

Chapter 12 – Austin on Speech Acts

12.1 Introduction

- **From the history:**

Philosophers of languages (as per Frege): the fundamental thing about the meaning of a sentence is its truth-value (sentence type(s): declarative sentence)
- Austin in the 1950s (*How to Do Things with Words*) → a challenge to this view
 - Not focusing on the grammatical type (i.e., *declarative*)
 - *Performatives* sentences:
 - a) not focusing on simply the truth-value
 - b) the ACTS we may perform using these sentences
 - shifting from the concentration on truth (analytic tradition) to a more general category involving language use in daily lives.

12.2. Performative Utterances

- **There are specific contexts (as their nature uses) in which these sentences may be produced:**
- They are all declaratives used to perform some action (rather than to describe the world or state the truth-value of the world) (*page 232*)
 - 1) *I promise that I'll be there;*

Context: by someone who made a promise to someone else
Action: to make promise
 - 2) *I name this ship the Enterprise;*

Context: the engineer who built this ship/or a mayor who gives a speech in a public ceremony
Action: to give something a name
 - 3) *I give notice that the next meeting will be held on 1 August;*

Context: some authority announced the date of a meeting.
Action: to give a notice
 - 4) *I sentence the prisoner to 14 years' hard labour;*

Context: a judge passed sentence
Action: to pass a sentence
 - 5) *I declare the festival open.*

Context: some dignitary (e.g. the mayor) opening a festival
Action: to declare the opening of a festival
- Verbs in 1) – 5):
 - 1st person

- Present tense
- However, they are not necessary/sufficient for uses of sentences to be performatives
- Others, e.g., 3rd person singular/plural & future tense (will do) work perfectly the same

(1a) *I will be there;*

(2a) *This ship is the Enterprise;*

(3a) *The next meeting will be held on 1 August;*

(4a) *The prisoner will serve 14 years hard labour;*

(5a) *The festival is now open.*

- Note that the above-mentioned verbs can be used to state the fact (e.g., in diary)
- **Performative uses** versus the **constative uses** (a speech act to present a true/false account of the facts of the case)

12.3 Towards a General Theory of Speech Acts

- According to Austin:
 - **Performative utterances** → something is done in the uttering of words
 - **Constative utterances** → something can be true or false
 - Can be further divided into 2 different distinctions:
 - a) Something is done vs. nothing is done/nothing like that
 - b) Utterances of declarative sentences which are true or false vs. utterances of declarative sentences which are not true or false
- What does a performative utterance have to be like?
 - 1) Contains a verb to describe the act (e.g., promise, order, etc)
 - 2) The verb to be in the 1st person of the present tense (however, this condition is not **necessary** (can be in 3rd person, second person etc) nor **sufficient** (sentences with these grammatical criteria need not be performatives → e.g., diary)
 - 3) Therefore, Austin said: utterances of sentences, which contain no performative verb, are considered performatives if they are equivalent (in some sense) to the utterances of sentences which do contain a performative verb (sentences 1a – 5a)

(1) *I **promise** that I'll be there;*

Versus.

(1a) *I will be there;*

- 4) **(1a) Non-performative:** To make a prediction
- 5) **(1a) Performative sense:** Equivalent to *I promise that I'll be there.*
- 6) Note that (1) may contain a non-performative sense (e.g., in the diary)
- 7) We can even make it unambiguously performative by adding a self-referential device '*hereby*': *I hereby promise that I'll be there.*

- 8) As per Austin, (1a) is a *primary performative* (the kind of performative utterance which could be made before there were words to describe types of linguistic act).
- 9) The performative is made explicit when being reformulated with a performative verb (as promise in (1) → verb: promise, act: to make a promise → consistent)

N.B. in this way, a constative utterance will count as performative

Example:

(6a) *The cat is dead.*

→ To add a performative verb 'state'

(6) *I **state** that the cat is dead.*

The use of (6) is equivalent to the use of (6a) → act: to make a statement

Therefore, constatives are performatives too.

3 speech acts:

1) Locutionary act:

- 10) *Saying something*
- 11) The literal meaning of the speech produces

2) Illocutionary acts:

- 12) *doing something in saying that*
- 13) Speaker's intention/act carried in the literal meaning

3) Perlocutionary acts:

- 14) *Achieving something by means of saying something*
- 15) Acts of achieving something by means of saying something.

