

CSABA CZEGLÉDI

## ON CONSTATIVE AND PERFORMATIVE UTTERANCES

In this article I discuss a problem that arises from a basic distinction in Speech Act Theory (SAT) as developed in Austin (1962 and 1975) between the categories introduced in the title. I will show that constative utterances as such do not exist, that the performative—constative distinction in its original form is false, but that the validity of the linguistic observations which motivated the distinction is regained by slightly modifying the theory, and that those observations will be interpretable within the framework of the theory without any detriment to its descriptive power or its general principles. First I will briefly discuss the speech-act theoretical apparatus that will be used.

### 1. SAT as a theory of verbal behavior

#### 1.1 Speech acts and the nature of their rules

In SAT verbal communication is interpreted as a type of rule-governed human behavior. From the perspective of SAT "speaking a language is a matter of performing speech acts according to systems of constitutive rules" (cf. Searle 1969: 38).

The *speech act*, the fundamental unit of verbal communication, is the central category of the theory. A speech act is the action that is performed in saying an utterance. The particular kind of action performed can be characterized in terms of the consequences that are believed to exist

in the speech situation following the performance of the speech act. To be more or less familiar with the rules of verbal communication is to be more or less familiar with the typical consequences of particular kinds of speech acts with respect to the speech situation as a whole.

Regulative or normative rules, e.g. the rules of etiquette, are contrasted with constitutive rules<sup>1</sup>, e.g. the rules of several kinds of games, in that the former regulate actions whose existence is logically independent of the rules. *Constitutive* rules, on the other hand, have the special property that the existence of the actions governed by constitutive rules is logically dependent on the existence of the rules. A game of chess, e.g., deserves the name only if the pieces are moved in accordance with the constitutive rules of the game. If you take away the rules, you will have taken away the game.

## 1.2 Explicit and implicit speech acts

Speech acts are characterized by the manner in which the communicative intention of the speaker is expressed in them. Accordingly, we will distinguish between *explicit* and *implicit* speech acts. Typically, a speaker will perform the act of opening a meeting and making a promise, respectively, in saying the following utterances.

- (1) I declare the meeting open.
- (2) I promise I won't tell anybody.

Both examples contain an (explicit) performative verb, which refers to the kind of speech act performed: *declare open* in (1) and *promise* in (2). Utterances like (1—2), which contain an (explicit) performative verb, are called *explicit performative utterances* (or *explicit performatives*, for short).

Consider now the following utterance:

- (3) I won't tell anybody.

(3) may be said under conditions similar to those of (2), and then it will have essentially the same kind of consequences with respect to the speech situation. In other words, in saying (3) the speaker may perform a speech act which is identical to that performed by saying (2): both (2) and (3) can

---

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of regulative and constitutive rules see Searle (1969: 33—35 and 1971: 41—42).

be used to make a promise. But (3) does not contain an explicit performative verb. Therefore utterances like (3) are called *implicit performative utterances*.

### 1.3 Locution and illocution

When considering "how many senses there are in which to say something *is* to do something, or *in* saying something we do something, and even *by* saying something we do something" Austin (1975: 94) concludes that a speech act may and should be divided into several different acts. I mention only two of these here: the *locutionary act* and the *illocutionary act*. A speaker performs a locutionary act when he says something in the words of a language in accordance with the grammatical rules of that language. An illocutionary act is performed when the speaker attributes some communicative function or force to his utterance. If, e.g., (3) is said in a natural speech situation, the locutionary act will be performed in saying a grammatically well-formed English sentence. The illocutionary act will be performed in saying (3) with the communicative intention of making a promise. We perform both a locutionary and an illocutionary act in every utterance we say.

## 2. The problem: performatives versus constatives

After this brief introduction to the fundamental categories of the theoretical apparatus, let us turn to the problem. The last explication of the performative—constative distinction is found in Austin (1962) and Austin (1975). Let us now consider carefully what exactly the distinction consisted in at various points in the explication of the idea. Henceforth, all page references will be to the 1975 edition edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Austin 1975) unless otherwise indicated.

Austin (1975) highlights the performative—constative distinction through the analysis of performative utterances of the kind illustrated below (a—c). These performative utterances, as opposed to constatives, have the distinguishing property that to issue them "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 these utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it” (p. 6).

