

AUSTIN ON PERFORMATIVES

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Phil Language

1. Performatives versus statements

I want to discuss a kind of utterance which looks like a statement and grammatically, I suppose, would be classed as a statement, which is not nonsensical, and yet is not true or false... Furthermore, if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something. (p. 137)

- “I do” (at a wedding)
- “I apologize”
- “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*”
- “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow”

In all these cases it would be absurd to regard the thing that 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 say rather that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action. (p. 137).

2. Infelicity

Suppose that, living in a country 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, “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. (p. 138)

- “I appoint you Consul”, where you are already appointed, or are a horse—facts specified by the convention not in place
- “I bet sixpence” and no one says “Done”—missing uptake

3. Explicit performatives

All the examples I have given hitherto do in fact have the same grammatical form: they all of them begin with the verb in the first person singular present indicative active... (p. 140)

- “Passengers are hereby warned to cross the line by the bridge only”
- “You are hereby authorized to...”

“Well-marked classes” of performative verbs:

verdicts, estimates, appraisals “I judge that the runner was safe”, “I estimate the size of the crowd at 50,000”

commitments “I promise that I will pay you \$50”; “I bet you \$50 that...”

exercise of rights and powers “I pronounce you husband and wife”, “I appoint you Consul”

4. Statements are performatives too

Making a statement is doing something. Statements can be felicitous or infelicitous:

- “The cat is on the mat but I don’t believe it”
- “All of John’s children are bald”, when John hasn’t got any children
- A: “I’m feeling depressed today”. B: “No you’re not”

Also, performatives can be good or bad in a way that has nothing to do with misfiring. Advice can be good, a warning can be apt, a promise can be kept, an order can be complied with, etc.

...in its original form our distinction between the performative and the statement... breaks down. I will just make a suggestion as to how to handle this matter. We need to go very much farther back, to consider all the ways and senses in which saying anything at all is doing this or that... besides the question ... as to what a certain utterance *means*, there is a further question... as to what was the *force*, as we may call it, of the utterance. We may be quite clear what “Shut the door” means, but not yet at all clear on the further point as to whether as uttered at a certain time it was an order, an entreaty, or whatnot.