

On Performatives Being Statements Too*

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Abstract

Performative utterances such as ‘I promise you to ϕ ’, issued under suitable conditions, have been claimed by Austin (1962) to constitute the enactment of something rather than the stating of something. They are thus not to be assessed in terms of truth and falsity. Subsequent theorists have typically contested half of this Austinian view, agreeing that a performative utterance such as ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ is the enactment of a promise, but claiming that it is also a statement to the effect that the promise is issued. I argue that speech-act-theoretically, uttering ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ under suitable conditions is not also the statement that the promise is issued. This is compatible, however, with the fact that semantically, ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ is true just in case my promise to you to ϕ is issued.

1 Introduction

In Austin (1962) we get a characterization of certain utterances as the doing, or enacting, of certain things – such as marrying (‘I do’), promising (‘I promise you to...’), naming (‘I name the ship...’), and bequeathing (‘I give and bequeath...’) – as opposed to describing or stating whatever was so done or enacted:

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing [footnote: Still less anything that I have already done or have yet to do.] or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue for it. (6)

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Austin does, however, marshal some considerations against a particular descriptivist view that seeks to assimilate performatives to statements.¹ He rejects the idea that in issuing a performative utterance along the lines of ‘I do’ or ‘I promise you to ϕ ’, the speaker describes an “inward and spiritual act” rather than simply undertake the marriage or commitment:

For one who says “promising is not merely a matter of uttering words! It is an inward and spiritual act!” is apt to appear as a solid moralist standing out against a generation of superficial theorizers: we see him as he sees himself, surveying the invisible depths of ethical space, with all the distinction of a specialist in the *sui generis*. Yet he provides Hippolytus with a let-out, the bigamist with an excuse for his ‘I do’ and the welsher with a defence for his ‘I bet’. Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*. (10)

Both “accuracy” and “morality” speak against the view that when I say ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ I am only describing some inner undertaking of the commitment to you to ϕ . Regarding accuracy, it is presumably plainly obvious that issuing a promise in speech is itself the enactment of the promise, the undertaking of the commitment. Regarding morality, the situation is more complicated, but the gist of Austin’s complaint is that there is a good moral (or “practical” in the wide sense) reason to suppose that in saying ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ I am undertaking the commitment to you to ϕ , pure and simple. If the words themselves in the appropriate circumstances couldn’t bind me in issuing the promise, requiring some inner accompaniment to make them true, then I could always get out of my commitment by pleading that the requisite inner accompaniment was missing. This would make a hash of promising. But, counters Austin, our word is our bond. Performative utterances are not in the business of reporting or stating “inward” acts because they are not statements at all. Their proper assessment is in terms of felicity and infelicity rather than in terms of truth and falsity.

It is a widely held that Austin’s foundational treatment of performative utterances as the doing of certain things (promising, wedding, bequeathing, naming, etc.), as opposed to the stating that they are done, is right about the doing but wrong about the stating. Yes, the performative ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ is the doing of something, the issuing of a promise. But *pace* Austin, the self-same performative utterance is *also*

¹Interestingly, he later assimilates statements to performatives before supplanting the earlier distinction between performatives and constatives with the mature theory of the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary aspects of the total speech act.

the stating of something made true by what was thereby done, the issuing of that very promise.

2 Performatives Being Statements

The Austinian view that performative utterances are not statements has been widely contested. Here is Lewis (1970):

I have assumed that performatives themselves do have truth values, but that also has been denied. (Austin 1962, Lecture I.) I would wish to say that to say that ‘I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow’ is true on an occasion of utterance iff the utterer *does* then bet his audience that it will rain on the following day; and, if the occasion is normal in certain respects, the utterer does so bet; therefore his utterance is true. Austin says it is obviously neither true nor false, apparently because to utter the sentence (in normal circumstances) is to bet. Granted; but why is that a reason to deny that the utterance is true? To utter ‘I am speaking’ is to speak, but it is also to speak the truth. (59)

Here is Bach (1975):

