Intention in Performative Utterances

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1. Self-Referentiality

1.1 What is it?

Most authors seem to agree that the formula for obtaining performativity includes self-reference. Before continuing, it is worthwhile to explain exactly what we mean by saying of an utterance that it is "self-referential." Let's look at an example:

(1) I apologize.

This sentence refers to itself in the sense that it *is* the action it describes (namely apologizing). It is also necessarily true, in the sense that there is no world in which this sentence, when uttered, could be false. Note the distinction between (1) and a sentence like:

(2) This sentence is a sentence.

While (2) refers to itself and is necessarily true, it is not an action and it is not in the first person. Contrast (1) also with a sentence like:

(3) I remove you from existence.

While (3) refers to itself, is an action, is necessarily true, and is in the first person, it is not the right *kind* of action. Performative verbs must be a kind of action that can be performed through speech alone (and removing someone from existence does not fall into this category).

What this actually shows us is that "self-referentiality" in the performative sense is a bit more than basic self-reference. Whether or not such extra features as being an action, being in the first person, or being the right *type* of action ought to be captured under the umbrella of "self-referentiality" is irrelevant to our discussion, because as we shall shortly see, self-referentiality is not to make a performative.

1.2 How We Get It

Regine Eckhardt describes two different ways in which the performative kind of self-referentiality can be derived. The first works for utterances with *hereby* and the second works for utterances lacking a *hereby*. For example:

(4) I hereby apologize.

In Eckhardt's analysis, we can go directly from (4) to something like (4'):

(4') I, *through this right here very utterance*, apologize.

The *hereby* directly creates self-referentiality. In contrast, consider (1), which is the same as (4) but without a *hereby*. In Eckhardt's analysis, the hearer of (1) must now go through a Bachian-style derivation to derive self-referentiality. This derivation goes something like:

1. I heard the utterance "I apologize."
2. There has been an act of apologizing.
3. What else could constitute this act besides the utterance itself?
4. Therefore, what has really been said is something like (4').

1.3 The Limits of Self-Referentiality

Self-referentiality is not enough to guarantee performativity; it is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition. It is only half of the performative formula. Consider this example:

(5) I hereby utter a sentence with eight words.

This sentence references itself, it is necessarily true, it is an action, it is in the first person, and it is a kind of action which can be performed through the use of language alone. However, it does not appear to be performative.

2. Intention and Searle

2.1 Where Does Intention Come From?

The missing piece of the performative formula, which you might have guessed from the title of this paper, is intention. Here we will turn to Searle, who gives us an interesting perspective on the role of intention in performatives. According to him, performative verbs like *promise* and *apologize* encode intentionality in their very meaning. They are necessarily intentional. In his own words: "If I didn't intend it as a promise, then it wasn't a promise." (Searle 1989: 551)

2.2 A Problem

This seems reasonable – it is hard to imagine just how one could *accidentally* promise. Yet the way Searle describes this encoding of intentionality places the weight not on the action itself but on the *word* itself; and this proves problematic. Consider this example:

(6) I promise to visit you tomorrow.

Now imagine that the speaker of (6), at the time of their uttering (6), holds no intention in their minds to fulfill their promise. They think to themselves "Ha, this poor fool thinks I'll be visiting him tomorrow. But really, I'll be busy playing golf!" In this case, it is arguable that there is no intention to promise. If this is true – if it is possible to use the word *promise* without intending to perform the action – then in what way does the word encode intentionality?

2.3 A Possible Solution

There are two ways to respond to this critique of Searle's analysis. First, one might take the line that (6) uttered insincerely is *still* a real promise. The intention of the speaker was not to *not promise*, but to actually promise and then later *break* that promise. This counter-argument harkens all the way back to Austin, who thought that this might be the reason promise-breakers suffer the wrath of those they promised to – even though they promised insincerely, a very real promise was still created.

A second, related way to respond is to slightly alter the kind of intention we are interested in. Rather than the intention to perform the act of promising, we might say that the intention encoded by the word promise is the intent to *communicate* a promise – in other words to make the other person *believe* that you have promised.

Really this is a different formulation of the above counter-argument. The first response alters the nature of the promising act to be something like "communicating a promise (whether or not you intend to keep it)" while the second simply shifts the intention to this same act, while leaving aside the issue of the nature of the act itself. How exactly we ought to shuffle around intention, communication, and the various other aspects of this promising exchange is a discussion for another time.

2.4 A Further Problem

We can safely say, though, that even if we choose to accept the defense provided above, there is still a problem. Consider the following example,

provided by Eckhardt, in which Person A has been making hilarious jokes for several minutes and Person B is, to use the colloquial phrase, dying of laughter:

(7) B: (gasps) Stop it! You are killing me!
A: (laughing) Ok. I hereby promise to never be funny again.

