



Austin on Constative and Performative Utterances: An Analysis

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Abstract:

Most early analytic philosopher, namely, G. Frege, B. Russell, Logical positivists, think that we use language to describe some facts of the worlds. However, Austin holds that there are two types of linguistic utterances, i.e., constative and performative. Constative utterances are made to describe some facts of the world, where as performative utterances are made to perform some acts. Performative utterances are neither true nor false, since they don't describe any fact of the world. However in this paper, I have tried to explain and analyze Austin's distinction between constative and performative utterance. In this connection, I have tried to explain the condition of happy performatives and criteria for distinguishing performative and constative utterances as provided by Austin.

Keywords: Constative, performative, descriptive fallacy, conditions for happy performative, criteria for performative utterances.

Introduction: Austin points out that there are some philosophers who hold that we use language to describe some facts or some states of affairs. For example, logical positivists hold that every meaningful statement are either synthetic which are used to describe some facts of the world or analytic which are use to state formal truths of logic and mathematics. Any statement which is neither analytic nor synthetic is considered by logical positivists as nonsensical. So, logical positivists hold that every statements of our language are used to describe something. But Austin points out that there are some statements which are used to perform some acts. These statements are not used to describe something. If any philosopher considers this type of statements as descriptive, they commit a fallacy which is called by Austin as *descriptive fallacy*. Austin says,

We very often also use utterances in ways beyond the scope at least of traditional grammar. It has come to be seen that many specially perplexing words embedded in apparently descriptive statements do not serve to indicate some specially odd additional feature in the reality reported, but to indicate (no to report) the circumstances in which the statement is made or reservations to which it is subject or the way in which it is to be taken and the like. To overlook these possibilities in the way once common is called the *descriptive fallacy*;... Not all true or false statements are descriptions and for this reason I prefer to use the word *constative*.¹

Distinction between Constative and Performative Utterances: Austin distinguishes between two types of utterances namely, the constative and the performative. There are

¹ J.L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, J.O. Urmson (ed.), p. 3.

some utterances which are made to describe some facts, these utterances are called constatives. Whereas some other utterances are always made to perform some acts, these utterances are called by Austin performative. Secondly, the constative utterances are always made to describe some fact, so they are always either true or false. If there is a fact corresponding to any constative utterance then that utterance will be true, otherwise false. On the other hand, performative utterances are made to do something. Thus, they are neither true nor false, but happy or unhappy. A performative utterance may be *felicitous* or *infelicitous* instead of true or false. If the utterer will act in accordance with his performative utterances, then his performative utterances are felicitous, otherwise infelicitous. Moreover, any performative utterance must have some specified goal, i.e., some specified act. If that goal will be achieved then the concern performative utterances will be happy. Austin gives some examples of performatives from our ordinary language, which are as follows:

- i. 'I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)'— as uttered in the course of marriage ceremony;
- ii. 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth'— as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.
- iii. 'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother'— as occurring in a will.
- iv. 'I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow'.

These utterances are used to perform some act. They are not used to describe some facts of the world. Thus these utterances are not characterized as true or false but happy or unhappy. For instance, when someone says, 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth', He does not describe the christening ceremony. Actually he is naming this ship. Similarly, when someone says before the registrar 'I do this woman my lawful wedded spouse'. He is not reporting the marriage ceremony, but he is performing the act of marriage. This performative utterance in order to be happy implies some conditions, namely, he is not already married, with wife living, sane, undivorced etc., which are too fulfilled. As Austin says,

These performative utterances are not true or false, then. But they do suffer from certain disabilities of their own. They can fail to come off in special ways, and that is what I want to consider next. The various ways in which a performative utterance may be unsatisfactory we call, for the sake of a name, the infelicities; and an infelicity arises—that is to say, the utterance is unhappy—if certain rules, transparently simple rules, are broken. I will mention some of these rules and then give examples of some infringements.²

Conditions for Happy Performatives: Austin has mentioned some objective and subjective conditions for smooth or happy performatives. The objective conditions for the happy and smooth performatives as mentioned by Austin are as follows:

Firstly, 'there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.'³ For example, when a husband who is by religion Hindu or Christian says thrice to his wife 'I divorce you', his utterance cannot be considered as

² J. L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *the Philosophy of Language*, p. 117.

³ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, J.O. Urmson (ed.), p. 14.

performative. For, this procedure to divorce wife by any husband is not recommended in Hindu and Christian religions as conventional procedure. However, if a married male who is a follower of Islam uses these words for three times for his wife, then he must perform the act of divorce by his utterances. For, according to the Islam religion, there is a legal procedure that if a married male wants to divorce his wife, then he will merely say thrice 'I divorce you'. Austin says,

Suppose that, living in a community like our own, we wish to divorce our wife. We may try standing her in front of us squarely in the room and saying, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, hear "I divorce you." Now this procedure is not accepted. We shall not thereby have succeeded in divorcing our wife, at least in this country and others like it.⁴

Secondly, 'the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.'⁵ For example, when someone utters 'I appoint you in front of another person, the speaker must have the authority to utter this sentence, there must be at least vacancy to appoint the hearer, and the hearer must be in need for an appointment. If anyone of these conditions is not fulfilled, the above mentioned utterance cannot be considered as happy performative.

Thirdly, 'the procedure must be executed by all participants correctly and completely '⁶. For example, if a married man, who belongs to Hindu religion, says to young women, 'I do you my lawful wedded spouse', then his utterance will not perform the act of marriage; it is a case misfire of performative utterance. Moreover when someone says 'I bet six pence' and nobody takes offer of betting, the acts which the speaker wants to perform by his utterance is not achieved.

Moreover, Austin mentions some subjective conditions for happy performative utterances if these subjective conditions are not properly fulfilled even if the circumstances are in order, the person who are involved in this procedure are also appropriate and the act executed correctly as well as completely by the person, then a performative utterance cannot be considered as happily performed. The subjective conditions for happy performative utterance as mentioned by Austin are as follows:

Firstly, 'Where as often, the procedure is designed for use by person having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct in the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves'.⁷ By these words, Austin points out that performatives in order to be happy must depend on subjective conditions like intention, thought, and feeling of the speaker. For instance, when someone says, 'I congratulate you' although he is not pleased at all, his performative utterance violates the above mentioned subjective conditions of performatives. Similarly, when someone does not intend to promise but says 'I promise',

⁴ J. L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language*, p. 117.

⁵ Ibid. p.15.

⁶ Ibid., p.15

⁷ Ibid., p.15

his performative utterance violates the above mentioned subjective condition. So, his performative utterance is not successful or happy.

Secondly, ‘And the participant must actually so conduct themselves subsequently’.⁸ For example, if someone says ‘I promise to tell the truth’ and then he will lie, he breaks his promise. The speaker of the above utterance has abused his utterance. This is an instance of an infelicity of a performative utterance.

According to Austin, if any violation occurs in objective conditions of performative utterance, then any performative utterance will be *Misfire*; and if any violation occurs in subjective conditions of performative utterance, then any performative utterance will be Abuse. As Austin says:

But there is another and a rather different way in which this kind of utterance may go wrong. A good many of these verbal procedures are designed for use by people who hold certain beliefs or have certain feelings or intentions. And if you use one of these formulae when you do not have the requisite thoughts or feelings or intentions then there is an abuse of the procedure, there is insincerity. Take, for example, the expression, “I congratulate you.” This is designed for use by people who are glad that the person addressed has achieved a certain feat; believe that he was personally responsible for the success, and so on. If I say “I congratulate you” when I’m not pleased or when I don’t believe that the credit was yours, then there is insincerity. Likewise if I say I promise to do something, without having the least intention of doing it or without believing it feasible. In these cases there is something wrong certainly, but it is not like a misfire. We should not say that I didn’t in fact promise, but rather that I did promise but promised insincerely; I did congratulate you but the congratulations were hollow. And there may be an infelicity of a somewhat similar kind when the performative utterance commits the speaker to future conduct of a certain description and then in the future he does not in fact behave in the expected way. 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 or wherever it may be, but then I proceed to treat you as though you were exceedingly unwelcome. In this case the procedure of saying “I welcome you” has been abuse in a way rather different from that of simple insincerity.⁹

Criteria for Performative Utterances: Austin provides two criteria for identifying the performative utterances, namely, Grammatical Criterion and Vocabulary Criterion.

