

Words for Things People Do with Words
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1. It is generally accepted by philosophers and linguists who have attempted to represent linguistically the observations made in Austin (1965), that there is a set of verbs which can be used performatively, as in (1)a-(5)a:

- 1) a. I hereby appoint you Curator of Ancient Potsherds.
 b. I (*hereby) appoint someone Curator of Anatolian Potsherds every three years.
- 2) a. I hereby pronounce that they are man and wife.
 b. You stand over there, repeat the vows after me, and then
here
now
- I pronounce that you are man and wife.
- 3) I am happy to inform you that you have been chosen Cheese Queen of 1973.
- 4) If I remember correctly, that fuse was replaced last week.
- 5) a. I hereby quash the summons directed to Mr. Pool, on the grounds that it was improperly served.
 b. The judge quashed the summons directed to Mr. Pool, on the grounds that it was improperly served.

Use of performative verbs to perform the speech acts of appointing, marrying, informing, stating and upholding motions to quash, is subject to specific felicity conditions and to general input and output conditions, discussed in Austin (1965) and Searle (1969). In this paper I will discuss the status of felicity conditions with respect to both performative uses and descriptive uses, such as (1)b-(5)b. In the latter case, descriptions of both successful and unsuccessful acts will be shown to be subject to felicity conditions. Failures, as Austin and L.J. Cohen (1964) point out, reveal much about the nature of speech acts.

I would like to note briefly some of the difficulties of finding a single characteristic in which performative and descriptive uses consistently differ. First, the performative verb is not always the highest predicate in the (surface) structure of the sentence. In (3), the performative verb is dominated by the emotive factive adjective happy, and in (4), the abstract performative verb STATE is modified by an if clause, which is a higher verb in one attractive analysis (Lakoff (1970)). So performatively used verbs cannot easily be tagged as always the highest predicate in a given unit of utterance. Until happy, higher modals and adverbials are better analysed, use of a diacritic feature is an unpleasant necessity.

Nor is tense of use as a defining characteristic. If all performative acts take place in the present moment, excluding time points immediately before or after, then it would seem that any verb of linguistic communication would be automatically non-perform-

ative if it had anything but immediately present time predicated of it. While the verb in (1) b does meet this definition of non-performative use, because the tense and adverbs are present iterative, it does not seem to me, however, that this is an adequate specification of the non-performative use of pronounce in (2)b. This sentence describes a rehearsal of the future performance of a speech act, and for this reason is a serious and literal use by persons to be involved in the speech act, as opposed to non-serious use by actors in a play, for example. Yet in (2)b the time predicated of pronounce is a single present moment.

No satisfactory single definition of performative vs. descriptive use of performative verbs exists and every exception that must be incorporated into the fairly general specifications of tense, dominance, person, etc. causes a serious loss of generality. Much of the difficulty of definition has to do with the analysis of other things, adverbs and tense rather than performative verbs. I am not going to propose a solution to the whole problem, but I will discuss another way that performative and non-performative verbs differ. Non-performative verbs may not be qualified by the same kind of reason clauses that may occur with the corresponding performative verb; this fact is limited in usefulness as a definition because not all performative verbs can be qualified by reason adverbials².

2. Felicity conditions place restrictions on the speaker, hearer and circumstances of a speech act. For example, in (5)a the speaker must be a judge, presiding in a courtroom, ruling on a previous motion to quash, for (5)a to be the speech act it purports to be. The speaker of (5)b need not be a judge in these circumstances, but he must believe that the speaker in the event he describes was a judge in a courtroom ruling on a motion to quash. Thus both performance and description of a speech act of a given type involve the same set of beliefs and conditions, though differently applied in the two cases.

The obvious point that performance and descriptions involve the same set of beliefs was made by George Lakoff (1971)³. He concluded from the ill-formedness of a sentence which described the performance of a speech act and at the same time asserted that a felicity condition did not hold, that 'felicity conditions must be represented as presuppositions which are part of the meaning of performative verbs'..(1971:336)

If so, then performances and descriptions of a given speech act cannot be represented as involving the presence or absence of a complex set of assumptions held by the speaker, perhaps represented in terms of propositional structures. Representation of all the beliefs and conditions associated with the successful performance of a speech act would cause the semantic structure to swell to grotesque proportions, so it is good news that the felicity conditions are actually present in both uses. This reduces the problem to the form of the lexical entry of the verb, which should contain a set of conditions on the use of the verb.

Calling the felicity conditions presuppositions, however, is

something which should be further investigated, as the well-known cases of presupposition, for example presupposition of the truth of the complement associated with factive verbs, differ in some respects from felicity conditions.

