

# PERFORMATIVES ARE STATEMENTS TOO

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Austin held that performative utterances “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, they are, or are part of, the doing of an action. Because the sentence uttered in a per-formative is grammatically declarative, Austin’s doctrine once seemed paradoxical. But it has since lost its air of paradox, as now philosophers are more cognizant of the distinction between sentences and statements and realize, thanks to Austin, that not all sentences are used to make statements. Nevertheless, 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. In Austin’s later terms, they comprise two simultaneous illocutionary acts. Uttering a performative sentence is to do what one is stating one is doing; indeed, that is what makes the statement true.

An (explicit) performative is the utterance of a sentence with main verb in the first person singular, simple present indicative active,<sup>2</sup> this verb being the name of the kind of illocutionary act one would ordinarily be performing in uttering that sentence (call such a verb a ‘performative verb’). For example, under normal circumstances of utterance,<sup>3</sup> ‘I order you to leave’, ‘I promise you a job’, and ‘I apologize for the delay’, are an order, a promise, and an apology, respectively. Such utterances appear to be of the form ordinarily, i.e., with non-performative verbs, used to make true or false statements, statements to the effect that the speaker is doing something or is in the state named by the verb, e.g., ‘I see the light’ or ‘I hate spinach’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the case of a sentence with a performative verb not in the first person singular, simple present indicative active, the use of it would ordinarily be to make a true or false statement, e.g., ‘I ordered him to leave’, ‘(By signing this) I am promising you a job’, and

'He apologizes for the delay'. Austin hopes vainly (p. 63) that this asymmetry will distinguish performative from other verbs.

Now Austin held that performative utterances, despite their declarative grammatical form, are not statements,<sup>5</sup> are not true or false (except in the oblique sense of being sincere or insincere). Rather, the job of the performative formula is that of "making explicit (which is not the same thing as stating or describing) what precise action it is that is being performed by the issuing of the utterance."<sup>6</sup> And to use that formula is to perform an act of the sort named by the performative verb.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this seems to be Austin's reason for thinking that performatives (not counting explicit constatives like 'I state...') are not constative. That is, performing, in uttering a performative sentence, an act of the sort named by the verb is incompatible with one's also stating thereby that one is performing such an act. But why accept this incompatibility? Why cannot one both perform an act and in the same breath state that one is performing it? Why should the use of certain verbs in a performative utterance be any less of a statement than the use of the same verbs in non-performative utterances, just because this use is also something other than a statement? Naturally, these rhetorical questions require an explanation of how it is possible to do both. First we will examine several arguments that this is impossible.

The following three arguments, which seem to reflect Austin's thinking on the matter (he gave no explicit argument), are totally inconclusive, because all they show is that a performative is not merely a statement, not that a performative isn't a statement at all. They seem to assume that an order (say) is not a statement just because it is also something else.

- (1) (Non-constative) performative utterances are neither true nor false. Therefore, they are not statements.

This argument is clearly question-begging. Of course, as orders (promises, apologies, etc.) performative utterances are neither true nor false. But if they are also statements, then as statements they are true or false. Indeed, if true, they are true in virtue of being made.

- (2) Someone who utters to A, 'I order you to leave', would not be said to have stated that he was ordering A to leave.

Even if he would not be said to have stated that he was ordering..., it does not follow that he did not state that he was ordering.... In fact, he

would not be said *merely* to have stated that he was ordering.... And that he would be said to have ordered... does not imply that he was not stating that he was ordering A to leave.

- (3) Someone who utters, 'I order you to leave', **does not intend to convey information, viz., that he is ordering A to leave; he intends to be thereby ordering A to leave.**

He could very well be intending and doing both. Indeed, as I will suggest, he succeeds in ordering A to leave precisely in virtue of stating that he is ordering A to leave. To be sure, conveying this information was not his primary intention, but insofar as it was necessary to the fulfillment of his primary intention, it too was intended.

