

Class #25 - Speech Acts  
Austin, "Performative Utterances"

I. Syntax, Semantics, Pragmatics

Philosophers and linguists often divide the study of language into three categories: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

We have not spent time on the syntax of language.

We looked a little at Russell's analysis of definite descriptions to see his claim that grammatical form is not necessarily proper logical form.

But mainly we have left the syntax of language to the linguists.

Our discussion of the semantics (and the metaphysics) of language was divided into two sections.

We looked first at reference and truth, how language connects with the world.

We then turned to some purer questions about meaning and meanings, finding analyses of meaning in terms of abstract propositions, behavior, and intentions, and finding some holistic and skeptical views about meaning.

Now, at the end of our course, we turn briefly to the pragmatics of language.

Briefly, pragmatics are those aspects of communication which do not concern syntax or semantics.

It is an 'etc.' category: anything that doesn't fit elsewhere.

Among the characteristics included among pragmatics are the tone and force of communication, as well as aspects which sometimes get called color.

Context is especially important.

We'll start with two classic papers on pragmatics, Austin's "Performative Utterances" and Grice's "Logic and Conversation."

Then we'll move on to two current papers about how to understand slurs and stereotypes.

II. Assertion and Performance

Austin begins his piece with a discussion of two views, both of which trace to Wittgenstein's work.

First, he lauds the logical empiricists and their verifiability theory of meaning for providing a tool which can be used to eliminate nonsense from language and philosophy.

But he argues that the verification theory eliminates too much that isn't nonsense.

There are unverifiable statements which are nevertheless not nonsense.

Among such statements we might include questions and commands, for which verification seems impossible in principle.

Austin also lauds the later Wittgensteinian view that there are many different uses of language.

Since there aren't infinitely many uses, we can identify and characterize some of these uses.

The rest of the article is an attempt to cash out the later Wittgenstein's claim that there are many uses of language.

In particular, Austin distinguishes a use of language for expressing truth and falsity (assertion) from what he calls performative utterances.

We noted, in previous classes, several places in which philosophers have assumed that the primary or paradigmatic uses of language are to express truth-valuable propositions.

For example, Strawson criticizes Russell for insisting on bivalence for sentences which contain empty references.

Strawson retorted that ordinary language has no logic.

We also saw that Grice's IBS project relies on the paradigm of uttering claims which one wants an audience to believe.

Such views, Austin implies, impose unnecessarily narrow constraints on uses of language.

Austin presents four cases of language-use which are not aimed at asserting truth-valuable claims:

wedding, apologizing, naming, betting

This is not an exhaustive list, but a representative one.

In each case, an act is performed.

In each case, the act goes beyond the assertion of a truth-valuable claim.

One could try, if one were motivated to see all of language as asserting facts, to interpret these cases as assertions.

Such an interpretation would be forced and misleading.

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. When I say 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' I do not describe the christening ceremony, I actually perform the christening; and when I say 'I do' (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife), I am not reporting on a marriage, I am indulging in it (235).

In issuing an explicit performative utterance we are not stating what act it is, we are showing or making explicit what act it is (245).

Austin provides a brief and avowedly incomplete list of the kinds of rules which surround performative utterances without which no act can be performed.

They must adhere to commonly known conventions and be used in the proper circumstances by the proper people.

They must be uttered sincerely and they demand follow-through.

Austin illustrates the list amusingly.

### III. Identifying Performatives

While it would be nice to have a grammatical criterion for performatives, a strictly syntactic way of distinguishing among the different acts we can perform with language, there is none.

Many performatives are framed in the first-person, for example, but it is easy to construct performatives in the second- or third-person.

Some performatives are imperative sentences, but many are not.

Austin suggest a procedure for identifying performative utterances.

What we should like to suppose - and there is a good deal in this-is that any utterance which is performative could be reduced or expanded or analysed into one of these two standard forms

beginning 'I...' so and so or beginning 'You (or he) hereby...' so and so. If there was any justification for this hope, as to some extent there is, then we might hope to make a list of all the verbs which can appear in these standard forms, and then we might classify the kinds of acts that can be performed by performative utterances. We might do this with the aid of a dictionary, using such a test as that already mentioned whether there is the characteristic asymmetry between the first person singular present indicative active and the other persons and tenses - in order to decide whether a verb is to go into our list or not. Now if we make such a list of verbs we do in fact find that they fall into certain fairly well-marked classes. There is the class of cases where we deliver verdicts and make estimates and appraisals of various kinds. There is the class where we give undertakings, commit ourselves in various ways by saying something. There is the class where by saying something we exercise various rights and powers, such as appointing and voting and so on. And there are one or two other fairly well-marked classes (243-4).

Austin is serious about this kind of thing.

It represents a practice which was common in philosophy in the mid-twentieth-century.

People called this kind of approach ordinary-language philosophy.

It was, obviously, inspired by later Wittgenstein.

Folks doing ordinary-language philosophy used to do things like get together and read the dictionary.

Austin concludes that the line between performative utterances and other speech acts is not clearly drawn.

He invokes 'Hurrah' and 'Damn' to illustrate.

In some cases, they are used as performatives.

In other cases, they seem different.

The case of 'I'm sorry' is perhaps clearer.

[I]f somebody says 'I am sorry', we wonder whether this is just the same as 'I apologize' - in which case of course we have said it's a performative utterance - or whether perhaps it's to be taken as a description, true or false, of the state of his feelings (246).

(The case of 'I'm sorry' can be even more interesting; consider, "I'm sorry if you were hurt by my comments.")

Austin's analysis of performative utterances helps explain what is weird about Moore-paradoxical sentences.

Remember, a Moore-paradoxical sentence has the form, 'p, but I do not believe that p'.

Such statements are not contradictory, since there is no conflict in my not believing some true claim.

But my asserting both a sentence and my disbelief of that sentence is infelicitous, since the act which I am performing in asserting the sentence is undermined by the act of claiming that I don't believe the sentence.

This analysis of Moore-paradoxicality invokes a negative characteristic of some claims which Austin calls infelicity.

Infelicity for performatives plays a role parallel to that which falsity plays with truth-valuable assertions.

It is an error of sorts.

All kinds of performatives have success and infelicity conditions.

#### IV. Force and Pragmatics

Toward the end of the article, partially motivated by his considerations of Moore-paradoxicality, Austin broadens his view of language to show that assertion is just one kind of performative.

The narrow view of language, which we might ascribe to Frege or Russell or early Wittgenstein, which holds that assertion is the primary purpose of language, is not utterly disconnected from the broader view of language as something with which we perform acts.

We see then that stating something is performing an act just as much as is giving an order or giving a warning; and we see, on the other hand, that, when we give an order or a warning or a piece of advice, there is a question about how this is related to fact which is not perhaps so very different from the kind of question that arises when we discuss how a statement is related to fact (251).

Austin concludes that utterances can vary, in addition to their meaning, in their force.

Two statements with the same meaning can have very different force when uttered in different contexts or in different ways.

This aspect of communication, which we saw in our class discussion earlier, is often called pragmatics.

We'll continue to pursue the nature of pragmatics, and its distinction from semantics, with Grice on Thursday.