

Austin: Doing by Talking

1. **J.L. Austin** (1911-1950): ordinary language philosopher, ethicist. One of the principal “Lotus-Eaters” of the 20th century.
2. **Examples of Performatives:**

Is the principally interesting thing about language that it can be used to make claims that are *true or false*?

NOTICE: This is what Logic-Choppers like Frege and Russell are tussling over: the logic, truth conditions, and information value of *e.g.* indirect discourse reports.

Austin: No, no, no!

Obvious examples:

- (1) Shut the door!
- (2) Would you please pass the salt?

Controversial examples:

- (3) That’s just pathetic! [expressing contempt?]
- (4) Maybe; maybe not. [expressing doubt?]
- (5) That must be the pizza guy. [expressing certainty?]

In the face of obvious examples, one might think that syntax will be our guide: the obvious examples of language use that does not aim at truth involve sentences that are not in the indicative mood. The controversial ones involve evaluative language (“pathetic”), or modal vocabulary (“maybe”, “must”).

SUGGESTION: Sentences which contain ordinary present indicative verbs aim at truth.

Austin’s Reply: This suggestion is wrong:

[Austin’s examples of performative utterances] will be perfectly straightforward utterances, with ordinary verbs in the first person singular present indicative active, and yet we shall see at once that they couldn’t possibly be true or false. Furthermore, if a person makes an utterance of this sort, we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something. (235)

EXAMPLES:

... in the course of a marriage ceremony I say, as people will, 'I do' ... Or again, suppose that I tread on your toe and say 'I apologize'. Or again, suppose that I have the bottle of champagne in my hand and say 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*'. Or suppose I say '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. We should rather say that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action. (235)

To fix ideas, let's focus on a single example: the promise. The performative utterance is of:

(6) I promise to meet you for lunch tomorrow.

3. **Austin's Claims:**

Standard Syntax Some performative utterances (*e.g.* (6)) contain ordinary verbs in the indicative present.

Action Performative utterances amount to doing something, rather than merely saying something.

No Truth Value Performative utterances are neither true nor false.

No Report (Strong) Performative utterances do not report the performance of an action (*e.g.* promising) on my part.

No Report (Weak) Performative utterances do not *merely* report the performance of an action on my part.

It seems to me that (Standard Syntax) and (Action) are evidently true.

4. **Why Believe (Action)?:**

Contrast with third-person and past tense:

For example, when we say 'I promise that ...', the case is very different from when we say 'He promises that ...', or in the past tense 'I promised that ...'. For when we say 'I promise that ...' we do perform an act of promising – we give a promise. (242)

Contrast (6) with:

(7) I promised to meet you for lunch tomorrow.

(8) Joe promised to meet you for lunch tomorrow.

Uttering (7) or (8) under normal circumstances does not obligate you. But uttering (6) under normal circumstances does. The difference is explained by the fact that we take an utterance of (6) to amount to undertaking a promise: we thereby incur an obligation.

Objection:

In the case of promising ... it's very easy 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. There is the case of Euripides' Hippolytus, who said, 'My tongue swore to, but my heart did not' – perhaps it should be 'mind' or 'spirit' rather than 'heart', but at any rate some kind of backstage artiste. (236)

The idea: uttering (1) isn't making a promise: making a promise is an inner and spiritual act, of which the utterance of (1) is an outward and audible report.

Austin's Reply:

Now it is clear from this sort of example that, if we slip into thinking that such utterances [as (6)] are reports, true or false, of the performance of inward and spiritual acts, we open a loophole to perjurers and welsers and bigamists and so on ... It is better, perhaps, to stick to the old saying that our word is our bond. (236)

The idea (I think): There is no such loophole; if the "backstage artiste" picture were correct, there would be; so, the "backstage artiste" picture is incorrect.

5. Why believe (No Truth Value)?

It follows from (No Report (Strong)): if our utterance is to be true or false, it must be in the business of reporting how things are – truth is just the accuracy of such a report.

NOTICE: (No Truth Value) does *not* follow from (No Report (Weak)): One can report that *P* without *merely* reporting that *P*. Consider, e.g.

(9) It's five minutes to 3.

(9) is truth-evaluable, but an utterance needn't *merely* be a report of the present time; it may also be intended to get you off the couch, for instance.

6. Why believe (No Report (Weak))?

It follows from (Action).

7. Why believe (No Report (Strong))?

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. We should rather say 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’ . . . , I am not reporting on a marriage, I am indulging in it. (235)

I’m not sure what this argument amounts to. **Possibilities:**

- **exclusion:** you can’t both promise and report that you are promising; and your utterance of (6) clearly amounts to promising; so, you must not be reporting that you are promising.

BUT: why can’t you do both at the same time? Consider:

(10) I am using English.

- **Inappropriateness:** it seems inappropriate to respond to an utterance of (6) with, “False!” This is a reason to think that (10) does not make a truth-evaluable report and is not truth-directed.

BUT:

(a) **Yes it is!** Consider:

(11) No you don’t; you have a plane to catch tomorrow.

Appropriate!

(b) **It might be obviously true.** It would be dumb to reply to (10) with, “False!”

(c) **It might be the inappropriateness of mere impoliteness.** Lots of truths are inappropriate to point out. [**EXAMPLE:** newborn babies look really strange.]

NOTE: The case of (10) provides a model for denying (No Report (Strong)) without endorsing the idea of a “backstage artiste.”