A much subtler argument is offered by Schiffer to show that performatives are not used constatively.<sup>8</sup> He holds that a verb used performatively has the same meaning as when used merely descriptively (a view I will defend later), and that explicit performatives are constative, as he puts it, in their logical form or conventional force. However, he argues ingeniously, they are uttered with "something slightly less than their full conventional force."<sup>9</sup> **It is not clear just what this means, but the argument for it is clear enough.**

Schiffer shares with Austin the view that the performative formula makes explicit the full illocutionary force of one's utterance. However, if this force includes being constative, what Schiffer calls the 'full conventional force', then an infinite regress results. Take the utterance, 'I order you to leave'. If its full illocutionary force includes being a statement, its full illocutionary force is not being made explicit – only its being order is made explicit. Now the speaker could make explicit the fact that he is making a statement by uttering, 'I state that I order you to leave'. But had he uttered this, on the view that *this* utterance was, like the previous one, made with its full conventional force, he would have been stating that he stated that he ordered. Thus, he would have still not made explicit the full illocutionary force of his utterance. **Needless to say, further attempts to make explicit the full illocutionary force would always leave more to be made explicit, *ad infinitum*.** From this Schiffer concludes that if the full illocutionary force of a performative includes being constative, its full force cannot be made explicit. But since (he assumes) the performative formula does make the full force explicit, it follows that the full

force does not include being constative. On the other hand, linguistic considerations – essentially that a performative sentence has no special grammatical feature and that the performative verb (or the sentence as a whole) has no special meaning – indicate that being constative is part of the full conventional force of performatives. Hence a performative is uttered ‘with something slightly less than its full conventional force’.

Without getting bogged down on the notion of conventional force and portions thereof,<sup>10</sup> I think the flaw in Schiffer’s argument is his acceptance of Austin’s view that performatives make explicit the full illocutionary force of (in Austin’s original words, ‘what precise action is being performed by’) the utterance. If the utterance is both an order and a statement, primarily the first, secondarily the second, but both nonetheless, then its full force is not made explicit by ‘I order...’. But that it is an order is made explicit, and that, of course, is the point of using the performative formula.

Now did Austin have any basis for saying that although using the performative formula makes explicit the precise action performed by the utterance, making it explicit is not to state what it is or to describe it? Granted, there are many ways to make things explicit other than to state what they are or to describe them. For example, I can make explicit my gratitude to someone by praising him (‘You’re so kind’), by saying ‘You didn’t have to do that’, or by returning the favor.<sup>11</sup> But why isn’t the use of the performative formula a statement of what I am doing, as when I say ‘I thank you’? After all, in general it is possible to perform several actions in one fell swoop, so why should the utterance of ‘I thank you’ not count both as giving thanks and as stating that I am is so doing? To be sure, the first is my primary intention, but its fulfillment is abetted by my secondary intention of making it explicit by stating what it is through the use of the performative formula.

Before sketching a positive account of how this is possible, it is essential to show that the efficacy of the performative formula is not a consequence of the meaning of the performative verbs. Imagine a state of affairs in which speakers of English did not make performative utterances like ‘I order you...’ or ‘I warn you...’, i.e., in which these sentences were used merely to make statements. If such utterances were mere statements and yet could be uttered truly and sincerely, something other than the utterance itself would have to constitute the order or the warning. This could be

the utterance of another sentence or some gesture from a 'vocabulary' of performative gestures. Then the statement, 'I order ...', would be regarded as false if not accompanied by the utterance of an appropriate sentence or by the appropriate gesture. This method might be inefficient compared to ours, but there is no reason (except on a hard 'Meaning is use' line) to hold that for these speakers words like 'order' and 'warn' would differ in meaning from what they mean for us. After all, they call 'orders' or 'warnings' the same things we do, except for the utterances of sentences that for us but not for them are performatives. Surely for us 'order' in 'I order' means the same as it does in other constructions. Moreover, since they use the same sentences we do but without performative effect, no special grammatical feature can account for that effect.