I wish to argue that the negative side of Austin’s doctrine – that performative utterances do not constate, are not true or false – is mistaken. Since I accept the positive side – that they are, or are part of, the doing of an action – my position is that performative utterances (other than conventionalized ones) are both doings and statings. (229)

And here is Ginet (1979):

One must, of course, agree that to utter one of Austin’s sentences in the appropriate circumstances (and with the right intentions) *is* to perform the act signified by the verb phrase in it. But I do not see why it should be thought, as Austin apparently takes for granted, that this is a reason to deny that in uttering one of those sentences in order to perform the associated act one also states that one thereby performs that act. As far as I know, no good reason has been offered by Austin or anyone else for denying this. (246)

None of these theorists claims that what the performative states or reports is something “inward”. On the contrary, the performative states what it enacts while

enacting it. In other words, the performative is self-stating or self-descriptive. In saying ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ (in the right circumstances) (i) I issue a promise to you to ϕ , while (ii) I truly state that (i). At least this is the normal case. False performative utterances are admitted in cases where some of the conditions for bringing about the performed act aren’t met, as in the case of ordering on the stage:

[I]t is hard for a performative to be anything but true on an occasion of its utterance. Hard but possible: you can be play-acting, practicing elocution, or impersonating an officer and say ‘I command that you be late’ falsely, that is, say it without thereby commanding your audience to be late. (Lewis 1970: 59)

But the prevailing wisdom is that performative utterances are normally self-verifying, enacting that which verifies them.²

Does this mean that “performatives are statements too”, as Bach (1975) puts it? There is a straightforward argument that suggests a negative answer here and goes some way to fill the lacuna mentioned in the passage from Ginet (1979). This will be laid out next. The implications of the argument, however, are not straightforward. The moral to draw, I want to suggest, is broadly methodological: While there is an important speech-act-theoretic sense in which the issuing of the performative is not also the issuing of the corresponding statement, there is a semantic sense in which the performative utterance is plausibly regarded in the normal case as self-verifyingly true.

3 Against Performatives Being Statements

By way of introduction to the argument that performatives aren’t statements too, it is useful to consider a parallel argument regarding the possibility of self-reference. Elsewhere I raise the question *when* an expression could be used to refer to itself.³ Plausibly, (1) a referring expression is produced by its utterer loaded with its contribution to truth-conditions. This is supported by empirical considerations regarding humdrum cases of truncated speech production, such as the uttering of ‘Joe Biden is...’ without ever completing the utterance. The utterer in such cases succeeds in referring to Biden despite the absence of a larger sentential context. The name is produced *as* standing for Biden.⁴ Next, it is a familiar lesson of the so-called new

²For a comprehensive articulation of this point of view, see García-Carpintero (2013) and many of the references contained therein.

³See Simchen (2013: §IV).

⁴There is of course much more to say in behalf of (1), which cannot be undertaken here.

theory of reference that to employ an expression to refer to something requires some sort of causal-historical connection to the referent. If I demonstratively refer to an apple in my hand, I do so in virtue of being somehow in the apple's causal wake, so to speak, through various sensory modalities. If I refer to Bismarck in using his name, I do so in virtue of a worldly relation, however complex, to the man. And so it goes: (2) an expression employed to refer to something refers to something existing at *some* point in the past, perhaps the very recent past and perhaps persisting into the present and the future, but something existing in the past nonetheless.⁵ Finally, (3) a referring expression contributes its referent to truth-conditions. This is supported by familiar considerations that favor Millianism. This trio of commitments (1)-(3) precludes self-reference insofar as self-reference would require the purported self-referential item to exist before coming into existence. That item would be produced loaded with its contribution to truth-conditions, as opposed to its contribution to truth-conditions being determined after the fact of its production, as per (1). *Qua* self-referential, it itself would constitute its own contribution to truth-conditions, as per (3). But its referent, namely, it itself, would have to exist at some point *before* being produced to refer to itself, as per (2). None of this precludes, of course, anyone from regarding a linguistic expression, once produced, as self-*denotative*. But it does preclude the production of a self-*referential* expression, an item standing for itself in the way that a speaker might, say, produce a demonstrative pronoun to refer to an intended demonstratum.⁶

