

PHIL 4233: Philosophy of Language
Prof. Funkhouser
Austin, "Performance Utterances"

I.

- Historically, philosophical interest has been biased towards utterances that are descriptive — i.e., make reports that are either true or false. Austin points out two stages of criticism of this approach:

1. The Verificationist's Challenge

2. Slogan: "Different uses of language" — not all meaningful utterances are intended to describe reality.

- Austin examines a kind of utterance which looks like a statement, is meaningful, but is neither true nor false.

- He says that his examples will not critically involve words like 'could' or 'good'. What is he referring to here?

- Austin is concerned with utterances for which a person *does* something, as opposed to merely *says* something, in virtue of uttering them.

- Examples of *performative utterances*: "I do." "I apologize." "I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*." "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow."

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 than, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action.

- Of course, more is needed to accomplish these acts than just saying these words. For example, a marriage does not occur unless it is in the right setting, led by a certified person, etc. Austin simply denies that "in addition to the saying of the words in such cases is the performance of some internal spiritual act, of which the words then are to be the report."

○ On this point consider his understanding of what it is to promise, according to which our word is our bond.

○ Performative utterances often *imply* that certain things are true, but, Austin claims, they do not *assert* them. Performative utterances are neither true nor false.

There are *infelicities* for performative utterances, however. This is because there are rules for performative utterances. Here are some such rules:

1. The convention (e.g., marriage or promising) must really exist.
2. The utterer must be in the appropriate circumstances to engage in this convention. E.g., you cannot divorce someone just by saying “I divorce you,” to your spouse in your living room.
3. The utterance should be sincere. E.g., there is an intention to keep the promise.
4. The utterer should live up to the obligations of his utterance. E.g., he should keep his promise.

II.

● Distinguish *reporting an act* from *performing an act*: e.g., “He promises” or “I promised” in contrast with “I promise”.

There is thus a clear difference between our first person singular present indicative active, and other persons and tenses.

○ There is not one standard grammatical form for performative utterances, however. And certain imperatives, or other grammatical forms, may be equivalent to performative utterances. Compare: “I order you to shut the door” and “Shut the door.” Using performative verbs can clarify our intentions.

● Is the distinction between performative and descriptive utterances sharp? Some, possibly problematic, cases: “Hurrah” and “Damn.” Or, the ambiguous “I’m sorry.”

○ Plus, there are some infelicities (besides correspondence to reality) for descriptive statements. Take Moore’s paradox, for example: “The cat is on the mat, but I don’t believe that it is.” Or, “All John’s children are bald, but John hasn’t got any children.”

○ Stating, describing, and reporting are also speech acts. But don’t these differ from performative utterances in that they are true or false?

But actually — though it would take too long to go on about this — the more you think about truth and falsity the more you find that very few statements that we ever utter are just true or just false. Usually there is the question are they fair or are they not fair, are they adequate or not adequate, are they exaggerated or not exaggerated? Are they too rough, or are they perfectly precise, accurate, and so on? ‘True’ and ‘false’ are just general labels for a whole dimension of different appraisals which have something or other to do with the relation between what we say and the facts. If, then, we loosen up our ideas of truth and falsity we shall see that statements, when assessed in relation to the facts, are not so very different after all from pieces of advice, warnings, verdicts, and so on.

- Besides a theory of utterance meaning, we need a theory of utterance *force*. This is speech act theory.