Notice that we have another device than the performative to make illocutionary force explicit. An explication can follow the utterance: 'Leave; and that's an order', or, 'I will come; and that's a promise'. Here the acts of doing and stating are kept distinct. A speaker issues an order, and then states that he has done so, thereby making explicit what he has done. Using the performative formula is to do both at once, I suggest, and that we have this convenient formula at our disposal is not due to the meaning of the performative verbs.

Why then is 'I order you to leave' an order, while such utterances as 'It is the case that I order you to leave' and 'I state that I order you to leave' are not orders? The latter two utterances are mere statements, true or false depending on whether or not the speaker gives the addressee an order at approximately the time of utterance, by performing or having just performed some other act, verbal or otherwise, such as forcefully pointing to the door. They can be true only if there is something other than themselves to be about. Now suppose that the thesis of this paper is true, that in particular, 'I order you to leave' is a statement. Suppose, moreover, that the speaker is performing no other act that could even remotely be construed as giving an order. In this event, either the speaker is mistaken or he must be doing something which counts as an order, and the only candidate for this is his utterance. It itself is the only thing for it to be about. That is, as a statement, the utterance is about itself, as an order. There is nothing paradoxical about this, despite the utterance's self-reference. After all, its self-reference can be made explicit by using the word 'hereby', as in, 'I hereby order you to leave'. What 'hereby' adds

to the original is something like this: 'In uttering this sentence, I order you to leave.'<sup>12</sup> The speaker thereby makes explicit not only the force of his utterance (that it's an order) but the vehicle of that force, namely the utterance itself.<sup>13</sup>

So far I have rejected known reasons for denying that a performative utterance is a statement too, I have denied that the efficacy of performatives is a matter of meaning, and I have suggested, with the help of the above 'hereby' argument, that taking a performative utterance as a statement may explain why it is a performative as well. Since a suggestion isn't an answer, I still haven't answered the question why an utterance like 'I order you to leave' is a performative. I take it that to answer this question is not to explain historically how or why there came to be the performative practice. Rather, an answer relevant to this discussion is one that states what has to be the case for such an utterance to count as an order. Unfortunately, a full answer can be given only in the context of a general theory of speech acts, and since that is beyond the scope of this paper, I'll merely sketch an answer.

I assume that there is a fundamental 'communicative presumption' among users of a language, to the effect that when they say something, what they are doing in saying it is determinable by their audience. Because this is a matter of mutual belief,<sup>14</sup> the speaker can reasonably intend his audience to take him as intending his act to be determinable, and it is on this basis, together with the utterance itself and the circumstances surrounding it, that the audience determines what that act is. The act is successful insofar as this determination is made correctly. To have said this is to make a long story short.<sup>15</sup> At any rate, in the case of performative utterances, even those without the use of 'hereby', normally the audience reasons, and is intended to reason, as follows:

- (1) He is saying, 'I order you to leave'.
- (2) He is stating that he is ordering me to leave.
- (3) If his statement is true, then he must be ordering me to leave.
- (4) If he is ordering me to leave, it must be his utterance that constitutes the order (what else could it be?).
- (5) Presumably, he is speaking the truth.
- (6) Therefore, in saying 'I order you to leave,' he is ordering me to leave.

Of course, this reasoning is artificially elaborate. Or perhaps one should say it is needlessly explicit. But that is because there is ample precedent for it. The performative practice short circuits the steps of this inference pattern, both as intended by the speaker and as carried through by the audience. Still, the success of the performative would be vitiated if any of the steps in the inference were blocked.<sup>16</sup> At any rate, since we have imagined a situation where the precedent of the performative practice is absent without subtraction from the meaning of the performative verbs, performativeness must be a matter of intended audience inference, warranted by the communicative presumption and compressed by precedent.<sup>17</sup>

