

# Performative Utterances

Austin

# Statements, True or False?

- One movement in Philosophy has been the verification theory: all statements are false or true.
- But we talk a lot of nonsense, are many of our sentences really statements? Or are we making a descriptive fallacy?
- Consider:
  - The expression of a desire
  - Feelings
  - Beliefs
  - Exclamations
  - Orders

# The Infinite Uses of Language

- A lot of philosophers have worked on a framework for statements, in the sense of what is true and false.
- But there are so many other uses of language.
- Austin explores the utterance that “looks like a *statement* and *grammatically* ... would be classed as a statement which is not nonsensical, and yet it is not true or false.” (Austin 235)

# What are these “Utterances”?

- These utterances are completely normal sentences, with verbs and are in first person singular.
- However:
  - They are not true or false
  - It appears the person making the utterance is “doing” something instead of “saying” something.
- Examples:
  - Marriage
  - An Apology
  - Christening
- We do not describe these things through language, we perform them

# The Important things to consider About Utterances

- They “imply” certain things are true but do not “say” that it is true or false.
- Though utterances are not true or false, they are infelicitous or felicitous

# Why does Austin Call this A *Performance Utterance*?

- “There are a great many devices that can be used for making clear, even at the primitive level, what act it is we are performing when we say something – the tone of voice, cadence, gesture – and above all we can rely upon the nature of the circumstances, the context in which the utterance is issued.” (Austin 244)

# Rules of a Performance Utterance

- The verbal procedure of the utterance needs to be an understood social convention
  - There can be physical movement that can perform the same verbal procedure
  - “The social habits of the society may considerably affect the question of which performative verbs are evolved and which, sometimes for rather irrelevant reasons, are not. For example, if I say ‘Your are a poltroon’, it might be that I’m censuring you or that I am insulting you.” (Austin 245)
- The circumstance must be appropriate to perform this procedure
- The audience to needs to accept what you are performing, it is mutual
  - e.g. I you say “I bet you \$10” and the other person says “I do not ”
  - The example of a low life naming the boat “Generalissimo Stalin”

# Austin's Examples of Marriage, Christening and Apologizing

- Doing v.s. Saying
- “We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I actually perform the 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.” (Austin 235)
- Performing is very different than reporting, or describing



# Kripke on “Naming and Necessity”

- “A rough statement of a theory might be the following: An initial 'baptism' takes place. Here the object may be named by ostentation, or the reference of the name may be fixed by a description. When the name is 'passed from link to link' the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it. If I hear the name 'Napoleon' and decide it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark, I do not satisfy this condition.” (Kripke 211)

# Disabilities of Utterances

- “A good many of these verbal procedures are designed for use by people who hold certain beliefs or have certain feelings or intentions. And if you use one of these formulae when you do not have the requisite thoughts or feelings or intentions then there is an abuse of the procedure, there is insincerity.” (Austin 239)
- Infelicities:
  - Misunderstandings
  - Insincerities
  - Forced under duress, or responsibilities

# Grice on “Meaning”

- “...we may sum up what is necessary for A to mean something by X as follows. A must intend to induce by x a belief in an audience and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized as so intended. But these intentions are not independent; the recognition is intended by A to play its part in inducing the belief, and if it does not do so something will have gone wrong with the fulfillment of A’s intentions.” (Grice 383)

# What Structure does a Performance Utterance Follow?

- Two standard forms:
- ‘I...’ so and so.
  - . “There is a clear difference between our first person singular present indicative active, and other persons and tenses.” (Austin 242)
    - “I promise something” v.s. “He promises something”
- ‘You (or he) hereby...’
  - Warnings and authorizations
- There are other forms that do not necessarily comply to these grammatical rules, but are understood.
  - E.g. “I order you to shut the door” v.s. “Shut the door.”

# Statements

- Austin begins to question the contrast between statements and utterances. We make statements on a “trust form”. They too, are susceptible to being infelicitous and felicitous.
- Statements can be
  - Void of reference and meaning
  - Insincere
- At times they parallel performance utterances, so should they have their own category? They are just speech acts.
- Is language beyond a logical structure?
  - “True and ‘false’ are just general label for a whole dimension of different appraisals which have something or other to do with the relation between what we say and the facts” (Austin 250-1)

# Strawson “On Referring”

- “Mentioning, or referring to, something is a characteristic of a use of an expression, just as “being about” something, and truth-or-falsity, are characteristics of a use of a sentence.” (Strawson 326)

# Austin Answers the Question

- “And one thing that emerges when we do do this is that, besides the question that has been very much studied in the past as to what a certain utterance *means*, there is a further question distinct from this as to what was the *force*, as we may call it of the utterance?” (Austin 249)

# Implications Of Performance Utterances

- Prayers are a ritual
  - No audience, but would it be a performance?
- Also what do you think of this idea of sincerity? Do you think it adds a level of morality to the procedure?
- Austin does mention ambiguities of performance utterances, for example “Hurrah”, “Damn” and “I’m sorry”
  - But do you think we perform an identity in general by the way we speak?
  - What about other languages?
- In that sense, if we’re constantly performing, what does that mean of our relationships with people, or an audience
  - It is insincere? Is it infelicitous



# What is Performative Language?

- Mind and Spirit:
- “... it’s very simple to think that the utterance is simply the outward and visible (that is, verbal) sign of the performance of some inward spiritual act of promising, and this view has certainly been expressed in many classic places.” (Austin 236)
- “Now it is clear from this example that, if we slip into thinking that such utterances are reports, true or false, of the performances of inward acts, we open a loophole to perjurers and welschers and bigamists and so on, so that there are disadvantages in being excessively solemn in this way.” (Austin 236)