
Article

Speech-Act Theory

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Abstract

J. L. Austin claims that to say something is to do something and divides all utterances into performative utterances (henceforth performatives) and constative utterances (henceforth constatives). Then, he endeavors to establish a criterion for distinguishing performatives and constatives, but he fails to do so. As a result, he abandons the criterion for separating utterances into performatives and constatives, and reaches a conclusion that all utterances are performatives. But his analysis of utterances causes an infinite regress, which means that his logic collapses.

Key Words: performative, constative, infinite regress

Introduction

Austin insists that to say something is to do something and endeavors to distinguish performatives from constatives. He searches for a criterion for distinguishing performatives from constatives but cannot find any. So he concludes that all utterances are performatives. Austin's idea is also summarized in *Philosophical Papers* 2nd edition (1969). Can his insistence be verified from a logical point of view?

The present author has written a paper entitled "A Critique of J. L. Austin's Speech-Act Theory (Araki 1992: 15–26)." Here is its abstract:

J. L. Austin divides utterances into performatives and constatives and then tries to establish a criterion for distinguishing one from the other. But his efforts all end in failure. This means that utterances cannot be classified into performatives and constatives against his assumption. However, he abandons the criterion and regards all the utterances as performatives. In fact, the first person expression, which he interprets

as a typical performative, is a self-objectified one and essentially the same as the second and the third person one. Therefore, it is impossible from a logical point of view to attempt to draw a distinction between performatives and constatives. All the utterances are constatives and should not be construed as performatives. (Araki 1992: 15)

In this present paper, Austin's theory is examined from a different point of view from Araki's (1992).

1. Performatives and Constatives

Austin insists that the following sentences are neither a description nor a statement of an act, but that saying them is nothing but actually doing the act itself:

I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.

I give and bequeath my watch to my brother.

I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.

(Austin 1962: 5)

He names these sentences above *performatives*,

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distinguishing them from other sentences he calls *constatives*. According to him, *performatives* do not say anything or they do not only simply say something but also do something. Also they do not report anything true or false about some kind of topic. Austin says:

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it.
(Austin 1962: 6)

Moreover, Austin insists that *performatives* are either happy (appropriate) or unhappy (inappropriate), depending on the circumstances. On the other hand, *constatives* are either true or false, depending on the situations. Austin says:

Let us first at least concentrate attention on the little matter already mentioned in passing [Austin 1962: 6]—this matter of ‘the appropriate circumstances’. To bet is not, as I pointed out in passing, merely to utter the words ‘I bet, &c.’: someone might do that all right, and yet we might still not agree that he had in fact, or at least entirely, succeeded in betting. [...] Besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action. What these are we may hope to discover by looking at and classifying types of case in which something *goes wrong* and the act—marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not—is therefore at least to some extent a failure: the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general *unhappy*.
(Austin 1962: 13–14)

2. True-False and Happy-Unhappy

Next Austin seeks the distinction between *performatives* and *constatives*, thinking that the former is either happy or unhappy, but that the latter is either true or false. But in some cases, *performatives* are either true or false and *constatives* are either happy or unhappy, he admits, and he cannot deny such a distinction is imperfect. Austin says:

So that considerations of the happiness and unhappiness type may infect statements (or some statements) and considerations of the type of truth and falsity may infect performatives (or some performatives).

We have then to take a further step out into the desert of comparative precision. We must ask: is there some precise way in which we can definitely distinguish the performative from the constative utterance?
(Austin 1962: 55)

Moreover, grammatical criteria are also denied when Austin tries to distinguish between performatives and constatives. Austin asks himself:

Well, is the use of the first person singular and of the present indicative active, so called, essential to a performative utterance?
(Austin 1962: 57)

And he answers this question himself:

A very common and important type of, one would think, indubitable performative has the verb in the *second or third person* (singular or plural) and the verb in the *passive* voice: so person and voice anyway are not essential. Some examples of this type are:

- (1) You are hereby authorized to pay
- (2) Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only.

Indeed the verb may be ‘impersonal’ in such cases with the passive, for example:

- (3) Notice is hereby given that trespassers will be prosecuted.
(Austin 1962: 57)

For example, Austin says that a sentence beginning with *I state ...* is not only a *performative* but also a *constative*, and that it is certain that the sentence can be *true* or *false* (Austin 1962: 91–92). This means that he denies his criterion that *performatives* are either happy or unhappy and *constatives* are either true or false. The reason is that he admits that one and the same sentence beginning with *I state ...* can be both a *performative* (which is either happy or unhappy) and a *constative* (which is either true or false) at the same time. Austin says:

Now let us consider where we stand for a moment: beginning with the supposed contrast between performative and constative utterances, we found sufficient indications that unhappiness nevertheless seems to characterize both kinds of utterance, not merely the performative; and that the requirement of conforming or bearing some relation to the facts, different in different cases, seems to characterize performatives, in addition to the requirement that they should be happy, similarly to the way which is characteristic of supposed constatives.

Now we failed to find a grammatical criterion for performatives, [...] we still have utterances beginning ‘I state that ...’ which seem to satisfy the requirements of being performative, yet which surely are the making of statements, and surely are essentially true or false.

It is time then to make a fresh start on the problem. We want to reconsider more generally the senses in which to say something may be to do something, or in saying something we do something (and also perhaps to consider the different case in which *by* saying something we do something). [...] When we issue any utterance whatsoever, are we not ‘doing something’?