To show this, I will first discuss reason adverbials associated with performative verbs, some examples of which are found in (4) and (5), and in (6)-(11) below.

- 6) The cops are hot on your trail, because I saw mysterious characters, too prosperous-looking to be winos, sifting through your garbage.
- 7) a. Who do you favor for the Derby, since you grew up in Louisville
b. Who do you favor for the Derby, since all I know about horses is that the front end bites and the back end kicks
c. Who do you favor for the Derby, since you've given me such good tips before
- 8) a. ??The cops are hot on your trail, because it's true
b. ?? The cops are hot on your trail, because I believe it
c. ?? The cops are hot on your trail, because you didn't know that
- 9) a. ? What do you favor for the Derby, because you know the answer
b. ? What do you favor for the Derby, because I don't know the answer
c. ? What do you favor for the Derby, because you're willing to tell me
- 10) Phlorescent Leech and Eddie are playing this Sunday,
a. if I remember correctly d. ?? since I remember correctly
b. if you'll believe it e. ?? because you'll believe it
c. if I could have your attention f. ? as I have your attention
- 11) What do you favor for the Derby,
a. if you have any ideas on the subject
b. if I could have your attention
c. ?? if I have your attention
d. ?? since you have ideas on the subject
e. ? since I have your attention
f. ?? since you probably have an answer

In (6)-(11), the performative verbs are not pronounced, but in the well-formed cases (6), (7), (10)a-c and (11)a-b, the adverbials are not associated with the pronounced contents of the sentence. They can be plausibly associated with the performative verb STATE or ASK, as reasons why the speaker believes that the felicity conditions on these verbs are fulfilled. As I argued in my dissertation (Davison (1973), reason clauses are always connected with conditions on successful performance, if they modify the performative. Generally they imply that a felicity condition holds, as in (6) and (7), rather than baldly stating that this is the case, as in the deviant sentences (8) and (9). The latter are odd in that they seem to state what is totally obvious. The speaker of a statement must believe that what he asserts is true, and in some

cases, that the hearer does not already know it. Someone who asks a question must not already know the answer, and must believe that the hearer does know the answer and is willing to give it (the preparatory and sincerity conditions of Searle (1969:57-71)). Fulfillment of such conditions may also be contingent. For example, in (4), the speaker asserts a proposition which he believes to be true provided that his memory has not deceived him, and in (11)a, the speaker asks for information which the speaker may have. If clauses also refer to what Searle calls normal input and output conditions, including hearing, background noise, intelligible speech, common language, etc. In (10)c the if clause refers to one of these, the attention of the hearer, which will also be discussed later as part of 'uptake'. All of these conditions have to do with successful and felicitous performance of a speech act, in particular things which result in the speaker being entitled to perform the speech act he purports to be performing, in that he has the beliefs which meet sincerity and other conditions.

In preceding examples, a reason clause was used to imply that what was asserted was true. In the following I will consider cases where reason clauses are used to justify the truth of part of an assertion, specifically where presuppositions are involved. For example, the use of regret in (12)a presupposes that Bernie is here:

- 12) a. I regret that Bernie is here, because his stuff is all over the place.
- b. Bernie is here, because his stuff is all over the place.
- 13) a. ?* It's alarming that Preston drank a can of sterno, as I found the empty can in his room.
- b. It's alarming that Preston drank a can of sterno, and (?) I think/know he did do it because I found the empty can in his room.

The truth of the proposition asserted in (12)b, Bernie is here, can be justified by the reason clause which follows. The same reason clause in (12)a only gives a reason for being regretful, not for believing that Bernie is here. Similarly, in (13)a, the reason clause which is meant to justify belief that Preston drank sterno can only be taken to be a reason, and an odd one, for that fact being alarming. In general presuppositions of truth cannot be justified in the same way that assertions can be justified, although both asserting and presupposing commit the speaker to belief in the truth of some proposition(s). Another difference can be found in order. (13)b is somewhat odd because the grounds for belief follow rather than precede; conjoined sentences in the opposite order would be perfectly well-formed. In the case of reason clauses, as in (4), (6) and (7), the order of clauses makes no difference to the well-formedness of the sentence as a whole.

Noun phrase descriptions, the predication of some name, involve beliefs also about how some particular instance matches general conditions on the use of some term. Predication may be

justified only when the description is asserted, as in (14) and (15), or questioned.

- 14) These are escargots, because it says so on the can.
15) This is a blackbird, since it has red and yellow borders on the wings.
16) ?* These escargots, because it says so on the can, are delicious.
17) ?* The cat caught a blackbird, since it had red and yellow borders on the wings.