Grammatical Criterion: The verb of any performative utterance must be used in the first person, singular, present tense, indicative and active voice. For example, I name, I bet, I do, I give etc. are instances of performative utterances. If a person asserts, ‘I do’, or ‘I bet’, then he does not describe something, but he performs these acts. More over Austin thinks that there are some superficial similarities among ‘I promise’ and ‘I promised’ or ‘he promises’, but the first one is clearly different from the rest two. When a person utters ‘I promised’ or ‘he promises’, he is simply describing reporting of his promise of some other

⁸ Ibid., p.15

⁹ J. L. Austin, ‘Performative Utterances’, in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *the Philosophy of Language*, p. 117-119.

person's promise. However, when a person, states 'I promise', he is not reporting or describing of his promise but indeed he does promise. It reveals that when a person says 'I promise', insinuates his/her commitment about his utterance. To explain this point, Austin says, 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 promised that..." we do perform an act of promising—we give a promise. What we do *not* do is to report on somebody's performing an act of promising—in particular, we do not report on somebody's use of the expression "I promise." We actually do use it and do the promising. But if I say "He promises", or in the past tense "I promised," I precisely do report on an act of promising, that is to say an act of using this formula "I promise"—I report on a present act of promising by him, or on a past act of my own. There is thus a clear difference between our first person singular present indicative, and other persons and tenses. This is brought out by the typical incident of little Willie whose uncle says he'll give him half –a-crown if he promises never to smoke till he's 55. Little Willie's anxious parent will say "of course he promises, don't you Willie?" giving him a nudge and little Willie just doesn't vouchsafe. The point here is that he must do the promising himself by saying "I promise" and his parent is going to first in saying he promises.¹⁰

Vocabulary Criterion: Austin holds that an utterance is counted as performative if one could fairly insert the word '*hereby*' before the main verb of the utterance. He says, '*hereby*' is a useful criterion' for an utterance to be performative. For example, the utterance of the sentence 'I promise to pay you...' is performative because the speaker could as well have to say 'I hereby promise to pay you...' The word '*hereby*' emphasizes that the act in question, here the giving of a promise, is constituted by the speaker's very utterance itself. He also thinks that this criterion is certainly a distinguishing mark off performatives from constative. For example, if someone utters a paradigmatic constative like 'The cat is on the mat', he could not have inserted '*hereby*', because the utterance of the sentence 'The cat is hereby on the mat' is nonsensical for the cat is on the mat regardless of his saying that it is. His saying it does nothing to make it so. J.R. Searle also says,

I think we use *hereby* because 'I promise' and 'I hereby promise' are amongst function-indicating devices for *commitment* provided by English language. For that reason we often use these expressions in the performance of speech acts which are not strictly speaking promises but in which we wish to emphasize our commitment'.¹¹

Austin's Abandonment of the Performative and Constative Dichotomy: Austin realizes afterwards that no criterion is either necessary or sufficient for an utterance's being performative. He thinks that this dichotomy cannot be properly explained for the following reasons:

Firstly, Austin points out that, there are some performative utterances in which the verbs are used in the second or third person and even in passive voice. For example, 'you are hereby authorized to do so and so', 'Passengers are warned to cross the line by the bridge only' etc. when someone utters the second sentence in a railway station, his

¹⁰ J. L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *the Philosophy of Language*, p. 119-120.

