

PERFORMATIVES INTRODUCED. Austin begins by highlighting the focus on assertion, utterances designed to report facts. He isolates two stages in the evolution of the debate regarding assertion. At the first stage, verificationism was a blessing, since it helped to root out nonsense, statements that could have no clear truth conditions. After verificationism came the stage when people grew aware of the various uses, such as persuasion, that could be associated with assertions. These other uses of various utterances distinct from factual reporting will be Austin's present subject. 220 221

He then turns to his subject which he defines as focussed on utterances that resemble assertions, and yet have a very different role. These utterances are used to *do* things, to make things happen—rather than merely reporting what has happened. 222

Example 1 (Baptism). Ships are named following a pleasant ceremony that involves breaking a bottle of champagne. Suppose I have a champagne in my hand and declare: 222

(17-1) I thereby name this ship 'Queen Elizabeth'.

At first glance I have described to you what I was doing—namely, naming. But this is wrong. I did not describe the act of naming, I *performed* the naming. My utterance was not an assertion. It was a performative utterance. Austin immediately cautions that the bare fact of uttering a few words is generally insufficient for a performance. Certain further conditions have to be fulfilled. He will come back to these conditions later on. 223

Example 2 (Promises). The last claim is illustrated with the case of promising which deserves to be mentioned separately. When a person makes a promise, he should be taken at his word. Whether he intends to keep his word or not, just the fact of him uttering, 'I promise ϕ -ing' should be sufficient for his promise to occur. We should not think of his utterance as simply conveying his inner attitude. If this were so, it would be exceedingly easy to go back on your word.

Question 3. Reflect on the example of promises. How different is it from the example of baptism?

Austin further observes that, though themselves not truth-apt, performatives may *imply* certain statements that are truth-apt. He does not have a theory here how this implication works ('woolly word'). 224

Remark 4. Anticipating later developments: the notion of 'implicature' will be central to Grice's theory.

FELICITY CONDITIONS. One problem, maybe *the* problem, of the philosophy of language since Wittgenstein, and then especially of logical positivism, was to specify the criteria of nonsense. Statements can be nonsensical in a number of ways: syntactically, grammatically, semantically, and pragmatically (as we are going to see in a moment).

Question 5. Give examples of nonsensical statements.

We observe a possibility of a similar disability in performatives. There are certain conditions to be satisfied for the performative utterance to be 'successful', conditions under which it does not 'misfire'. 224

(i) At least some performatives rely on extant conventions, and so these conventions must already be in place if the utterance were to perform—if, that is, by using some words I could baptise, marry, and so on. 224

(ii) The speaker must observe the precise form of the convention. Thus divorcing my wife would not work if I were to simply place my wife on a sofa and declare, 'I thereby divorce you!' Or alternatively, if I place *so-and-so's* wife on a sofa and declare, 'You are thereby divorced from so-and-so!' The occasion, the speaker, the addressee must, in other words, all fit the provisions specified in the convention. 225

(iii) There is another kind of infelicity which, as Austin notes, is different from the earlier ones. Some performatives are intrinsically linked to inner states. As a priest authorised to marry couples, I am not required to have any particular attitude whatsoever. In fact, I can be quite drunk and still be able to exercise my authority. But it is otherwise with other performatives. When I apologise, congratulate, thank, it seems that I should have a correspondent attitude. If the attitude is absent, then there is an abuse of this form of speech. Same with promises. Normally I should intend to promise 226

when I promise. And if I don't, then there is 'insincerity' involved. But the role of insincerity is limited. There *is* a promise in place, even when the attitude is mismatched. We should probably say that sincerity is one of the conditions for the competent use of the performative utterance which does not, however, impinge on its success. Austin then makes a further point when he says that some performatives *commit* me, by the very fact of utterance, to a certain type of a future performance. If I say, 'Welcome!' and then proceed to abuse you, it indicates some fault with my utterance. We might in this case say that, either the speaker has not mastered the use of the words, or that the utterance was not 'really' made, that it failed in the way analogous to an utterance by an impostor priest.

The list of infelicities, and of the felicity conditions, is incomplete. Austin gives two illustrations. In the *Generalissimo Stalin* case, we might be uncertain whether the failure is due to the identity of the speaker or to the procedure as a whole. A more interesting failure is when the hearer did not properly hear or simply misunderstood what is said. Clearly this failure matters to some performatives, but not to other. An even more interesting failure is when an utterance is made non-seriously, deliberately so. Once again, it should matter to some performatives, but not to other.

TAXONOMY. Austin turns to the question of identifying performatives. How can we know which performative utterance is made on the given occasion. One idea is to use the criterion of verbal clauses. Each performative's kind is determined by a paraphrase into a sentence with a governing verbal clause (here I deviate from Austin's order of presentation somewhat: he first considers the possibility that all performatives are *actually* given with a governing verbal clause, and so the issue of paraphrase does not come up till page 230). In this sentence the governing verb will be in the first person singular present indicative active.

Example 6. If I say:

I will marry you,

my utterance is ambiguous, first, between a declarative (an assertion) and a performative. Second, it is not clear from my words which performative, if any, was made. If my utterance is allowed to stay as it is, then it is a mere prediction. If, however, we allow it to be paraphrased into:

[I promise that] I will marry you,

then we have a performative of promising.

Example 7. Carrying on with the same example, we contrast:

I promise that I will marry you.

I promised that I will marry you.

The first utterance here is a promise. The second one, however, is a mere report.

Of course some performatives can perfectly be made in the third person (warnings or apologies) or in a different mood, such as orders delivered in the imperative. But, to repeat, we hope that they can all be reduced with an appropriate paraphrase to one of the standard verbal clauses.

Austin then speculates that language has evolved to have these explicit verbal clauses precisely to disambiguate performative utterances.

Example 8. Suppose I say: 'You are a coward.' The ambiguity will be removed once I paraphrase this utterance into these 'standard' forms:

I reprimand you for your cowardice.

I censure you for your cowardice.

The language, however, for good social reasons has not evolved the clause 'I insult you'. (This point on insults is very interesting, but Austin, I think, is clearly mistaken in his diagnosis. I cannot elaborate on this here.)