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What Is the Point of Talking about “Performatives”?

Niklas Forsberg

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University of Pardubice

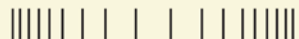
Jednota filosofická, Olomouc
April 25, 2019



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Introduction:

("old habits of *Gleichschaltung*")

our ordinary words are much subtler in their uses, and mark many more distinctions, than philosophers have realized; and the facts of perception, as discovered by, for instance, psychologists but also as noted by common morals, are much more diverse and complicated than has been allowed for. It is essential, here as elsewhere, to abandon old habits of *Gleichschaltung*, the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies.

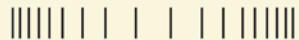
(Austin: *Sense and Sensibilia*, p. 3)



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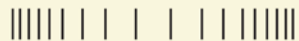


Performatives ("go catch a falling star")

I want to discuss a kind of utterance which looks like a statement and grammatically, I suppose, would be classed as a statement. (...) They will be perfectly straightforward utterances, with ordinary verbs in the first person 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* rather than merely *saying* something.

Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 235





Performatives ("go catch a falling star")

Suppose, for example, that in the course of a marriage ceremony I say, as people will, 'I do' – (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife). Or again, suppose that I tread on your toe and I say 'I apologize'. Or again, suppose that I have the bottle of champagne in my hand and say 'I name this ship the *Queen Elisabeth*'. Or suppose I say 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow'.



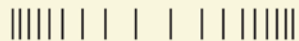


Performatives ("go catch a falling star")

In all these cases it would be absurd to regard the thing I say as a report of the performance of the action which is undoubtedly done – the action of betting, or christening, or apologizing. We should rather say that, in saying what I do, I actually perform the action. When I say 'I name this ship the *Queen Elisabeth*' I do not describe the christening ceremony, I actually perform the christening. (...) Now these kinds of utterance are the ones that we call *performative* utterances.

(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 235.)





Performatives ("go catch a falling star")

A. Performatives

"I do"

"I promise I will come and visit
you tomorrow"

"I hereby baptize you..."

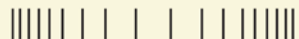
B. Constatives

"The mat is on the cat"

"The coffee is hot"

"There are 107 kinds of tulips"



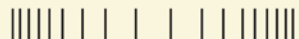


Performatives ("go catch a falling star")

These performatives 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 (...) The various ways in which a performative utterance may be unsatisfactory we call, for the sake of the name, the infelicities: and infelicities arises – that is, the utterance is unhappy – if certain rules, transparently simple rules, are broken.

(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 237.)





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Performatives ("go catch a falling star")

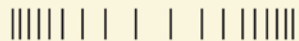
Suppose that you are about to name the ship, you have been appointed to name it, and you are just about to bang the bottle against the stem: but at that moment some low type comes up, snatches the bottle out of your hand, breaks it on the stem, shouts out 'I name this ship the *Generalissimo Stalin* and then for good measure kicks away the chocks.



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Performatives ("go catch a falling star")

Well, we agree of course on several things. We agree that the ship certainly isn't now named the *Generalissimo Stalin*, and we agree that it's an infernal shame and so on and so forth. But we may not agree as to how we should classify the particular infelicity in this case.

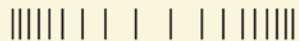
(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 239f.)



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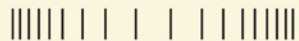


Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

That, then, is perhaps enough to be going on with. We have discussed the performative utterance and its infelicities. That equips us, we may suppose, with two new shining tools to crack the crib of reality maybe. It also equips us – it always does – with two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet. The question is how to use them.

(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 241.)





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Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

"So far we have been going firmly ahead, feeling the firm ground of prejudice glide away beneath our feet, which is rather exhilarating, but what next?"

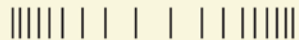
(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 241.)



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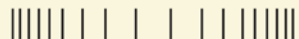


Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

"You are more than entitled to know what the word 'performative' means. It is a new word and an ugly word, and perhaps it does not mean very much."

(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 233.)





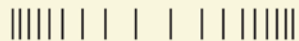
Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

Austin's aim is to criticize the assumption that:

"the sole business, the sole interesting business, of any utterance – that is, of anything we say – is to be true or at least false."

(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 233.)





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Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

You will be waiting for the bit where we bog down, the bit where we take it all back, and sure enough that's going to come but it will take time.

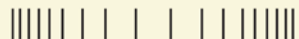
(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 241.)



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Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

We see, or learn to see:

“what act it is that we are performing when we say something”

by means of paying attention to

“the tone of voice, cadence, gesture – and above all we can rely upon the nature of the circumstances, the context in which the utterance is made.”

(Austin, “Performative Utterances,” p. 244.)



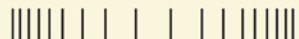


Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

“‘The coffee is hot’ may be an observation, a hint, a request, an explanation, an excuse, a warning — or hallucinated. So— in each case — what?”

(Stanley Cavell, “Performative Utterances,” p. 244.)





Breakdown

("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

She: "You don't really see me."

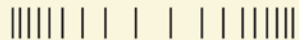
He: "I am looking at you right now."

She: "Don't be cruel. You know exactly what I mean. I am simply not unique to you! You are just a hopeless womanizer."

He: "What? You are my Tulip! You know that."

She: "There are 109 kinds of tulips..."