Descriptions embedded in statements and other speech acts cannot be justified, as in the ill-formed sentences (16) and (17), which are intended to have neutral stress. (17) could be improved with contrastive stress on blackbird, but (16) is beyond repair. Beliefs about the appropriateness of a noun phrase description embedded in a sentence may not be qualified, very much like the beliefs associated with factivity.

Nevertheless, noun phrase descriptions and descriptions of speech acts have properties in common and distinct from factive verbs, and seem to involve a different kind of presupposition from the kind associated with factive verbs. For example, (18) is a distinctly odd sentence, containing a very peculiar use of regret :

- 18)??? The cat didn't catch a bird {and } I regret that the cat
caught a blackbird. {but }

(18) is genuinely contradictory. The parallel cases for NP descriptions, (19), and performative acts, (20), are much less odd.

- 19) (?) The bird was pink, but it was a blackbird.
20) Nell didn't intend to go, but she promised her Aunt Tillie she would.

Expressions of the failure of some condition on the appropriateness of a description does not make the use of the description blackbird or promise contradictory or even very odd. (19) and (20) only mean that the bird was a funny kind of blackbird, or that the promise was insincere. The latter case is interesting, as (20) could mean either that Susan deliberately went through the motions of making a promise—knowing that she didn't intend to keep it—or that she thought at the time that she intended to go, but turned out not to, when she had discovered her true feelings. From the absence of strong contradiction in (19) and (20) and from the presence of qualifying clauses in (4), (6), (7) and (10) a-c and (11)a-b, which are ruled out in the case of presupposed propositions, we may conclude that 'presupposition' does not mean exactly the same thing when applied to factives as when it is used to include felicity conditions.

It is interesting to note that presuppositions on performative verbs may be justified by reason clauses only when the verb is used performatively, not when it is used descriptively, although the felicity conditions hold in both cases. While (21), with contrastive stress, may justify the description promise, (22) with normal stress only expresses reasons for making a promise or for going, not reasons for calling the act a promise.

- 21) John really did promise to go, because he did intend to go.
22) ?? John promised to go, a) because he wanted to go to Varenna
anyhow
b) since he was able to afford the
ticket
c) as he knew that I wanted to see him

I do not know of anything in current semantic theory which predicts this, although it seems to be a reasonable result. The only other cases I know of where a description may be qualified by reason clauses are vocatives, as in (23) and (24):

- 23) Mr. Smith--as that's the name on your nametag --would you please sign here.
- 24) Adelaide, for that is your real name, would you listen to me.

Naming the hearer seems to be a part of the speech act, and can be qualified as the felicity condition can be qualified. Noun phrase descriptions can be qualified only if parasitic on some speech act of stating or questioning and only if the description is in the syntactic position, the predicate, where it becomes indistinguishable from the whole proposition whose truth may be justified.

3. In this final section I will consider descriptions of successful and unsuccessful illocutionary acts, all of which will be part of statements, the truth of which could be justified by reason clauses. But use of reason clauses to justify either a positive or negative description of a speech act is severely restricted.

As in (21), and also in (25)-(28), reason clauses cannot justify calling a speech act a successful instance of promising, stating, warning or bequeathing.

- 25) John warned Ringo of the danger, { ??because Ringo heard him
and Ringo heard him
- 26) ?? Margaret stated that she was absolutely smashed, because
everyone let her finish her sentence.
- 27) ?? Ringo bequeathed his rings to Zack,
a. ?? since he still had them in his possession.
b. (?) because he intended Zack to have them.
- 28) ??Elizabeth appointed Sir Robert Warden of the Cinque Ports,
{ because she had the power to do so }
because he accepted

The reason clauses might possibly be used to explain why the quoted speaker did something, although often the motives ascribed would be pretty odd. This is probably connected to the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions, as in (6) and (7)b, as opposed to (5)a and (27)b. Generally felicity conditions are necessary but not sufficient conditions. One need not say all that one believes to be true, nor ask all that one does not know. But once it is established that a summons has been served improperly, the motion to quash must be upheld, and to a weaker degree, if there is some possession which one wants to guarantee will be given to a certain person, the reasonable thing to do is bequeath it by will. Reason clauses with descriptions only are plausible if taken as sufficient conditions, motives for doing some act, while felicity conditions may be either, but mostly necessary conditions.

An unsuccessful act cannot be described with a negated verb, as in (29), which only means that John performed no act, not that he attempted an unsuccessful act of warning.⁴

- 29) ?* John didn't warn Ringo that there was danger afoot, because Ringo didn't hear him.
- 30) a. John tried to warn Ringo, but Ringo didn't hear him.
b. John didn't succeed in warning Ringo, because Ringo didn't hear him.
- 31) Margaret tried to state that she was absolutely smashed, but nobody let her finish her sentence.

