

I am not convinced that Austin has proved that performatives cannot be a type of statement. Let's examine his arguments for this claim. To be clear, the opposing view is that performatives can be classified as a statement in the sense that they report on an internal action (such as promising). First, Austin mentions that if we accept this view we "open a loophole to perjurers and welshers and bigamists and so on, so that there are disadvantages in being excessively solemn in this way." (236) Second, he points out the asymmetry between grammatical formulations of a performative. For example, "I promise" is an action, whereas "he promised" is clearly a description. Finally, we may perhaps infer (for I had difficulty locating any explicit mention of this) that a third argument opposing the classification of performatives as statements runs something like this: when someone says "I promise", they have actually made a promise, whether they were sincere or not, and this is why we become angry with them if they later break their word.

Allow me to discuss these arguments slightly out of order. The first point is, I think, easily dismissed. While there may (or may not) be pragmatic disadvantages to formulating our theory of performatives in a certain way, this does not seem to reflect upon the actual value of the theory. Our job is to discern the nature of performatives, not attempt to describe their nature in a way that suits our social preferences. The third and final point is one but not the only possible interpretation. That is, I believe it possible to formulate the notion of "breaking a promise" in one of two ways. Either we can say that, as the third argument does, a promise has been made regardless of sincerity, and it is the violation of this promise which brings moral blame; or we can say that the phrase "I promise" was used as a description of an internal act of promising, and that when someone breaks their promise we say "you liar!" because they had not truthfully reported their internal act.

The second argument interests me the most. Let us examine something that is decidedly *not* a performative in a similar context. For example, “I break a glass.” Clearly just saying this is not enough to perform the action of breaking a glass. If we say “he broke a glass,” then it is obviously a description of a past action. But is the first person present tense version also a description? To my ears, at least, it does not sound like one. It simply sounds odd, because it sounds like someone *trying* to use a performative, but failing because breaking a glass is not an action that can be performed verbally. Perhaps if it were contained in the context of a first person narrative it would sound like a description, but I think in this case “I promise” would also sound descriptive rather than performative. If my intuitions are at all correct, then we must ask if this characteristic asymmetry between grammatical formulations is actually characteristic of performatives at all, or whether it applies to any verb phrase.

At this point you might well accuse me of hypocrisy and point out that I *just* drew a distinction between description and performance. Here is what I think. We may formulate our theory of performatives such that our criterion for a performative is that it is, or can be paraphrased as, a description of an action that is internal. We may then say that when used in speech, we take this special class of description and treat it differently, as an action of sorts. But we are also allowed, then, to extend to performatives the very useful rules of analysis we use on statements. I would like to conclude this response with a disclaimer. First, while I am unconvinced of Austin’s view on this matter, I am also entirely unconvinced by the opposing view which I describe above. I write, then, more to urge critical analysis of Austin’s position than to support the opposing one.