

**Philosophy 308**  
***The Language Revolution***  
**Russell Marcus**  
**Fall 2014**

Class #25  
Austin - Performative Utterances

# Business

- Pragmatics for these two weeks
  - Swati today
  - Sean and Justin Thursday
  - Dangerous language next week
- Course Evaluations
- Paper due Tuesday 12/9
- Final on Tuesday 12/16
  - Prep Qs on line
- What else?

# Syntax, Semantics, Pragmatics

- Syntax
  - Linguists
  - Russell: grammatical form is not proper logical form.
- Our study of semantics divided into two sections.
  - Reference and truth: how language connects with the world
  - Purer questions about meaning and meanings
    - abstract propositions
    - behavior
    - intentions
    - holism
    - skepticism

# Pragmatics

- Aspects of communication which do not concern syntax or semantics.
- ‘etc.’
- Tone and force of communication (color)
- Context is especially important.
- ‘But’ and ‘and’
- Two classic papers on pragmatics
  - Austin’s “Performative Utterances”
  - Grice’s “Logic and Conversation.”
- Two current papers about how to understand slurs and stereotypes.
  - Robin Jeshion and Liz Camp



# Swati on Austin

# What Do We Do With Words?

- Austin's four cases
  - ▶ wedding, apologizing, naming, betting
- Can we understand these as assertions?
  - ▶ “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).
- In groups:
  - ▶ What other kinds of things do we do with words?



Photo # 80-G-447599 Mary Lin Moore christens USS Impervious, 1952



# Wittgenstein's List

## Investigations §23

Making a joke; telling it  
Solving a problem in practical arithmetic  
Translating from one language into another  
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying  
Giving orders, and obeying them  
Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements  
Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)  
Reporting an event  
Speculating about an event  
Forming and testing a hypothesis  
Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams  
Making up a story; and reading it  
Play-acting  
Singing catches  
Guessing riddles

# A Thin Line

- Where is the line between performative utterances and other speech acts?
- ‘Hurrah’ and ‘Damn’
- ‘I’m sorry’
  - ▶ “[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).
  - ▶ “I’m sorry if you were hurt by my comments.”
- Demands



# Identifying Performatives

“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).

# Moore-Paradoxical Sentences

- Austin's analysis of performative utterances helps explain what is weird about Moore-paradoxical sentences.
  - '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.
- Generalizing from 'truth' and 'falsity' to 'success' and 'infelicity'

# Assertion as Performative

- The assertionist view of language: All language is essentially assertion
  - ▶ Frege or Russell or early Wittgenstein
  - ▶ Grice
- The assertionist view 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).