

Class Five: *How to Do Things with Worlds*, Lectures 4-6

Doing Things with Words - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Recap: Performatives vs. Constatives

- **The Initial Characterization:** Here's how we originally characterized the distinction between constatives and performatives.
 - **Constatives:** Sentences like "John is running," "The cat is on the mat," and so on, which simply describe how things are.
 - **Performatives:** Sentences like "I bet you ten bucks the Giants will win," "I now pronounce you man and wife," "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth," and so on, which appear to describe what I'm doing, but actually don't describe but, rather, constitute the doing of that action.
- **Some Initial Distinctions:** We distinguished these kinds of sentences or utterances as follows:
 - In uttering a constative, one simply *says* something, but in uttering a performative, one *does* something.
 - Constatives are *true or false*, whereas performatives are not true or false, but, rather, *happy or unhappy*.
 - * We distinguished different ways in which a performative could be unhappy.
- **An Observation:** This still basically fits the Fregean model. Recall Frege distinguished declaratives (which expressed thoughts), from other sentences that don't express thoughts, such as imperatives and exclamatives. Reading the first three lectures, it seems that all Austin has done is add another kind of non-thought-expressing sentence to the mix, which, interesting as it may be, might be bracketed as inessential to the core of language.

2 An Initial Blurring of the Distinction (and a Quick Phil Language Primer)

- **The Original Contrast Questioned:** We said that a performative like "I promise to do the dishes" was not true or false, but, rather, happy or unhappy. This contrasted it with a *constative* like "The dishes are in the cupboard," which is just true or false. The second half of Lecture IV calls into question this distinction.
- **The Initial Observation:** Though "I promise to do the dishes" is not itself true or false but happy or unhappy, if it is happy, then this means that several other things are true. For instance, it means that I'm in a position to promise to do the dishes (I'm not some random person off the street who has no business doing your dishes), that I intend to do the dishes, that I will do the dishes, and so on.
- **Three Kinds of Relations Between Sentences:** We can distinguish between the following three kinds of relations between sentences:
 - **Entailment:** A sentence *A* entails a sentence *B* if, given what *A* and *B* mean, it's not possible for *A* to be true and *B* to be false. Some examples:

- * "All frogs are green" entails "Some frogs are green."
- * "The shape is a rectangle" entails "The shape is a polygon."
- **Implication:** If A implies B , then someone who utters A invites the hearer to infer B , but it is nevertheless possible for A to be true and B to be false. Some examples:
 - * "I ate some of the pizza" implies (but does not entail) "I didn't eat all the pizza."
 - * "It is raining" implies "I believe it is raining."
 - That is why you cannot felicitously say "It is raining but I do not believe that it is."
- **Presupposition:** If A presupposes B , then someone who utters A takes for granted the truth of B . Unlike an entailment, where, if B is false, then A is also false. In the case of presupposition it seems that, if B is false, then A lacks a truth value.
 - * "All of Jack's children are bald" presupposes "Jack has children."
 - * "Frank stopped beating his dog" presupposes "There was some point in time at which Frank was beating his dog."
- **A Test for Distinguishing the First from the Second and Third:** If A entails B , then $\text{not-}B$ entails $\text{not-}A$ (a logical rule known as contraposition). But this doesn't hold for implications and presuppositions.
- **An Observation:** We were thinking of performatives, which can be "unhappy" along the dimensions we considered last class, as distinct from constatives in this regard. But, when we consider these kinds of relations, we see that, beyond just being true or false, constatives can be "unhappy" in quite analogous ways as well.
 - **Implication:** If I say "It's raining" when I don't believe that it's raining, I'm being insincere in a way that is directly analogous to saying "I promise to do the dishes" when I don't intend to do them. Just as a constative utterance " p " implies that I believe that p , a performative utterance of the form "I promise to φ " implies that I intend to φ .
 - **Presupposition:** If I say "All of Jack's children are bald" when Jack doesn't have any children, this statement is "void," as Austin says. It's almost as if I didn't really make a statement at all. He suggests this is analogous to going up and saying "I hereby name this ship the Queen Elizabeth" when I'm not the designated person.
- **Conclusion:** The line between the constative and the performative is starting to blur.