¹¹ J.R.Searle (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language*, p.49

utterance is undoubtedly performative. But the main verb of this sentence is not in the first person, singular, present, indicative active. So the grammatical criterion cannot be considered as necessary condition for an utterance's being performative. Moreover, Austin points out that, performative utterance may be without the use of the verb *hereby*. For instance, the utterances of the sentences 'Passengers are warned to cross the track by bridge only'; 'you are ordered to follow these rules'; 'you are authorized to do so and so', etc. are performatives. However, they do not comprise the term 'hereby'. Thus, the vocabulary criterion cannot also be considered as necessary condition for an utterance's being performative. Austin says,

That then, is a bit of a test for whether an utterance is performative or not, but it would not do to suppose that every performative utterance has to take this standard form. There is at least one other standard form, every bit as common as this one, where the verb is in the passive voice and in the second or third person, not in the first. The sort of case I mean is that of a notice inscribed "Passengers are warned to cross the line by the bridge only," or of a document reading "You are hereby authorized" to do so and so. These are undoubtedly performative, and in fact a signature is often required in order to show who it is that is doing the act of warning, or authorizing, or whatever it may be. Very typical of this kind of performative—especially liable to occur in written documents of course—is that the little word 'hereby' either actually occurs or might naturally be inserted.¹²

Secondly, Austin points out that there are some performative utterances which are not satisfying any criterion for performatives. For example, utterances like 'This bull is dangerous', 'Dangerous bull' or simply 'Bull' may be used as performatives like 'You are hereby warned that this bull is dangerous'. But these utterances do not satisfy any criterion for performatives. Austin writes,

Unfortunately, however, we still can't possibly suggest that every utterance which is to be classed as a performative has to take one or another of these two, as we might call them, standard forms. After all it would be a very typical performative utterance to say "I order you to shut the door." This satisfies all the criteria. It is performative the act of ordering you to shut the door, and it is not true or false. But in the appropriate circumstances surely we could perform exactly the same act by simply saying "Shut the door," in the imperative. Or again, suppose that somebody sticks up a notice "This bull is dangerous," or simply "Dangerous bull," or simply "Bull." Does this necessarily differ from sticking up a notice; appropriately signed, saying "You are hereby warned that this bull is dangerous?" It seems that the simple notice "Bull" can do just the same job as the more elaborate formula.¹³

Thirdly, performatives can be explicit or implicit. An explicit performative is one where it is clear from the utterance of the performatives, like in the case of the performatives "I promise..." and "I advise you..." what actions are being performed. On the other hand, an implicit performative is one where it is not clear from the utterance what kind of action is being performed. In this case, it is the context that determines what kind of action is being performed. For instance, my utterance of "I will be there" may mean that I am making a

¹² J. L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *the Philosophy of Language*, p. 120.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 120.

promise, expressing an intention of being there, or simply making a prediction of some future event. It is the context of my utterance that indicates what action I am performing.

However, Austin thinks that he cannot satisfactorily explain the distinction between constative and performative utterances, and lastly he abandons this dichotomy. He says, Considerations of this sort, then, may well make us feel pretty unhappy. If we look back for a moment at our contrast between statements and performative utterances, we realize that we were taking statements very much on trust from, as we said, the traditional treatment. Statements, we had it, were to be true or false; performative utterances on the other hand were to be felicitous or infelicitous. They were the doing of something, whereas for all we said making statements was for all we said making statements was not doing something. Now this contrast surely, if we look back at it, is unsatisfactory.¹⁴

However, J.L. Austin, in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, introduces the distinction between constative and performative utterances and the distinction of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts with the intention for contributing to new terminologies for the accurate study of language. He points out that stating of facts either truly or falsely is not the only use of language. He introduces a new dimension of language that using it people not only say something, but also does something. Austin points out that some of the verbs in their first person, singular number, present tense and active voice use have some special characteristic, that is, when they are used in appropriate circumstances, lead to a performance of an action. Thus, in issuing utterance in like 'I promise' or 'I apologize', the speaker performs the act of promising or apologizing. This type of utterances and their uses in ordinary circumstances lead him to uphold his new theory of Performative Utterance. To accomplish this task, he introduces the new concept of performative and contrasts it with statement or constative. He tries to develop this distinction meticulously but he becomes critical to this distinction and abandons it for a more general theory, i.e., the theory of speech act.

¹⁴ J. L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language*, p. 122 (my emphasis).

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