Austin, “Performative Utterances”

1. Statements

Assumption: sole interesting business of any utterance is to be true or false

Criticisms:

i. Verificationism: If an utterance is true or false then we ought to be able to determine which. If we can’t then it must be nonsense.

ii. Meaning as Use: Some of those utterances which, when treated as statements, were at risk of being judged nonsense, did not set out to be statements at all. Rather, they perform functions—e.g. influencing people, drawing attention to some feature of the circumstances without reporting it.

2. Performatives

There is a class of utterances whose members

i. look like statements

ii. would be so-classed grammatically (declarative in form)

iii. are neither true nor false

iv. are not nonsense

For example:

a. During marriage ceremony – “I do”

b. Someone steps on someone else’s foot – “I apologize”

c. “I name this ship the Professor Dr. Batty” – hits ship with champagne bottle

d. “I bet you ten dollars it will rain tomorrow”

Austin: if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say she is doing something rather than merely saying something – it would be absurd to regard the thing I say as a report of the performance that is actually done

Note: (1) Austin is not claiming that, e.g., marrying is simply a matter of saying a few Words. The words have to be said in the appropriate circumstances.

(2) It is not necessary that the utterance be accompanied by the performance of some internal spiritual act of which the words are a report. This would give perjurers and welchers a loophole.

(3) Although performative utterances do not report facts and, hence, are not true or false, they often imply certain things that are true or false in some sense of “imply”. For example, uttering “I do” implies that the speaker is not already married.

3. Infelicities

Performatives are governed by rules, usually implicit in normative social behaviour. So, they can fail to ‘come off’ if these rules are broken.

Constitutive Rules: If X violates a constitutive rule for performing a speech act of type A, then X has failed to perform an act of type A at all.

Regulative Rules: If X violates a regulative rule for performing a speech act of type A, then X performs an act of type A, but X’s act is defective in some way.
Austin’s Examples:
1. The relevant constitutive must exist: The conventional procedure that we are purportedly speaking in accordance with which by our utterance must exist. There must be a convention to the effect that one can _____ by saying “______” in the appropriate circumstances.
   e.g. Saying “I divorce you” does not count as an act of divorcing because no such procedure exists.
2. The constitutive rules are violated: The circumstances in which we purport to invoke the procedure must be appropriate for its invocation.
   e.g. Saying “I pick George” does not count as picking George if George is not playing.
   e.g. Saying “I appoint you counsel” when you have been appointed already.
   e.g. Saying “I will” when the other says “I won’t” counts as a case in which the procedure is not completed.
3. The regulative rules are violated: Certain procedures are designed for people who hold certain beliefs or have certain feelings or intentions. Insincerity occurs when you use one of these formulae without the requisite feelings or intentions.
   e.g. Saying “I congratulate you” when you are not glad the person addressed has had a certain success and believe that he was personally responsible for the success.
   e.g. Saying “I promise to do X” when you don’t have the least intention of doing X or of believing it is feasible.

4. A Performatives Criterion?
   The “Hereby” Criterion: an utterance is performative if one could fairly interpolate the word “hereby” before the main verb.

Applications:
   i. “I promise that I’ll be on time” can be recast as “I hereby promise that I’ll be on time” – performative.
   ii. “Passengers are warned not to cross the line” can be recast as “Passengers are hereby warned not to cross the line” – performative.
   iii. “The cat is on the mat” cannot be recast as “The cat is hereby on the mat” – statement.
   iv. “She promises that she’ll be on time” cannot be recast as “She hereby promises that she’ll be on time” – statement.

Problems:
   a. Primary vs. Explicit Performative: “Shut the door” vs. “I order you to shut the door”.
   b. Borderlines Cases: “Hurrah” and “Damn” are neither true nor false and the utterer performs the acting of cheering/ swearing, but not obviously performatives in the intended sense. Also, “I am sorry” seems to hover between being a performatives (like “I apologize”) and being a statement describing one’s emotions.
   c. Stating: “I state that …”
Utterances of these forms pass the hereby test but can be evaluated as true or false.

5. A True Distinction? Statements and Performatives Reconsidered
   Stating and Speech Acts: Stating is every bit as much an act as ordering or warning. There is no reason why stating should be given a specially unique position.
   Performatives and Correspondence: We can evaluate performatives (as well as statements) in terms of correspondence to the facts. Was it a justified warning, a sound verdict? The correspondence relations are distinct from those required for truth or falsity.

The distinction between performatives and statements is not so clear.

In general two there are two questions: (1) what does a certain utterance mean? and (2) what was the force of the utterance?
In addition to the old doctrine about meanings we need a new theory about the possible forces of utterances.

6. Speech Act Theory

i. **Locutionary Content**: the propositional content of an utterance.

ii. **Locutionary Acts**: acts of expressing certain propositional contents, performed by means of performing referential and predicative acts.

iii. **Illocutionary Force**: classification of an act as stating, promising, betting, etc.

iv. **Illocutionary Acts**: acts performed in saying something.

v. **Perlocutionary Effect**: the actual effects on the hearer—e.g. frightening, convincing, etc.

vi. **Perlocutionary Acts**: acts of causing certain states in the hearer.