3 Attempting to Draw a Sharp Distinction

- **First Attempt:** But performatives are happy or unhappy, not true or false, and constatives are true or false, not happy or unhappy.
 - **On Constatives:** As we've already seen, "It's raining," said when I don't believe that it's raining (but it is in fact raining), seems like it's something like unhappy, though true.
 - **On Performatives:** "I warn you that the bull is about to charge," said sincerely but in a case in which the bull is not about to charge (perhaps, unbeknownst to the speaker, it's a well-trained docile bull).
 - * The warning is not "void," nor is it insincere. So it's not unhappy in any of the senses previously discussed, but it still seems unhappy in a certain sense.
 - * We're inclined to say that what was said was, in some way, false.

Neither of these cases conclusively show that performatives have just the same properties of truth/falsity we ascribe to constatives or that constatives have just the same properties of happiness/unhappiness we ascribe to performatives, but just that it's hard to draw a clear-cut distinction along these lines (without presupposing the constative/performative distinction).

- **Second Attempt:** Perhaps we can draw a grammatical distinction. For instance, performatives are sentences like “I promise,” “I bet,” “I name,” and so on, using the first-person pronoun (“I”) and a performative verb (“promise,” “bet,” etc.) in the present tense.
 - **The Clear Problem:** There are lots of sentences that seem to fit the category of performatives that don’t fit this grammatical schema.
 - * **Performatives Using Second or Third Person:** “You are hereby authorized to . . .”
“Passengers are warned to . . .”
 - * **It Seems that the Same Speech Act Can Be Performed by the Utterance of Various Sentences:** I may order you to turn right just by saying “Turn right” rather than “I order you to turn right.” I may give permission by saying “You may go” rather than “I permit you to go.”
 - In these cases, it seems that I’m doing the very same thing with the use of my words, but uttering different words in these different cases.
- **Third Attempt:** We can try a more sophisticated, less surface-level grammatical distinction. In cases in which there is not an *explicit* “I [performative verb],” expressing the doer/doing of the action, there is an *implicit* “I [performative verb]” that can be made explicit. So, any utterance that is *in fact* a performative, can be made into a kind of “standard form.”
 - **The Peculiar Sepcial Use of the First-Person Present Indicative:** It seems like there’s an essential assymetry between the first person “I” and a third-person pronoun such as “he” that arises specifically in their connection with performative verbs.
 - * **An Example:** “[A]n anxious parent when his child has been asked to do something may say ‘he promises, don’t you Willy?’ but little Willy must still himself say ‘I promise’ if he is really to have promised.”
 - * **The Important Point:**
 - **The Problem of Non-Performative Uses:** We can use the first-person present indicative with a performative verb and not make a performative utterance. For instance “I bet him (every morning) sixpence that it will rain” or “I promise only when I intend to keep my word.”
 - * We might be able to respond to these particular examples by pointing out that, in these cases, the simple present is used to express a *habitual* actual, whereas that’s not the case in performatives (some languages draw this grammatical distinction).
 - **Speech Acts that Can’t Be Made Into Explicit Performatives:** To insult someone seems to be to perform a particular kind of speech act. One might do this by saying, for instance, “You’re a dope.” But it seems that one cannot make the performative nature of these speech act explicit with a sentence of the form “I insult you by calling you a dope.”
 - **The Problem with “I State”:** It seems like any criterion along these lines is going to include “I state” as a performative, but this seems like it can’t be a performative since, in saying these words, one does nothing more than say something, and perfomatives are defined precisely in contrast to such a case.
- **The Upshot:** The task of relating all performative utterances to a specific class of sentences seems hopeless.

4 Taking Stock

- **Question:** Why did Austin go through all this, characterizing the phenomenon one way only in order to essentially say *scratch all that*? What’s the point?
 - **A Potential Answer:** As I understand the text, the philosophical point of this exercise is to show that the performative aspect of language is precisely *not bracketable*. All language essentially involves a performative dimension.

- **What We'll Want to Say about Some Examples:**
 - If I say "The bull's going to charge!" the uttering of this declarative sentence can constitute an act of warning you, but it's also true or false (true if the bull is, in fact, going to charge).
 - Likewise, to recall Wittgenstein's example, if I say "I'm in pain!" the utterance of this sentence can constitute a demand for the dentist to stop drilling. In that way, it functions like "Ouch!" But, unlike "Ouch!" it is also true, since I am, in fact, in pain.
- **Dimensions of the Speech Act:** What we want is an account of the different dimensions of the speech act, where every speech act includes a dimension of "doing something" that we've been thinking of as distinctive of performatives.