If the act of warning is considered unsuccessful, it must be described as in (30), with tried to (success not presupposed) or didn't succeed. Of course, as (19) and (20) show, failure of some condition does not require that the act be described as a failure, or that the bird be described as a non-blackbird. But if the speech act was a failure or infelicitous, it can be described as in (30).⁵

- 32) Larita tried to ask me to find a job for her brother-in-law.
- 33) My neighbor tried to tell me that the Sound is infested with communist submarines.
- 34) Mae tried to ask me why my friends got divorced.

(32)-(34) involve the failure of felicity conditions; for example, the speaker of (32) may feel he is unable to get jobs for brothers-in-law, the speaker of (33) may think that the neighbor doesn't believe what he asserts or has no reasonable grounds for believing it, and the speaker of (34) may believe he does not know why his friends got divorced, or that Mae should have known he would not be willing to tell. Description with try implies belief that a felicity condition has failed, though assertion that a condition has failed does not automatically require description with try.

Failure in (32)-(34), as in (31), may occur because the act was performed under such adverse conditions that uptake did not or could not occur. The requirements on the performative use of

warn and state are slightly different from the conditions on the descriptive use of warn and state. As Cohen (1964) pointed out, to have warned or stated something requires that uptake occur, for example that the hearer heard the statement or warning. So how can one say I warn or I state if it is not guaranteed that uptake will occur? I think the answer is that performative use only requires expectation of uptake, in the absence of other information, while descriptive uses, even of future acts, requires some kind of certainty. Actual uptake is a felicity condition only on verbs like bet, which requires that someone take up the bet after it is made (Austin (1965)). Generally performative uses of performative verbs have weaker conditions on uptake attached to them than do descriptive differences.

5. In this respect, performative and descriptive uses differ by the presence or absence of the requirement concerning uptake. They differ also in the possibility of reason clauses relating to the fulfilling of the felicity conditions. The absence in the case of descriptions seems to follow from the fact that presuppositions cannot be qualified if embedded in some sentence which is the complement of some performative verb. Felicity conditions differ from the classic types of presuppositions, like factives, in that they can be justified by reason clauses if the verb is used performatively. Whether or not they are justified, felicity conditions hold on both descriptive and performative uses, and are involved in the definition of failures.

It is still not clear exactly why some presuppositions are different from others, or how direct involvement in the illocutionary act allows the felicity condition presuppositions to be qualified by reason clauses, unlike other cases of presupposition.

NOTES

1. The relationship between the adverbial and the abstract performative in this sentence is further discussed in section 2. The speaker asserts a proposition to be true, contingent in truth on the reliability of the speaker's memory. That the speaker believes what he asserts to be true is a felicity condition on stating, as has been noted by Austin and Searle. So I claim that the adverbial modifies the performative itself, rather than some abstract predicate TRUE or KNOW. I also argue in my thesis (Davison (1973)) that there is just one performative verb in (4), which dominates the asserted proposition, and it is dominated by an unasserted adverbial.

2. Generally overt performatives such as state, assert, declare and (hereby) ask, request are odd if justified by a reason clause related to some felicity condition. State, assert and declare require a stronger certainty of truth of the complement than just reasonable deduction from some fact in the world, as in (6). Many languages distinguish in other ways between first-hand knowledge

and reported or unreliable statements, and languages can differ in the degrees of certainty which a given grammatical construction requires. This interesting fact was brought to my attention by Bill J. Darden.

3. Lakoff (1971) gives the following example:

35) Sam smashed a bottle over the bow of the ship, thereby christening it the Jackie Kennedy, although he had no authority to bestow names on ships

'(35) involves a contradiction. It is a contradiction between the assertion that he had no authority to bestow names in ships and what is presupposed by the verb 'christen', namely that he had authority to bestow a name on the ship in question...Thus felicity conditions must be represented as presuppositions which are part of the meaning of performative verbs...' (1971:335-6)

4. James Lindholm pointed out to me that performative verbs like warn differ from verbs like kill. Not warn only means that no act took place, while not kill, not hit and negatives of other active verbs are at least ambiguous between the meaning that no act took place and the meaning that some other kind of act took place.

5. Lauri Karttunen pointed out to me that even infelicitous acts, for example ones which fail in reference, can be described without tried, or not succeed.

i) Sam told me to stop hitting my older brother

If I myself am the eldest, I can still report an order to stop hitting my older brother as (i), exactly reproducing the names used in the original act. I would, however, use (i) rather than (ii) only with a good bit of sarcasm, irony or indignation .

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