Turning to the view that performatives are self-stating or self-descriptive, we face an analogous situation. For any p , in order to truly state that p , it has to be the case that p . For the case at hand, in order to truly state that I promise you to ϕ , it has to be the case that I promise you to ϕ . Now suppose that (i) I only complete the issuing of my promise to you to ϕ by saying 'I promise you to ϕ ' at t_0 , in the sense that for any time interval $\epsilon > 0$, I have not yet issued the promise to you to ϕ by saying 'I promise you to ϕ ' at $t_0 - \epsilon$. Let R^c be the triadic relation of commitment created by the issued promise among speaker S (me), audience A (you), and ϕ -ing. Then $R^c(A, S, \phi)$ obtains at t_0 but does not obtain at $t_0 - \epsilon$ for any $\epsilon > 0$. Now, under

⁵The point of the previous footnote clearly applies to (2) as well. For the purpose of introducing the argument to follow we can safely avoid the tangled issue of reference to things commonly regarded as non-spatiotemporal, such as fictional characters (according to some views) or mathematical entities (according to many views).

⁶Crucial here is the distinction between reference as the worldly relation between an expression and what it is deployed to stand for, and denotation as the formal relation of semantic evaluation. A topic that cannot be broached here is purported reference to future entities, such as Kaplan's (1969) famous example of 'Newman 1' purportedly referring to the first child to be born in the 22nd century. Such examples arguably depend on illicitly combining elements of the two relations.

ordinary circumstances, for a speaker to sincerely state that p , where p recounts the speaker's doing something, requires that the speaker believe that p . Indeed, it seems plausible that (ii) to sincerely state that p at t , where p recounts the speaker's doing something, requires the speaker to believe that p at $t - \delta$ for some time interval $\delta > 0$ that is at least as long as is needed for the registration of the act by the speaker to culminate in the act's report. In other words, we state that we do something after registering, or forming the belief, that we do it. This seems especially clear when we recount acts conducted by us in the past, but it is also the case for present-tense and future-tense reports. When the realtor does the remote walk-through on FaceTime and says 'I am now walking into the dining room', she says what she is doing *after* she registers that she is doing it, however close the time of registration or belief formation is to the later time at which she reports that she is walking into the dining room. Similar considerations apply to her saying 'I will next show you the front balcony'. Saying that she will show her audience the front balcony follows her forming the belief that she will show her audience the front balcony. If this is generally correct, then sincerely and *truly* stating that p at t , where p recounts the speaker's doing something, requires that the speaker truly believe that p at $t - \delta$ for some $\delta > 0$. And when p is present-tense, the speaker truly believing that p at $t - \delta$ requires that *it be the case* that p at $t - \delta'$ for some $\delta' \geq \delta$.⁷ Now suppose that in promising you to ϕ by saying 'I promise you to ϕ ', as per (i), I am *also* sincerely and truly stating that I promise you to ϕ . Truly stating that I promise you to ϕ at t_0 requires that it be the case that I promise you to ϕ at $t_0 - \delta''$ for some time interval $\delta'' > 0$ that is at least as long as is required for me to (promise you to ϕ and to) register that I promise you to ϕ , as per (ii). In other words, $R^c(S, A, \phi)$ obtains at $t_0 - \delta''$. But this contradicts the choice of t_0 above: simply set ϵ to δ'' . So in promising you to ϕ I do *not* also truly state that I promise you to ϕ .

4 Speech Act Theory and Semantics

Assuming the argument is sound, what is the moral to draw here? Consider the crucial step that to sincerely state that p at t , where p recounts the speaker's doing something, requires the speaker to believe that p at $t - \delta$ for some $\delta > 0$. What sort of requirement is this? We might say it is a basic fact about our linguistic practices

⁷' \geq ' rather than ' $>$ ' to allow for the belief formation to be simultaneous with the act. If such simultaneity is allowed, then in the stating of p , where p recounts the act of stating that p , the stating that p might be simultaneous with the belief that one is stating that p after all, flouting (ii). This, however, concerns the enactment of statements and is beside the present concern with whether performative utterances such as 'I promise you to ϕ ' or 'I do' are statements too.

