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## ARE PERFORMATIVE UTTERANCES DECLARATIONS?

### 1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF PERFORMATIVES<sup>1</sup> AND CONDITIONS ON ITS SOLUTION

Performatives are of particular interest to the philosophy of language and linguistics because of the special tension that they reveal between semantics and pragmatics: any theory of them must explain their '*performative force*', the (often nonconstative<sup>2</sup>) force marked by the performative element of the sentence, within the framework of a *compositional semantics*. An account of performatives would be easy were we to give up one or the other. For instance, if performative utterances were always just constative in their force, then the grammatical form of performative sentences could be straightforwardly declarative (or truth-valuable). On the other hand, if we ignore compositionality, then their performative force could be given by special conventions of force that attach to the performative element in (just) the performative sentence. But neither option is very attractive. Sentences (1a—c) really do seem to be used nonconstatively (not truth-valuable) — in fact they seem to be used to perform the act named by the performative verb (or noun etc.) that they contain.<sup>3</sup>

- (1) a. I (hereby) order you to leave.
- b. I (hereby) promise to pay you five dollars.
- c. I (hereby) declare this meeting adjourned.
- d. I ordered you to leave.

And these sentences seem to be semantically compositional — the meaning of each sentence seems to be a function of the meaning its constituents have in other, non-performative, sentences plus their grammatical relations. We will call this formulation of semantic compositionality, '*innocent compositionality*', and it rolls together two separate principles: (i) *compositionality*: the meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meaning of its constituents plus their (grammatical) relations, and (ii) *innocence*: constituents contribute the same (range of) meanings to every expression that contains them.<sup>4</sup> A compositional semantics that can treat the contribution of e.g. 'order' in (1a) the same as 'order' in (1d) will have at least two advantages. First, a compositional theory need not explain how such a word loses the (normal) compositional meaning it has in (1d) when it occurs in (1a).<sup>5</sup> Second, a compositional theory will not make the prediction that each of these performative words, and the

sentences they occur in, is ambiguous, and so it will not have to provide separate performative and non-performative clauses for each such word in the language.

**Conditions of Adequacy** Any adequate account of performatives should meet at least four conditions.<sup>6</sup> It should explain how performatives: (i) can be normal *declaratives* from the point of view of compositional semantics, (ii) can have an interpretation as a *non-constative* doing<sup>7</sup>, and (iii) can introspectively feel as if they mean just that non-constative doing. In addition, a theory of performatives must (iv) explain how they work communicatively — how speakers perform the acts they do, and how this is communicated to hearers.

**What are Performative Utterances?** Austin (1961) introduced the term ‘performative’ as a “new and ugly word”, and Austin (1962) develops and extends that discussion. Austin never defined a performative precisely, but he gave many examples and made some general comments about them.<sup>8</sup> For our purposes it is important to note that there seem to be two notions of a performative at work in Austin’s discussion:<sup>9</sup>

*Wide notion:* Performative utterances are not merely sayings, they are also doings, where the utterance of certain words in certain socio-physical circumstances is sufficient to perform the act:

- (2) a. I do. (said in a marriage ceremony)
- b. Kamerad! (surrendering in war time)

*Narrow notion:* Performative utterances name the act being performed in that utterance (see (1a—c) above).

Both notions occur in discussions of performatives, but the second, narrow notion has become the focus of discussion.

**The Problem of Performatives** Here is the problem of performatives: how should we resolve this tension between a compositional semantics and a nonconstative pragmatics, while conforming to these conditions of adequacy?

**Spectrum of Analyses of Performatives** Philosophy of language and linguistics provides us with a wide spectrum of analyses of performatives, some of which have been pursued in the literature, and some of which have not (yet):<sup>10</sup>

1. Performatives are just used to *do* (illocutionary) things, (Austin, 1961, 1962; Searle 1965, 1969; Reimer 1995),
2. Performatives are used to *say* (locutionary) things and to *do* (illocutionary) other things (Austin, 1961, 1962),
3. Performatives are used to *constate* (illocutionary) one thing and to *do*, by *standardized indirection*, something else (illocutionary) (Bach 1975, 1995; Bach and Harnish, 1979, 1992; Harnish 1988, 1997),
4. Performatives are used to *constate* one thing (illocutionary), and by *implicature* to *do* (illocutionary) another,
5. Performatives are used to *declare* (illocutionary) one thing and to *do* (illocutionary) another (Recanati, 1987; Searle, 1989),

6. Performatives are *ambiguous* as between performative and a non-performative readings,
7. Performatives are *true* or *false*, but are not used to *constate* anything (Schiffer, 1972),
8. Performatives are *true* or *false*, and are used to *constate* one thing and to *do* that thing directly (Davidson, 1979).

Here we will briefly rehearse position 3, the standardized indirect analysis of Bach and Harnish, then we will turn to our central concern, an evaluation of Searle's version of position 5, the declarational analysis of performatives.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. PERFORMATIVE UTTERANCES AS STANDARDIZED INDIRECTION<sup>12</sup>

**Inferential Pragmatics** Bach and Harnish (1979) (hereafter 'B&H') was written from within a certain framework, one we might call an 'inferential' theory of communication in particular, and pragmatics in general. The basic idea behind inferential theories is that successful communication involves a rich system of inferences over and above the information contained in the language *per se*. When a hearer infers a speaker's communicative intent from the utterance of some expression *e*, then the hearer makes an inference of the form:

The speaker has uttered expression *e*  
[Mutual Beliefs and Presumptions]

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So, the speaker is communicating the message that *F(P)*.<sup>13</sup>

An alternative idea has been dubbed the 'message model' and the 'code model'. On this second conception, successful communication is secured by the encoding and decoding of a linguistic message, where it is understood that semantic (and possibly syntactic) rules or conventions forge the connection between sound and message and the message is the meaning of some sentences or subsentential expressions. Despite its distinguished history, there is virtually no chance such a theory can be right, and we should work to elaborate a conception of communication with a more modest role for knowledge of language and linguistic conventions.

**Gricean Pragmatics** B&H is a special case of 'Gricean' models of communication.<sup>14</sup> Gricean models construe successful communication as a species of rational, cooperative problem solving. The speaker produces an utterance, with a certain meaning in a certain context, with the expectation that the hearer shares knowledge of that meaning and that context, and is able, on the basis of this information, plus general principles, to infer what the speaker means to communicate. The speaker's problem is to give by his utterance, evidence that will allow the hearer, in the context, to recognize his communicative intention. If the speaker does not provide enough of the right kind of evidence, the hearer will not be able to reliably make the correct inference, and communication can break down. The details of this process distinguish specific Gricean theories, including Grice's own. Grice proposed an analysis of what it is for a speaker to

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