- (a) "I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*"
- (b) "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother"
- (c) "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow." (p. 5)

It suggests that constative utterances are assumed to be familiar and the two types of utterances are defined in a mutually contrastive fashion with reference to each other: constative utterances are the ones that possess the negatively specified features of the performatives and do not possess their positively specified features and conversely. The idea may be diagrammed like this:

#### Constative and (explicit) performative utterances

Utterance type	To say the utterance is to perform the speech act denoted by the verb	May be true or false
CONSTATIVE	—	+
PERFORMATIVE (EXPLICIT)	+	—

That is to say, a constative utterance is a description or statement of the action denoted by the verb but it is not the performance of that action, and a constative utterance may be true or false: "to issue a constative utterance . . . is to make a statement. To issue a performative utterance is, for example, to make a bet" (p. 6, footnote 2).

In the explication of the "doctrine of the *Infelicities*" in Lectures II and III, Austin points out that an additional distinguishing property of performatives is that they are characterized by the set of conditions that must be met for each performative to be "happy" (p. 14) and by the ways in which a performative can "go wrong" or be "unhappy" (p. 18).

It is important to bear in mind that the characterization of performatives is based on their distinction from the "supposedly familiar" (p. 20) constatives, which are assumed to typically go wrong by being false.

What Austin meant by the sensitivity of constatives to the true—false distinction was that "in ordinary cases, for example running, it is the fact that he is running which makes the statement that he is running *true*, or again, that the truth of the constative utterance 'he is running' depends on his being running" (p. 47). On the other hand, Austin notes that constatives are not only true or false but there are other ways in which they can go wrong. For example, the statement "The present King of France is bald" (p. 20) is neither true, nor false. What is wrong with it is that a presupposition which is associated with it is not met. Constative utterances which are neither true nor false are thus similar to performatives (in that they are neither true nor false). Furthermore, Austin says, "there are obvious similarities between a lie and a false promise" (p. 20). It turns out then that some utterances which we would like to consider constatives are insensitive to the true—false distinction and appear to be similar to performatives.

Austin argues, on the other hand, that some performative utterances are characterized by "an obvious slide towards truth or falsity" (p. 141). He claims that "we may: estimate rightly or wrongly . . . find correctly or incorrectly . . . pronounce correctly or incorrectly" (p. 141).

Furthermore, there are utterances that must be considered performative but cannot be characterized in terms of the familiar felicity conditions. It is something else that goes wrong with them. This is how Austin characterizes them (p. 55):

. . . connected with the performative (I presume it is one) 'I warn you that the bull is about to charge' is the fact, if it is one, that the bull is about to charge: if the bull is *not*, then indeed the utterance 'I warn you that the bull is about to charge' is open to criticism—but not in any of the ways we have hitherto characterized as varieties of unhappiness. We should not in this case say the warning was void—i.e. that he did not warn but only went through a form of warning—nor that it was insincere: we should feel much more inclined to say the warning was false or (better) mistaken, as with a statement. 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).

Since it seems that neither the distinction in terms of truth or falsity nor the distinction in terms of happiness or unhappiness can uniquely apply to one or the other type of utterances, Austin searches for grammatical criteria to distinguish them. But, he concludes, the search leads to "an impasse over any *single simple* criterion of grammar or vocabulary" (p. 59) because all the grammatical criteria that characterize performative utterances will also be met by utterances like "I state that . . .," which are considered constative. Moreover, since "statements *are* liable to every kind of infelicity to which performatives are liable" (p. 136), that is to say, as speech acts they are subject to the same felicity conditions as performatives, "there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act" (p. 139). Thus we are forced to conclude that statements are performatives, which amounts to saying that constatives are performatives.

Considerations of this kind lead Austin to conclude that the performative—constative distinction is to be discarded and that it must be replaced by the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts within the speech act, because "in general and for all utterances that we have considered (except perhaps for swearing), we have found:

- (1) Happiness/unhappiness dimension,
- (1a) An illocutionary force,
- (2) Truth/falsehood dimension,
- (2a) A locutionary meaning (sense and reference)" (p. 148).

Thus we are forced to conclude that there are no constative utterances, at least in terms of the original performative versus constative distinction. All of our utterances are performatives. The original idea does not necessarily have to be abandoned, however, since examples like

- (4) I am cold
- (5) This line is printed in bold.

are different in an important sense from (1—3). While (1—3) do not have truth values, (4—5) may be true or false. ((5) is obviously false.) This was the original idea underlying the performative—constative distinction: constative utterances do, performative utterances do not have truth values. Thus an utterance may be either performative or constative but not both. Therefore (4—5) are not performatives, since they are true—false sensitive.