when it comes to sincerely reporting our own conduct, part of the phenomenology of stating “in the wild”, a fact of language as studied by speech act theory. Why would such a fact be set aside by the theorist who wishes to argue that in saying ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ I am also issuing a truth made true by what my words enact, namely the promise to you to ϕ ? The latter position is taken from the standpoint of semantics. For semantics, the idea that the likes of ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ are to be assessed radically differently from the likes of ‘I promised you to ϕ ’ or ‘She promises you to ϕ ’ introduces a theoretically intolerable discrepancy in the assignment of truth-conditions. Davidson (1979) puts it as follows:

Austin held that performatives have no truth value on the ground that uttering a sentence like ‘I order you to go’ is not typically to describe one’s own speech act but rather to issue an order. This is perhaps an accurate account of how we would characterize many speech acts that consist in uttering explicit performatives. But as a description of what the words that are uttered mean, this view introduces an intolerable discrepancy between the semantics of certain first-person present-tense verbs and their other-person other-tense variants. (16)

From a semantic-theoretic standpoint, the first-person pronoun is another pronoun among others. In extensional contexts it contributes the speaker to the truth-conditions of sentences in which it partakes. How can it be that the truth-conditions of ‘She promises you to ϕ ’ should be determined *inter alia* by what the third-person pronoun ‘she’ stands for, whereas replacing that pronoun with the first-person pronoun – and adjusting the present-tense verb accordingly – results in the *loss of truth-conditions altogether*? This seems incredible.

5 Resolution

In an important paper on methodology in the study of language, Lewis (1975) asks what languages as assignments of truth-conditions (in the form of intensions) to sentences have to do with language as a social practice. The answer he offers draws on his earlier work on convention: there is a convention of truthfulness and trust in such an assignment of truth-conditions to sentences – where truthfulness is trying not to utter a falsehood and trust is imputing truthfulness to others – within the population of speakers. In the background of this picture is a methodological divergence between semantics as the study of truth-conditions and speech act theory as the study of linguistic action.

When Lewis (1970) insists that “‘I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow’ is true on an occasion of utterance iff the utterer *does* then bet his audience that it will rain on the following day; and, if the occasion is normal in certain respects, the utterer does so bet; therefore his utterance is true” (59), his insistence falls within a proposed semantics. When Austin (1962) insists that “it seems clear that to utter the [performative] sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) 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” (6) his insistence doesn’t fall within a proposed semantics but within the rather different explanatory enterprise of (what is to become) speech act theory.

The question whether performatives are self-verifying statements is a useful prism through which to view the methodological contrast between these two distinct theoretical endeavors in the study of natural language. The contrast offers a more satisfying assessment of the dispute over the workings of performativity in natural language than alternative assessments. The phenomenology of performativity is one and the same, we might say; the theoretical standpoints for handling it are different. Even if speech-act-theoretically in promising to ϕ we are not also stating that we are, as Austin suggests, this does not entail that it isn’t the case that ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ is true just in case the promise to you to ϕ is issued. Even if semantically ‘I promise you to ϕ ’ is true just in case the promise to you to ϕ is issued, as Lewis and others contend, this doesn’t entail that in enacting the promise we are also enacting a statement to the effect that this very promise is issued. Statements as such are not the subject matter for semantic theorizing.⁸ The theoretical purview of speech act theory is the agentive production of speech. The theoretical purview of semantics is its post-hoc evaluation in terms of truth-conditions (or context change potential within dynamic approaches). There is no inference from the performative utterance not constituting an act of stating to its lacking truth-conditions. There is no inference from the performative having truth-conditions to its utterance constituting an

⁸Consider, for example, the following passage from the opening section of Heim and Kratzer’s classic (1998):

A theory of meaning, then, pairs sentences with their truth-conditions. The results are statements of the following form:

Truth-conditions

The sentence “There is a bag of potatoes in my pantry” is true if and only if there is a bag of potatoes in my pantry. (1)

Statements constitute semantic theory itself, but it is *sentences* rather than statements that are included within its purview.

act of stating alongside its other enactment.⁹

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