Example: '*Shut the door!*'

- **Locutionary act:** the speaker said something meaningful rather merely making noises
- **Illocutionary act:** an order/request to the audience to shut the door
- **Perlocutionary act:** getting someone to shut the door as the goal

The 3 acts are integrated instead of being separated

➤ **Austin placed a great emphasis on the illocutionary act.**

(1a) *I will be there.*

The illocutionary act can be either:

- 16) **A promise:** without having a true/false statement
- 17) **A prediction:** with true/false value

➤ If Austin is right

- a) The specific significance in the history of the philosophy of language is that **we will only have something capable of truth or falsity once an appropriate illocutionary act has been performed.**
- b) The general significance for understanding what matters about language is that **many of the most important features of the language we encounter will depend on the**

illocutionary act being performed, not the grammar.

12.4 Truth and Performatives

(1) I promise that I'll be there;

(1a) I will be there.

→ **Nothing true is said by either (1) or (1a)**

(6) I state that the cat is dead;

(6a) The cat is dead

→ One thing is stated by both (6) and (6a), that is 'the cat is dead'

For sentence (1), Kent Bach & Michael Harnish said there're 2 illocutionary acts:

1. I'm stating that I promise to be there

2. I'm promising to be there (as that the statement is true)

→ which require (1) to be self-verifying

Which is slightly different from that of Austin's view saying *if I utter (1) to make a promise, I don't state anything*

→ Their suggestion seems to conflict with the correspondence intuition (that is what makes a statement true must be somehow independent of that statement itself) → liar paradox
(L)(L) is false

➤ An alternative to their suggestions: Introducing a special speech act of *referring*

- Uses of **singular terms** to involve acts of referring to objects

- Uses of **predicates** to involve acts of referring to qualities and relations

- Uses of **sentences** to involve acts of referring to combination of objects and qualities or relations (states of affairs/situations_

Difficulties:

1) Need to explain how sentences can refer to states of affairs without being true or false

2) Need to deal with the various difficulties which have led Davidson & others to abandon referential account of meaning

12.5 Issues for a Theory of Speech Acts

Issues to consider:

➤ **Central issue: the meaning of words** → when performing an illocutionary act, we need to first exploit this prior meaning of the words.

a) However, Austin defined words as if they only have **Sense** and **Reference**

b) the truth and falsity can be determined only when the illocutionary act of **stating** is being performed

c) the meaning of words cannot explain the truth of sentences

d) → hard to see how sentences can be true

⇒ **2 natural alternatives**

a) Adopt some form of referential theory of meaning (introducing the speech act of *referring*)

b) May try building speech-act theory more thoroughly into our conception of semantics

- ◆ Attempt to explain the meaning of sentences in terms of the illocutionary acts that could be performed with them (Illocutionary-act *potential*)
 - ◆ In this way, the very same sentence can be used to perform quite different illocutionary acts
 - ◆ We need to then first determine what particular illocutionary act would be performed
 - (IAM) A sentence *s* means that *p* if and only if
 - If *s* means that *p*
 - if someone makes a **promise** in uttering *s*, she will be **promising** that *p*
 - If someone makes a **prediction** in uttering *s*, she will be **predicting** that *p*.
- What determines what illocutionary act is performed when someone speaks?
- ➔ Intention of the speaker
- Whether an illocutionary act needs to conform to rules established by convention.
- i. **Austin:** various kinds of illocutionary act are established by convention (however, it's not clear what kind of conventions he had in mind)
 - According to Austin, speech acts are evidently bound by rules & with clear boundaries (performed by the right people, in the right way, on the right occasions etc.) → these rules are conventional but arbitrary (they're not natural objects)
 - Same for *promises*, the practice of making promises need not have existed & seems to depend for its continued existence on the attitudes and behaviour of the group of people who accept each other's promises
 - However, these do not apply to the majority of illocutionary acts
 - ii. **Oppose Austin's view** (e.g., Bach & Harnish) → need be nothing conventional about them, the fundamental types of illocutionary act are fixed by the states of mind which they express.
 - Expressions of belief (constative as per Bach & Harnish)
 - Expressions of directive → speaker's attitude towards some prospective action by the hearer
 - No specific procedures/conventional rules to follow to perform an act
 - ➔ In this view, an illocutionary act is an intention to do something (an expression of a particular attitude like belief or desire)

Determine a locution, illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect for each of the following statements

- a. I'm sorry to have to ask this but could you come a bit earlier?
- b. I wouldn't go around staring at people like that if I were you.
- c. I hope to see you at 9 o'clock.
- d. Do you know what time it is?
- e. I love chocolate cake.