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Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

"Of course statements are liable to be assessed in this matter of their correspondence or failure to correspond with the facts, that is, by being true or false. But they are also liable to infelicity every bit as much as are performative utterances."

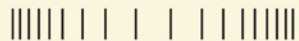
(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 247.)



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Breakdown

(“two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet”)

“for a certain performative utterance to be happy, certain statements *have to be true.*”

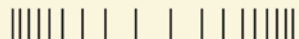
(Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 44.)



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Breakdown

(“two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet”)

“this distinction is not as clear as it might be. It’s now that we begin to sink in a little.”

(Austin, “Performative Utterances,” p. 246.)



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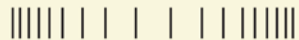


Breakdown ("two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet")

We see then that stating something is performing an act just as much as is giving an order or giving a warning; and we see, on the other hand, that, when we give an order or a warning or a piece of advice, there is a question about how this is related to fact which is not perhaps so very different from the kind of question that arises when we discuss how a statement is related to a fact.

(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 251.)





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Breakdown

(“two shining new skids under our metaphysical feet”)

Well, this seems to mean that in its original form **our distinction** between the performative and the statement is considerably weakened, and indeed **breaks down**.

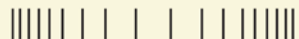
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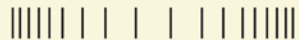


The Corrections ("a perverse attachment"?)

“Austin’s William James Lectures’ might well have borne the subtitle ‘In Pursuit of a Vanishing Distinction’. Although the chase is remorseless, glimpses of the quarry become increasingly equivocal and the hunter is left empty-handed at last.”

(Max Black, “Austin on Performatives,” *Philosophy*, Vol. 38, No. 145 (1963), p. 217)



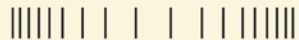


The Corrections ("a perverse attachment"?)

“It would require a perverse attachment to what Austin used to call the ‘descriptive fallacy’ to insist that the promise-maker is primarily making a truth-claim: one might as well argue that a chessplayer who moves a bishop is primarily saying that he is moving the piece.”

(Max Black, “Austin on Performatives,” p. 217)



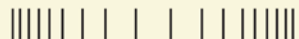


The Corrections ("a perverse attachment"?)

“Appeal to ordinary language is very useful when the logical grammar of particular words and families of words is under investigation; it is likely to be less profitable when what is at stake is a general view of how language works.”

(Max Black, “Austin on Performatives,” p. 226.)



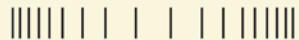


The Corrections ("a perverse attachment"?)

“The main theme of Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* is the replacement of the original distinction between performatives and constatives by a general theory of speech acts.”

(John Searle, “Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Oct., 1968), p. 405.)





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The Corrections ("a perverse attachment"?)

“it looked for a while as if he would have to say that every utterance was a performative, and that would render the notion useless.”

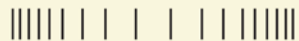
(Searle, “How Performatives Work,” p. 536.)



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The Corrections ("a perverse attachment"?)

“I can promise by saying ‘I hereby promise,’ but I can’t fry an egg, by saying ‘I hereby fry an egg’.”

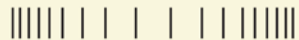
(Searle, “How Performatives Work,” p. 538.)



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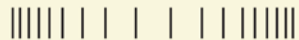
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What's left?
("the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies")

"I can promise by saying 'I hereby promise,' but I can't fry an egg, by saying 'I hereby fry an egg'."

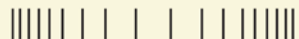
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What's left? ("the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies")

How to Do Things with Words is:

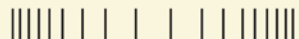
“a complex argument in support of the claim that all speech should be considered as action.”

The book's argument:

“has the form of a proof by contradiction: the thesis proposed at the beginning is the opposite of the intended one and its refutation serves as proof of the intended thesis.”

(Marina Sbisa “How to Read Austin,” p. 3.)





What's left? ("the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies")

"Other Minds" 1939 (published 1946)

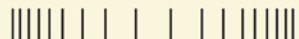
Lecture Series: "Words and Deeds," Oxford, 1952 – 1954

The William James Lectures (Harvard), *How to do Things with Words*, 1955

"Performative Utterances" a talk Austin at BBC 1956

"Performative Utterances" was presented again in Gothenburg in 1959 (On Youtube)





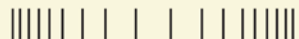
What's left? ("the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies")

[W]e suggested that the performative is not altogether so obviously distinct from the constative (...).

[Very commonly the *same* sentence is used on different occasions of utterance in *both* ways, performative and constative. The thing seems hopeless from the start, if we are to leave utterances *as they stand* and seek for a criterion.

(Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, p. 67.)





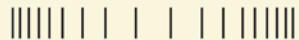
What's left?

(“the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies”)

in order to explain what can go wrong with statements we cannot concentrate on the proposition involved (whatever that is) as has been done traditionally. We must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued – the total speech act – if we are to see the parallel between performative utterances, and how each can go wrong. So the total speech act in the total situation is emerging from logic piecemeal as important in special cases: and so we are thus assimilating the supposed constative utterance to the performative.

(Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 52.)





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What's left?
("the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies")

"life and truth and things do tend to be complicated.
It's not things, it's philosophers that are simple."

(Austin, "Performative Utterances," p. 252.)



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