I have defended the position, contrary to Austin's, that performative utterances are also statements. But what is the upshot of this claim? Its significance (and conclusiveness) requires a general theory of speech acts, a theory that in some systematic way gives the necessary and sufficient conditions for the performance of speech acts of various types. In particular, such a theory would specify conditions for statements, and if I am right, those conditions would be met by explicit performatives. It would be ironic if the theory implied that Austin was unfair to performatives, that they are statements too.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1962, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the first person plural can be used performatively, as when a spokesman speaks for a group; and the second person passive can be used performatively, as in 'You are commanded...'. By the way, I follow Austin's general usage of 'performative' as meaning explicit rather than primary performatives, a distinction 'introduced rather surreptitiously' by p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> What these are is a complicated question (see Austin's 'doctrine of the Infelicities', pp. 14ff). Note that these sentences needn't be used performatively, as when one is speaking in the historical present or describing one's habitual behavior. See Austin, *op. cit.*, pp. 64 and 68.

<sup>4</sup> Most English verbs normally take the progressive (continuous) present, rather than the simple present. Zeno Vendler notes that like performatives, statements of mental acts and of mental states also take the simple present. He draws some fascinating parallels between them and performatives in *Res Cogitans*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1972, Chs. I and II.

<sup>5</sup> We are sticking with Austin's provisional performative/constative distinction. Of course, his subsequent general theory of illocutionary acts collapsed that distinction,

since constatives (and 'expositives' generally – cf. Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 85) are performative in the sense that involve doing something. But they (e.g., 'I state that...') are also true or false. Still, he never came to hold that all performatives can be true or false.

<sup>6</sup> Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> What kind of fact is this? Later I will show that it is not a matter of meaning but of something else.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen R. Schiffer, *Meaning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1972, pp. 104–110.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> The connection of force to convention is not easy to specify, partly because of the unclarity of the notions of force and of convention, and partly because of the variety of cases. In 'Intention and Convention in Speech Acts', *Philosophical Review* LXXIII (1964), 439–460, P. F. Strawson argues that only the more formalized or ritualized performatives have their force in virtue of convention; otherwise it's a matter of reflexive intention along the lines of H. P. Grice, 'Meaning', *Philosophical Review* LXVI (1957), 377–388. On the notion of convention and other sociological notions, see my 'Analytic Social Philosophy – Basic Concepts', forthcoming, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*.

<sup>11</sup> Austin gives a similar variety of cases to show what 'making explicit' conveys (*op. cit.*, pp. 69–70), but claims that a performative is not a statement only because it could not be true or false. This passage is the closest he comes to an argument.

<sup>12</sup> Austin uses a legalistic locution to describe the force of 'hereby' as serving to indicate that the utterance "is, as it is said, the instrument effecting the act" (*op. cit.*, p. 57).

<sup>13</sup> In 'Sentences Verifiable by their Use', *Analysis* 22 (1962), 86–89, E. J. Lemmon includes performatives among the utterances to which his titular phrase applies. While I applaud his recognition, by implication, of the constative character of performatives, I should characterize them, unlike most of Lemmon's other examples, as 'true in virtue of their use'.

<sup>14</sup> A and B mutually believe that p if and only if each believes (1) that p, (2) that the other believes that p, and (3) that the other believes that the first believes that p. This concept is central to my paper cited in note 10. Similar notions appear in current philosophy, e.g., Schiffer, *op. cit.*, but the idea (as 'mutual recognition' and as 'mutual expectation') originated in Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1960, Ch. 3.

<sup>15</sup> I hope to present the long story in another place, following Strawson's suggestion (*op. cit.*) of analyzing illocutionary acts (other than institutionalized types) in terms of Gricean (*op. cit.*) intentions. Part will appear in 'The Speech Act Schema', forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> I think any theory involving Gricean (reflexive) intentions must face up to the fact that the intended inferences are not explicit. Perhaps such a theory must require not that these inferences be made and intended but that they not be blocked.

<sup>17</sup> This claim does not, of course, apply to conventionalized performatives (see note 10).