



20thC Philosophy

JAKE CHANDLER

10. Austin on speech acts



INTRODUCTION

Last week

- The early Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:
 - an attempt at a systematic theory of linguistic meaning, truth-conditionally conceived
- The later Wittgenstein's *Investigations*:
 - a collection of comments and examples illustrating the diverse functionality of linguistic behaviour, sidelining representation
 - a (sketchy) discussion of the role of convention in determining correct linguistic practise
- Three constants:
 - An focus on issues surrounding language
 - An unusual view of the role of philosophy
 - A cryptic and heterodox style

Today

- A contemporaneous influential philosopher, whose work shares with the *Investigations* a significant number of features:
 - Belief in philosophical importance of the study of language
 - View of the study of language as the study of a form of behaviour
 - Broadening of focus beyond notions such as truth, meaning and representation
 - Central importance of the notion of social convention

John Langshaw Austin



- Born 1911, in Lancaster; died 1960, in Oxford
- Read classics and philosophy at Oxford, becoming lecturer there in 1935
- Worked for the British Intelligence during WW2 and multiply decorated for a major role in relation to D Day
- Returned to Oxford to take the prestigious White's Professorship of Moral Philosophy
- Famous for engagement with students ("Saturday Morning" sessions)
- Two important posthumously published books (1962): *Sense and Sensibilia* and *How to Do Things with Words*

'PERFORMATIVES' VS 'CONSTATIVES'

His work

- Austin was a central figure of the **Oxford Ordinary Language Philosophy** movement, in the late 40's to early 70's (also: Strawson, Wisdom, Ryle, etc.), whose key tenet was that
 - Many philosophical problems can be dispelled by attending to the *ordinary usage* of the relevant expressions (echoes Moore's claim that counterintuitive philosophical claims often simply result from a non-standard use of terms)
- Austin produced important work in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of action and epistemology
- Most famous contributions:
 - (i) his critique of sense data (*Sense and Sensibilia*)
 - (ii) his theory of 'speech acts' (*How to Do Things with Words*)
- Here: a quick intro to (ii) via his 'Performative Utterances' paper

Austin's target

- Like Stevenson, Wittgenstein, and others, Austin is unhappy with a certain narrow approach to the philosophy of language:
 - 'We have not got to go very far back in the history of philosophy to find philosophers assuming more or less as a matter of course that the sole business, the sole interesting business, of any utterance...is to be true or false. Of course, they had always known that there are other kinds of things that we say—things like imperatives, the expression of wishes, and exclamations...But still philosophers have assumed that the only things they are interested in are utterances...which describe situations truly or falsely.' (*PU*, p. 136)

The recent context

- He notes that the popularity of this view seems to be waning, crediting:
 - (1) *Verificationism*: many utterances of declarative sentences may be neither true nor false, i.e. not factually significant
 - (2) *Emotivism*: utterances of declarative sentences involving ethical terms may have the primary function of expressing and eliciting emotions
- He also seems to allude to the late Wittgenstein and followers but objects to their lack of appetite for a **systematic framework**

Introducing performatives (ctd)

- Austin's initial examples of performatives:
 - (1) 'I do (take so-and-so to be my wedded wife)' (said in a wedding ceremony)
 - (2) 'I apologize' (said after stepping on someone's toe)
 - (3) 'I name the ship the "Queen Elizabeth"' (said at a ship launch)
 - (4) 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow'
- He tells us:

'In all these cases it would be absurd to regard the thing that I say as a report of the performance of the action which is undoubtedly done— the action of betting, or christening, or apologizing. We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action.' (p. 137)

Introducing performatives

- Starting point of the paper: discussion of a kind of utterance of a declarative sentence that
 - (a) 'is not true or false'
 - (b) is describable as 'doing something rather than merely saying something'
- He calls such a kind of utterance a '**performative**' utterance (antonym: '**constative**')

Introducing performatives (ctd)

- By way of contrast, note that (1)-(4), all present tense, seem quite different from their future or past tense counterparts
 - (1') 'I did take so-and-so to be my wedded wife.'
 - (2') 'I apologised.'
 - (3') 'I will name the ship the "Queen Elizabeth"'
 - (4') 'I once bet you sixpence it would rain the next day'

Felicity

- Although performatives are claimed to be neither true nor false, they are claimed to be evaluable according to certain specific **standards**, grounded in social convention (see last week)
- When they meet the standards, Austin says they are ‘**felicitous**’
- He offers a non-exhaustive list of potential felicity conditions
 - (i) ‘The convention invoked must exist and be accepted’
Infelicity: Simply saying ‘I divorce you’ in 20thC UK
 - (ii) ‘The circumstances in which we purport to invoke this procedure must be appropriate for its invocation’
Infelicity: Saying ‘I pick you for the team’, when the person didn’t volunteer to play

Performatives and linguistic form

- Unfortunately, it seems that no grammatical/phonetic/lexical features distinguish *all* performatives from *all* non-performatives
- If *so and* Austin is right about the truth values of performatives:
 - Whether or not a particular utterance has a truth value is *not* determined by its linguistic form
- Morris (2007) suggests that the sentences in our original examples of performatives can be uttered non-performatively:
 - ‘10 am: call from festival organizer worried about the afternoon ceremony; *I promise that I’ll be there.*
 - 10.30: rush to shipyard, where I am hustled onto a platform beside a huge ship; *...I name this ship the Enterprise.*’

Felicity (ctd)

- Another one:
 - (iii) If applicable, the utterer must have ‘the requisite thoughts or feelings or intentions’
Infelicity: Saying ‘I congratulate you’ when one doesn’t believe the person was responsible for the outcome

Performatives and linguistic form (ctd)