As Eckhardt rightly points out, A does not intend to make a promise and B will not interpret him as having made one (unlike in the case of an insincere promise). This brings us back to the original question – if it is possible to use the word *promise* without intending to perform the act, how exactly does *promise* encode intentionality?

2.5 A Better Solution

One solution is to back off from Searle's stance and say instead that it is only the act and not the word which encodes intentionality. But it is not necessary to do so. The above criticisms show that we might have a *better* analysis if we move intentionality from word to action; but they do not show that it is *impossible* for intention to be encoded in a word.

Take (7), in which the word *promise* was used but the act was not performed. Rather than taking this as evidence of the lack of intentionality encoded in *promise*, we could take it as evidence of some kind of "blocking" mechanism. This mechanism might be intonation, or context, or however exactly we want to describe the ways in which (7) fails to be a successful promise. What the mechanism does is overwrite the intention encoded in *promise*.

This is not surprising; it is a basic facet of language that original word meaning is negated or otherwise altered when combined with other word meanings (as well as intonation, context, etc.) For example:

(7) I do not love you.

We might define the word *love* as "affection." In (7), we are not talking about affection, but the lack thereof. The original meaning of the word is negated in some sense by the context of the sentence. This does not mean that the idea of affection is not contained in the word *love*; it simply means that when you take *love* and insert it into a broader context, the meaning is altered.

3. Intention and Eckhardt

3.1 Defining and Frogs

Eckhardt, who is aware that her analysis of self-referentiality doesn't answer all the questions we need answered about performativity, gives us a further analysis

of intention. On her terms, intention appears in the speaker's act of *defining* their utterance as a certain kind of illocutionary act. She says that "The speaker must want the information transfer *e* to be a PROMISE" (or, for our purposes, any other performative verb). She compares this act of defining an utterance to the act of an artist defining the content of their art. Let us allow Eckhardt herself to describe this analogy.

> Imagine a painter who draws a nice and realistic picture of a frog. There is no doubt that the picture shows a frog... However, does the picture show a he-frog or a she-frog? If both sexes look alike, the painter has the authority to decide the sex of the depicted frog. If the painter intends the picture to show a she-frog, then that is so. Otherwise it isn't. (Eckhardt 2012: 46)

3.2 An Opposing View

The major opposition to this analogy will come from the same corner as literary formalism. In literary formalism, the work is to be taken as completely separate from its author and their intentions. When reading *A Catcher in the Rye*, Holden's red hat can be seen as symbolic of his dead brother (who had red hair) *regardless* of whether or not J.D. Salinger chose the hat color for this reason. Perhaps he simply thought Holden's favorite color would be red – but this is irrelevant. A symbol is a symbol, analysis is analysis, and a book is not a riddle with the answer being the author's original vision. In the same way, a literary formalist might say that a painter has absolutely no right to define the sex of the frog they've just painted (or anything else about it, for that matter).

3.3 Countering the Opposition

Whether or not we agree with this position on art and creative work in general, it presents an opportunity to strengthen and refine Eckhardt's view. We can both inure her theory against such attacks and at the same time provide more specificity in her analysis of intention. To strengthen her theory we will sacrifice some strength from the artist's power to define. Rather than having the capability to change the very *nature* of their creation in some metaphysical, existential sense, we can say that artists have the ability merely to affect *how their work is perceived*.

When an artist defines their painting as a painting of a she-frog, they aren't changing the nature of the content of the painting, they're just making it more likely that people will interpret the frog in the painting as female. It is interesting that these two things may not be so different – for what is the content of a painting but our perceptions of it? Regardless, such an alteration to the theory will protect it from the objections of literary formalists and their ilk.

Moreover, it seems that changing the theory in this way actually brings it closer to what Eckhardt intended. She herself cites studies that show that "the intention of the creator ranks highly when people categorize an artifact." (Eckhardt 2012: 46)

3.4 But Where Does It Come From?

We still haven't answered the question of where intentionality comes from. This is because in Eckhardt's case, that's the wrong question. For Searle, intention was encoded in verbs. For Eckhardt, it doesn't really matter where the intention comes from – such considerations are psychological ones, and far outside her analysis. The point is that the speaker *does* intend to perform a certain act, and that this intention leads them to define their utterance as such. So the real question is what constitutes this act of definition? How do we get from intention to definition?

The answer is extremely nonmysterious. The definition of the utterance as a certain type of act is a piece of information the same as any other. As such it is communicated the same way as any other piece of information; through word meaning, intonation, body language, etc. To define an utterance as a promise, we might use the word *promise*, along with an intonation that is at least *not* sarcastic. Or, we might use an emphatic or very serious intonation, but leave out the actual word. Whatever the specifics, it seems that the intention is communicated through the same mechanisms as the content.

References

Eckhardt, Regine: 2012, 'Hereby explained: an event-based account of performative utterances', *Linguistics and Philosophy* **35**, 21-55.

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