But if the term *constative* is taken to mean 'may be true or false' and if the idea is abandoned that an utterance is either constative or performative but not both, and if we assume instead that every utterance is performative, then an utterance may be both constative and performative at the same time (cf. (4—5)). In this case, however, the original performative—constative distinction becomes meaningless, since the so-called constative utterances are no longer in contrast with performatives, but constitute a subclass of the latter.

After a careful consideration of the performative—constative distinction several factors seem to suggest that we must take a closer look at the expression *constative utterance* and, particularly, we must reconsider the true—false distinction. Only statements can be true or false. Both (4) and (5) can be true or false, therefore both are statements. The statement is a logical or clausal semantic category. (4—5) can be characterized thus: (a) they are sentences, (b) they are statements, and (c) they can be true or false. (4—5), however, are not only characterized by the properties (a—c), but also by the properties that (d) they are utterances, and when issued as such (e) they are speech acts.

The term *statement*, however, can be given a different interpretation. Used in the pragmatic sense, the expression may refer to the *action* of making a statement, i.e., to the *speech act*. An action cannot be true or false, just as goals in football are not true or false. A goal is or is not *scored*. Similarly, an event may or may not have happened, an action may or may not have been performed but goals, events, and actions are neither true nor false: they do not have truth values. It is in this sense that we may say that performatives have no truth values. And constatives? They do not have truth values either. Both performatives and constatives are speech acts, and speech acts have no truth values. But if all utterances are speech acts, what

kind of speech acts are constative utterances? They are by no means speech acts that can be true or false. Such speech acts do not exist. Every utterance is performative, because every utterance is the performance of an act: a speech act. Indeed, the expression *performative utterance* is a tautology. Therefore we have two options: we either modify the sense of the term *constative* and reinterpret the original distinction thus retaining it in a new sense which is compatible with the (intuitively convincing) original idea or discard the distinction as untenable. Austin opted for the second alternative.

I do not think, however, that one has to pay such a high price for rescuing the theory. We have at least two reasons to choose the less expensive option. The so-called constative utterances *are* different in an important manner from the so-called performatives. Secondly, a careful consideration of the nature of our problem reveals the intriguing ambiguity of the term *utterance*, which, it seems, must take some responsibility for the conflicting conclusions that we were forced draw above.

Utterances like (4—5) *are* systematically different from utterances like (1—3). The typical consequence of saying (1) is that the meeting will begin, and that the meeting will be considered open by everybody concerned. Moreover, for the meeting to be considered open, it is a precondition that (1) must have been said (by a specific type of speaker in specific circumstances, neither of which will be discussed now). A consequence of issuing (2) or (3) is that if the speaker "does tell somebody" he will become answerable for that, and that for him to become answerable for it, it is a precondition that he must have said (2) or (3). To issue (4—5) (as opposed to (1—3)) is to issue utterances that correspond to sentences which in turn are semantically characterized as expressing statements. To issue (4) or (5) (as opposed to (1), (2) or (3)) is to perform the act of making a statement. Pragmatically, the speech acts performed in saying (4—5) are statements. Statements are just as much speech acts as promises and openings of meetings. It is true that normally nobody feels cold as a consequence of saying (4), and that anybody may feel cold without saying anything like (4), and that the way (5) is printed is totally independent of saying it; its content may be false (as indeed it is), but its existence is indisputable.



### 3. Conclusion

Utterances like (4—5), although different from utterances like (1—3) in ways we have just discussed, share an important property with them: just as most normal utterances, they are not simply "issued out of speakers' heads" for no reason at all. They are issued with a communicative force or intention. When they are said, a speech act is performed: the speech act of making a statement. The so-called constative utterances are statements and as such they constitute a subclass of performatives. We no longer contrast constatives with performatives, because every utterance is a performative. We will say instead that statements are a subclass of speech acts along with other subclasses of speech acts, which include promises, threats, warnings, bets, orders, etc.

It turns out that we must make a careful distinction between *speech acts* on the one hand and *utterances* on the other. The former are actions performed in issuing the latter and the latter are products of performing the former (cf. Szabolcsi 1983). In addition, we must distinguish both from *sentences*. The former are pragmatic categories and the latter is a syntactic category. A sentence may be characterized semantically by saying that it expresses a statement, which may be either true or false, but the question of truth or falsity cannot even be raised in connection with actions.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Second Edition, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Searle, John R. "What is a Speech Act?" In: Searle, John R. (ed.) 1971.
- Searle, John R. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Szabolcsi Anna. "A performatívok szemantikája." *Általános Nyelvészeti Tanulmányok* (ed. Szépe György) 15, 1983. pp. 281—91.