- Some other candidates for double-duty—possibly more promising—hinted at by Austin:
 - ‘I’ll be there’
 - ‘This ship will be called the ‘Queen Elizabeth’”

'Hereby'

- In spite of this, *some* sentences appear to *only* be utterable performatively
- Consider the following counterparts of our initial examples:
 - (1") 'I *hereby* do'
 - (2") 'I *hereby* apologize'
 - (3") 'I *hereby* name the ship the 'Queen Elizabeth''
 - (4") 'I *hereby* bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow'
- Note: this also provides a performativity test (if an utterance is 'equivalent' to some 'hereby' construction, it is performative)

Quick comment

- Does the hereby test *really* allow us to pick out the kinds of 'performative verbs' that Austin is interested in?
- Consider:
 - 'I hereby whisper to you.'
 - 'I hereby speak so loudly that your toddler will cry.'
 - 'I hereby upset all the people in the meditation class.'
- Whispering and upsetting don't seem to have felicity conditions or be underpinned by socio-linguistic conventions

Performative verbs

- Austin takes this observation to allow him to build a **typology** of performatives by grouping together the **performative verbs** that occur in these 'hereby' sentences
- In PU, Austin picks out a number of 'fairly well-marked classes'
 - 'the class of cases where we deliver verdicts and make estimates and appraisals of various kinds'
 - 'the class where we give undertakings, commit ourselves in various ways'
 - 'the class...where we exercise various rights and powers'

Saying vs showing

- According to Austin, the function of performative verbs is not to *describe* oneself as performing the relevant action, but to unambiguously **show** that such a performance is being carried out
- His analogy:
 - 'Suppose I appear before you one day and bow deeply from the waist. Well that is ambiguous. I may be simply observing the local flora...; on the other hand, conceivably I might be doing obeisance to you. [To] clear up this ambiguity, we have some kind of device, such as raising the hat...Nobody would want to say that lifting your hat was stating that you were performing an act of obeisance'
- Note the parallel with ethical terms and emotivism

‘Primary’ performatives

- Recall our two ‘double-duty’ sentences
 - ‘I’ll be there’
 - ‘This ship will be called the ‘Queen Elizabeth’”
- In Austin’s terminology, when their utterances are performative, these utterances are ‘primary performatives’ (aka ‘implicit’)
- The nature of the utterance can be disambiguated by introducing a performative verb
 - ‘I promise I’ll be there’
 - ‘I name the ship the ‘Queen Elizabeth’”
- Having said all of the above, Austin then questions the initial distinction...

THE DISTINCTION CHALLENGED

Truth and performatives

- Austin first suggests that some ‘performatives’ may have truth values or something similar
 - He claims that an utterance of the following lies somewhere in between an act of apology and an expression of feeling
 - ‘I am sorry.’
 - He voices similar concerns about the apparent performatives
 - ‘Out.’ (said by an umpire)
 - ‘Guilty.’ (said by a jury member)
- which ‘seem to have something like the duty to be true or false, and seem not to be so remote from statements’

Truth and performatives (ctd)

- A probably more important case of interest:
 - ‘I state that...’
- Austin suggests that utterances of sentences of this form are performatives (compare ‘I warn you that...’)
- Now recall: performative verbs are supposed to ‘show’ what kind of action is being carried out
- But if ‘state’ does indeed show these utterances to be statements, they must surely bear truth values!

Truth and performatives (ctd)

- Finally, he cites further 'performatives' for which some rough kind of requirement of correspondence with the facts is in place
 - 'I advise you...?' (Is the advice sound?)
 - 'I warn you...?' (Is the warning justified?)
- Claim: this correspondence could amount to truth on a 'loosen[ed] up' version of the concept

Beyond the performative/constative distinction

- Austin concludes:
 - '...in its original form our distinction between the performative and the statement...breaks down. I will just make a suggestion as to how to handle this matter. We need to go very much farther back, to consider all the ways and senses in which saying anything at all is doing this or that...besides the question...as to what a certain utterance means, there is a further question...as to what was the force, as we may call it, of the utterance. We may be quite clear what 'Shut the door' means, but not yet at all clear on the further point as to whether as uttered at a certain time it was an order, an entreaty, or whatnot.'

Infelicity and constatives

- Austin provides examples suggesting constatives *also* can be evaluated for felicity, as well as truth
- The most compelling one is the case of 'Moore-paradoxical' utterances:
 - Uttering 'It's raining but I don't believe it' is problematic, even though it may well be true
 - Austin: the utterance is infelicitous in that same way that an insincere utterance of 'I promise I'll be there' is
 - Compare: 'I promise I'll be there but I have no intention of being there'
- Also, more controversially:
 - 'John's children are all bald but he has no children'

Beyond the performative/constative distinction

- In *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin tells us that a particular utterance will simultaneously be an instance of 3 types of acts:
 - **Locutionary**: an act individuated by its phonetic/syntactic/semantic properties ('the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain 'meaning'')
 - **Illocutionary**: an act individuated by its conventional function
Example: making a statement or promise, issuing a command or request, etc.
 - **Perlocutionary**: an act individuated, without appeal to convention, by its intended effects
Example: getting someone to believe or do something, etc.

Next week: Grice

- Required reading:
 - Soames, S. *AoM*, Ch 9
- Recommended reading:
 - Grice, H.P. 1989: Logic and Conversation. In his *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press.
 - Grice, H.P. 1957: Meaning. *Philosophical Review* 66(3): 377–388.
 - Lycan, W. 2000: *The Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction* (Second Edition). London & New York: Routledge. Chs. 7 & 13.

References

- Morris, M. 2007: *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: CUP.