

Philosophy 308
The Language Revolution
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Fall 2015

Class #25
Austin - Performative Utterances

Business

- Pragmatics for these two weeks
 - Amber on Austin today
 - Me on Grice on Thursday
 - Dangerous language next week
- Paper is now due on **Tuesday 12/8**.
 - Note the change
- Final on Tuesday 12/15
 - Two Versions
- 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
 - verification conditions
 - 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.
 - Chris Hom, and Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore
 - Also Robin Jeshion and Liz Camp (optional)



Austin and Wittgenstein

- Early Wittgenstein and the verification theory
 - ▶ “People began to say: 'Well, if these things are true or false it ought to be possible to decide which they are, and if we can't decide which they are they aren't any good but are, in short, nonsense'. And this new approach did a great deal of good...” (233)
- Later Wittgenstein
 - ▶ “People began to ask whether after all some of those things which, treated as statements, were in danger of being dismissed as nonsense did after all really set out to be statements at all. Mightn't they perhaps be intended not to report facts but to influence people in this way or that, or to let off steam in this way or that? ... On these lines people have now adopted a new slogan, the slogan of the 'different uses of language'.

Amber on Austin

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).

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

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's IBS
- 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).