8. **Felicity Conditions:** Performative utterances are not truth-directed, but they are liable to certain defects.

TERMINOLOGY

- Performative utterances that are free of such defects are called *felicitous*; and
- The *felicity conditions* for a performative utterance are the conditions under which it is felicitous.

The idea: performative utterances don’t have *truth-conditions*, they have *felicity conditions*.

9. **Three kinds of felicity conditions:** [These are intended to be rough and ready categories, neither exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive]

- (a) **Conditions on Production:** If the utterer has not met these conditions, then the attempt to act has failed: one has not promised, married, christened, nominated, at all. Legalistic vocab: the act is *null and void*.

EXAMPLES:

- *Appropriate object:* You can't indict a ham sandwich.
- *Appropriate circumstances:* You can't marry someone if you are already married to someone else.
- *Existence of a convention:* You can't sell corn futures if there is no such thing as corn futures.

- (b) **Conditions on Sincerity:** if the utterer has not met these conditions, then the attempt to act has succeeded, but the act is insincere.

EXAMPLES: bigamists, swindlers, perjurers, *etc.*

- (c) **Conditions on Follow-Through:** if the utterer has not met these conditions, then the attempt to act has succeeded, and the act was sincere, but has not followed through on commitments he made.

This is very obvious, of course, if I promise to do something and then break my promise, but there are many kinds of commitment of a rather less tangible form than that in the case of promising. For instance, I may say 'I welcome you', bidding you welcome to my home ... but then I proceed to treat you as though you were exceedingly unwelcome.

- (d) **Conditions on Uptake:** if the audience has not met these conditions, then the attempt to act does not succeed.

EXAMPLES: misunderstanding, failure to hear, rejection of a bet, *etc.*

10. **The performative utterance “implies” that the felicity conditions are satisfied.**

[A]lthough these utterances do not themselves report facts and are not themselves true or false, saying these things does very often *imply* that certain things are true and not false, in some sense at least of that rather wooly word 'imply'. For example, when I say 'I do take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife', or some other formula in the marriage ceremony, I do imply that I'm not already married, with wife living, sane, undivorced, and the rest of it. (237)

AN UPSHOT: There is a kind of rule-governed implication that cannot be understood in the way traditional in logic, as the preservation of truth.

11. **Assertions are performative utterances too:** Austin argues that asserting a claim (*aka* making a statement, reporting a fact) is a performative utterance, even though it is truth-directed.

And after all when we state something or describe something or report something, we do perform an act which is every bit as much an act as an act of ordering or warning. There seems no good reason why stating should be given a specially unique position. (249)

Two Arguments:

(a) The argument from borderline cases:

Again, consider the case of the umpire when he says ‘Out’ . . . , or the jury’s utterance when they say that they find the prisoner guilty. Of course, we say, these are cases of giving verdicts, performing the act of appraising and so forth, but still in a way they have some connexion with the facts. They seem to have something like the duty to be true or false, and seem not to be so very remote from statements. (247)

The idea:

- i. Calling someone ‘Out’ is a performative utterance;
- ii. Calling someone ‘Out’ has truth conditions;

iii. So, performative utterances can have truth conditions.

This conclusion indicates that there is no reason to deny that assertions are performative utterances on account of their having truth conditions.

(b) The argument from infelicitous assertion:

Case: Moore’s Paradox

For example, it has been pointed out that there is something very odd about saying something like this: ‘The cat is on the mat but I don’t believe it is’. Now this is an outrageous thing to say, but it is not self-contradictory. There is no reason why the cat shouldn’t be on the mat without my believing that it is. So how are we to classify what’s wrong with this statement? If we remember now the doctrine of infelicity we shall see that the person who makes this remark about the cat is in much the same position as somebody who says something like this: ‘I promise that I shall be there, but I haven’t the least intention of being there’. . . . [The speaker] is actually avowing . . . insincerity – which makes a peculiar kind of nonsense. (248)

Consider:

(12) The cat is on the mat, but I don’t believe that it is.

FACTS:

- **defective:** Any utterance of this sentence is defective, and you can tell that it is defective just by thinking. You don’t have to check the speaker’s beliefs or the position of the cat.

- **not contradictory:** This sentence is not contradictory. In fact, it is in many cases the plain truth. And there are countless sentences defective in this way that are in fact true: many facts that obtain in spite of my not believing that they do.

Moore's Paradox Some sentences relevantly like (12) are true, but seem defective nonetheless.

Austin's Diagnosis Moore's paradoxical sentences are defective in virtue of the fact that utterances of them cannot be felicitous.

UPSHOT: assertions are performative utterances. Like other performatives, they have felicity conditions that go beyond their truth conditions. In particular, there is the following condition on assertion:

Belief Norm Assert that *P* only if you believe that *P*.

Assertions that violate (Belief Norm) are infelicitous – in particular, they are insincere.

12. Force vs. Content:

[B]esides 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. We may be quite clear what 'Shut the door' means, but not yet at all clear on the further point as to whether as uttered at a certain time it was an order, an entreaty or whatnot. (251)

Content of an utterance: what that utterance means;

Force of an utterance: which performative that utterance enacts.

Same force, different content:

(13) What time is it?

(14) Who is the man drinking the martini?

Same content different force:

(15) Pass to Ronaldinho! [An instruction shouted by the coach]

(16) Pass to Ronaldinho. [As reported by the announcer]