

HOW PERFORMATIVES DON'T WORK

1. PERFORMATIVES AS STATEMENTS

Opposing the so-called “descriptive fallacy”, according to which non-descriptive utterances are mistakenly conceived of as straightforward statements of fact solely on the grounds that they have the form of statements, Austin (1962) points out that there is a class of utterances which, despite looking like statements, do not state anything at all and are not true or false, but — in the appropriate circumstances — constitute the performance of an action “which would not *normally* be described as saying something”. As linguistic actions they are subject to the so-called felicity conditions. Austin calls this class of utterances “performatives” and gives examples like those in (1):

- (1) a. I bequeath my watch to my brother.
- b. I order you to go.

He tentatively contrasts performative utterances with constative utterances which are typically used to make statements, refer to facts, and depending on whether or not they accord with the facts are true or false. As for the performatives, he distinguishes between explicit performatives like those in (1) and implicit performatives like those in (2), which do not contain a performative formula but nevertheless constitute the performance of an action even if it is not indicated explicitly which action is to be performed.

- (2) a. My watch should be given to my brother.
- b. Go!

Austin then shows that the criteria by which he had characterized the class of performatives equally apply to the class of constatives, and that the criteria by which he had characterized the class of constatives equally apply to performatives. Therefore, the tentative distinction between constative and performative utterances cannot be sustained. Since constative utterances are at least implicitly performative (and can also take explicit performative shape), Austin concludes that every utterance is performative and that, therefore, the notion of performativity loses its classificatory value.

Austin's conclusion has been subject to intense debate. Several authors (among them Black 1969, Walker 1969, Wiggins 1971, Schiffer 1972, Warnock 1973,

Holdcroft 1974) have tried to show that his arguments were not strong enough to destroy the distinction between performatives and constatives. Moreover, if the characteristics of performatives apply equally well to constatives, he might as well have just come to the conclusion that every utterance is constative. After all, this is in fact the position taken by David Lewis (1972) who claims that non-declarative sentences like e.g. *Be late!* can be considered as paraphrases of corresponding explicit performatives and argues that the latter can be said to be true if and only if the speaker successfully performs the action denoted by the performative verb.

The view that performatives are statements, which is advocated by most of the recent analyses of performatives,¹ plays a crucial role in two prominent attempts at solving the basic problem of performatives: "How can saying make it so", as asked by Austin, or, to put it in Searle's words, "How do performatives work"? To make these questions more explicit we can say that the puzzle about performatives is simply this:

- (3) How is it possible that I can perform the action denoted by the verb "promise" just by saying "I hereby promise", that is, how does the saying — in the appropriate circumstances — constitute the doing?

As for the answers to these questions offered so far, the two basic approaches in (4) can be distinguished:

- (4) a. This capacity of performatives is due to the semantics of the performative formula (Austin 1962, Searle 1969, Searle 1989).
 b. This capacity of performatives is due to the pragmatics of conversational inferences (Bach/Harnish 1979, Harnish 1997, Harnish 1999).

Approach (4b) proceeds from the assumption that the literal meaning of performatives is that of a statement to the effect that the speaker is performing the act named by the performative verb. The fact that the speaker does in fact perform this act with his utterance is then derived from the literal meaning by a Gricean inferential process usually associated with indirect speech acts. Performative utterances are thus considered to be instances of indirect speech acts. Thus, in uttering a performative, the speaker directly performs the act of stating and indirectly performs the act that he states he is performing. To derive the indirect act from the literal meaning of (5), the hearer might reason (and be expected to reason) as indicated in (6) (Bach/Harnish 1979, Harnish 1999):

- (5) I order you to leave.
 (6) a. He is saying "I order you to leave".
 b. He is stating that he is ordering me to leave.
 c. If his statement is true, then he must be ordering me to leave.
 d. If he is ordering me to leave, it must be his utterance that constitutes the order (what else could it be?).
 e. Presumably, he is speaking the truth (conversational presumption).

- f. Therefore, in stating that he is ordering me to leave he is ordering me to leave.

The further idea is that this sort of inference has been standardized so that after standardization, the performative practice “short-circuits the steps of this inference pattern, both as carried through by the hearer and as expected by the speaker” (Harnish 1999). The two assumptions of this approach that are of crucial concern to us here are summarized in (7):

- (7) a. In uttering a performative, the speaker implicitly performs the act of stating.
- b. Performative utterances are semantically ordinary declaratives.

It is a corollary of (7) that performative utterances, due to their literal meaning, can be true or false in principle:

- (8) Performative utterances can be true or false.

As is obvious from the reconstruction in (6), according to approach (4b) the semantics of performatives also contributes to the solution of the performative puzzle, but only in an indirect way: it determines the descriptive property of the performative and thus provides the basis for the inferential process that gives the “indirect” act.

Let us now turn to approach (4a). Searle (1989) rejects the idea that performatives work by way of being statements to the effect that one performs the act named by the performative verb. He considers the self-referentiality of such statements as not sufficient to be constitutive of the performance of that act. In his view, the performative utterance (5) is *literally* an order; the hearer does not have to *infer* that the speaker has made an order. On the other hand, he also assumes that a performative utterance has an assertive meaning. The question then is how these literal meanings of an ordinary indicative sentence interact to provide the actual performance of an action denoted by the performative verb. The crucial point in Searle’s answer is assumption (9) (Searle 1989: 551):

- (9) The manifestation of the intention to perform a linguistic action — in an appropriate context — is sufficient for the performance of the action.²

Against the background of this assumption, which I will not discuss any further, the basic question about performatives is how a performative manages to be a manifestation (and not just a description) of the intention to perform the action denoted by the performative verb. Searle’s answer is (Searle 1989: 553):

- (10) The literal meaning of a sentence encodes the intention mentioned in (9) if this sentence “encodes executive self-referentiality over an intentional verb”.

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