(Austin 1962: 90–91)

3. Unification of *Performatives* and *Constatives*

Eventually Austin develops his argument from the distinction between *performatives* and *constatives* to a general theory of speech acts. He analyzes speech acts as *locutionary act* (saying something), *illocutionary act* (what you’re trying to do by speaking), and *perlocutionary act* (the effect of what you say). Austin says:

The act of ‘saying something’ in this full normal sense I call, i.e. dub, the performance of a locutionary act,

(Austin 1962: 94)

To perform a locutionary act is in general, we may say, also and *eo ipso* to perform an *illocutionary act*, as I propose to call it.

(Austin 1962: 98)

There is yet a further sense (C) in which to perform a locutionary act, and therein an illocutionary act, may also be to perform an act of another kind.

Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them; and we may then say, thinking of this, that the speaker has performed an act in the nomenclature of which reference is made either (C. a), only obliquely, or even (C. b), not at all, to the performance of the locutionary or illocutionary act. We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a *perlocutionary act* or *perlocution*.

(Austin 1962: 101)

We have here then roughly distinguished three kinds of acts—the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary.

(Austin 1962: 102–103)

Surprisingly enough, Austin goes on to insist that *constatives* perform *illocutionary act* and *perlocutionary act* just as *performatives* do. As a result, he completely abandons the distinction between *performatives* and *constatives*. Finally Austin comes to a conclusion that all speech acts (utterances) are *performatives*. He classifies them into the following five types:

- (1) Verdictives.
- (2) Exercitives.
- (3) Commissives.
- (4) Behavitives.
- (5) Expositives.

(Austin 1962: 150)

4. Infinite Regress

If Austin’s conclusion is right, then what will happen? I shall follow his argument along the line of logic.

He insists that all speech acts are *performatives*. So the following sentence is an example of a *performative* as Austin himself admits:

It is raining.

(Austin 1962: 133)

He insists that to say the sentence above is *to state* it and that saying it, that is, *stating* it, is quite the same as *verifying*, *betting*, and *warning* something (Austin 1962: 133). In other words, the sentence “It is raining” can be interpreted as:

I state that it is raining. (Austin 1962: 133)

interpreted as

Surprisingly enough, along the same line of argument, Austin insists that the following is also a *performative*:

I state that I state that I state that he didn't do that.

He didn't (did not) do that (it). (Austin 1962: 134)

This process goes on ad infinitum and is called an infinite regress. The infinite regress is an example of recursion, which is thought to be a universal property of human language by Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002).

The reason is that the sentence above is not different from the following:

As Motoki Tokieda points out, we cannot describe a person who states something since such an infinite regress takes place:

I state that he didn't do that (it).
(Austin 1962: 133)

The sentence above, according to Austin, is a *performative* just as the following are:

We can never describe ourselves by using language in the same way as when we depict something other than us. For example, when a painter paints his or her self-portrait, the character in the self-portrait is not the painter who is painting himself or herself but the character who is objectified and materialized independently of the painter who is painting himself or herself. This is true of language. "I" in "I read" is not the person who uses this expression but the character who is objectified. (My translation)

I counterargue that he didn't do that.
I imply that he didn't do that.
I bet that he didn't do that. (Austin 1962: 133)

Therefore, for Austin, *stating* something is to perform an act (Austin 1962: 138–139).

If we accept his insistence, then the following sentence

(Tokieda 1941: 42–43)

I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.

A similar thing to this happens when we see an image which is reflected in a mirror by looking at another mirror. It is another example of the infinite regress.

can be interpreted as

I state that I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.

So Austin's analysis falls into an infinite regress although he might not have noticed that his arguments led to the infinite regress.

because all utterances *are stated*. This should be true of stating something as a logical conclusion. This means that all sentences or utterances are *stating* something although he classifies them into the five types of performatives (Austin 1962: 150). So the following sentence

Incidentally, from a different point of view, J. R. Ross (1970) noticed this phenomenon when he proposed "performative analysis" based on transformational grammar. Geoffrey Leech explains:

I state that he didn't (did not) do that.

is also no exception and can be construed as

I state that I state that he didn't do that.

The gist of the performative analysis is that in its 'deepest structure' [...] every sentence is a performative; that is, every sentence contains as its main subject a first-person pronoun, and as its main verb a performative verb in the simple present tense. For example, the declarative sentence *Tomorrow will be rainy* has, in this view, a deep structure of a form such as *I state that [tomorrow will be rainy]* or *I predict that [tomorrow will be rainy]*, or *I warn you that [tomorrow*

The utterance above is also *stated*, so it can be

will be rainy]. (Leech 1981: 323–324)

He points out the difficulties of the performative analysis:

[...] to suppose that a double performative *I state to you that I promise you* underlies this sentence [As for myself, I promise you that I'll be there.] is to open the door to potential infinite regression of performatives, one within the other:

I state that *X*.

I state that I state that *X*.

I state that I state that I state that *X* ...

(etc.)

If this sort of embedding is allowed, then every simple sentence can be derived from infinitely many deep structures. (Leech 1981: 325–326)

After all, Ross also abandoned his performative analysis because of the infinite regress.

Furthermore, we might think of Austin's idea from a different point of view. If Austin's idea is right, then all utterances including his five types of speech acts (Austin 1962: 150)

1. Verdictives
2. Exercitives
3. Commissives
4. Behabitives
5. Expositives

might be interpreted as the only one type of speech act: *stating*. The reason is that every utterance, includ-

ing Austin's five types of speech acts, can be thought of as *stating* something. Can Austin accept this conclusion? Probably not. But this is a logical necessity. Austin must admit it despite his insistence.

Conclusion

Austin tries to distinguish *performatives* from *constatives* one way or another, but only to find that there is no such a criterion at all. As a result, he abandons distinctions between *performatives* and *constatives* and concludes that all utterances are *performatives*. But his theory falls into an infinite regress and collapses.

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