionary act is an act one performs in doing something. For instance, in warning someone, you may be doing so and at the same time waving a stick or throwing a tomato. However, not every act one performs in saying something is an illocutionary act. For example, in making a joke, something may be said but they are not illocutionary acts [Austin: 1962, 104f; 121].

(c) Every Locutionary utterance has an illocutionary force. Saying something with a given illocutionary force, is *eo ipso* to perform an illocutionary act. Such illocutionary acts have practical effects: for instance, an advice is taken, or the passing of sentence results in the man being sent to prison; the uttering of the words: “I do take ...” of the marriage ceremony ties the nuptial knot of matrimony.

In bringing about these effects the speaker who performs the illocutionary act, of advising or pronouncing the sentence, also *eo ipso* performs what is called a Perlocutionary act; that is, he succeeds in convincing someone or in committing someone to jail. Generally, for any Locutionary utterance, besides having an illocutionary force, may have a Perlocutionary force, that is, the effect of an utterance upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the listeners or even of the speaker or of other persons. To affect, such feelings, thoughts or actions are to perform what we call a Perlocutionary act.

Philosophical interest in Performative verbs arose as we said at the beginning because they seem to offer counter-instance to the verificationist’s thesis that the only meaningful sentences are those which express true or false statements. Performatives, indeed, were distinguished from descriptive statements, by the fact that they could neither be true nor false, but could only be felicitous or infelicitous. Now, the realization is that stating or asserting anything at all in a speech situation – is not just sometimes but always an illocutionary act, which also and *eo ipso* count as performances of the Perlocutionary act with practical effects.

6. Some New Trends towards a Theory of Meaning

Finally, Austin's discussion of Performatives has been seen by some philosophers of Language to promise some new clues for looking at the theory of meaning, capable of doing justice to the communicative and intentional aspects of language. In this respect, they have tended to believe that perhaps the study of meaning ought simply to be regarded as co-extensive with the study of illocutionary acting. I do not here intend to discuss the developments in this area. This can be found in John Searle's book: *Speech Acts*. (1970). Searle maintains that a study of the meaning of sentences is in principle not different from a study of speech acts (Searle: 1970: 18). They are the same study, he believes, since every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform any particular speech act or even certain range of speech acts. According to him, since in an appropriate context of utterance, every possible speech act can in principle be given an exact formation in a sentence or sentences, the study of the meaning of sentences and the study of speech acts are not two separate studies but one study from different perspectives.

Searle's assimilation of the study of meaning to the study of illocutionary acts definitely sets a new agenda for the theory of meaning. Austin on his part originally did not intend his work as a theory of meaning, but he made it clear about the necessity of not confusing sentence meanings and speech acts. According to him, "once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act" (Austin: 1962, 13)

But it must be admitted that Austin himself gave an occasion which seems to blur the distinction between stating and other kinds of illocutionary acts when he made the distinction between Performatives and constatives which often slide towards truth or falsity (Austin: 1962; 141; cf., also: Harrison, B. 1979, 172). But in such

Performative cases as stating estimates, findings and pronouncements, we do not look at their truth or falsehood; instead, we speak of their correctness or incorrectness.

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