Performative Utterances and Limits of Russellian Truth Value

J.L Austin's work as a philosopher lies in the wake of many profound philosophers of language in the late 19th and 20th century. While respecting the milestones achieved prior, Austin would like to move beyond the constrained concepts of truth functionality pioneered by Russell and Frege that have been ubiquitous in language analysis. While Austin does desire to explore terrain beyond that marked out by Russell and company, he holds a more specific conception of language than that of an expressivist. Austin wants to shed light on utterances that are not nonsensical, such as cries of pain, but neither true nor false as well (according to the traditional understanding of truth and falsity) [235]. This paper will explore a handful of Austin's contributions to the philosophy of language, namely performative utterances and issues surrounding them, as well as explicit performative utterances, what he calls "felicitous" and "infelicitous" statements, and statements that complicate classical conceptions of truth.

In regards to performative utterances, Austin says, " [I]f a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something" [235]. More specifically, it appears that performative utterances bring facts into existence, doing more than reporting information, they additionally affirm a fact's being. Austin provides a few clear cut examples of this phenomena. One concise example is that of a marriage. When an individual says "I do" to their significant other at the altar, the two (according to the standards we have set) become "one." The words spoken by the couple are given a particular power due to the ritual they are engaged in, not only reporting feelings of affirmation, but also a legal, social, and

spiritual union. Or as put succinctly by Austin, "[W]hen I say 'I do', I am not reporting on a marriage, I am indulging in it" [235].

As hinted at, there is a particular rituality that seems to engulf the previous example of a wedding. Austin presented a handful of guidelines, though not exhaustive, to delineate between what he calls "felicitous" and "infelicitous" statements. These criteria are threefold: (i.) The convention invoked by a speaker must "exist and be accepted," (ii.) the convention must occur in the appropriate circumstances, and (iii.) the procedure of invocation must occur correctly and completely [237-38]. To elaborate these points we will further explore wedding ceremonies. In accordance with the first rule, it is clear that one cannot have a "super wedding" or "wedding 2.0" (with the exclusion of a second marriage or renewal of vows, depending on how one interprets it), for these conventions are non-existent and not accepted by members of society. Furthermore, performative utterances for a wedding will misfire if one is not in the appropriate setting. Saying "I do" as I drink tea and write this paper does not bear the same gravity as that of a nervous groom on his very special day. Lastly, one would not say that a wedding ceremony was complete if before the groom could say "I do" he ran away, was captured, or even in Austin's humorous statement, turned out to be a horse.

The guidelines that demarcate performative statements are necessary but not sufficient to completely describe the utterances Austin would like to capture. Aware of this, he examines a handful of performative statements that are still infelicitous despite meeting the aforementioned criteria. One glaring example is that of insincerity. According to Austin, "If I say 'I congratulate you' when I'm not pleased or when I don't believe that the credit was yours, then there is insincerity" [239]. In regards to the phrase *I'm sorry*, it is unclear whether or not this is a

performative utterance of apologizing or of describing the feelings of the person apologizing. Furthermore, neither of these appear to be truth functional, and any attempt to determine this would likely be unfruitful. Perhaps the later is determinable as true or false upon further investigation, but the performative iteration of the phrase is not verifiable; again, the phrase seems to bring a fact into the world. Another circumstance similar to insincerity is misunderstanding. Dissonance between speaker and listener can occur, but the criteria of an existent convention, proper context, and completion are met. It even appears that Austin is taking a step backward when he asks, "...how can we tell, whether any utterance is to be classed as a performative or not?" [241].

It is here that Austin turns to syntax, positing first person singular present indicative active statements as textbook performative utterances [242]. He acknowledges that this syntactic form is not a catch all, but rather another rough guideline in addition to the three criteria proposed earlier. The advantage to this form is that it minimizes the ambiguity of its interpretation. Take the sentence "I order you to shut the door" as opposed to merely "Shut the door." The first sentence is an example of what Austin calls an explicit performative utterance. These explicit statements lay bare the formula and leave little to the imagination. In using performative verbs and phrases such as "I order" or "Warning:" or "I promise," Austin claims that "we make explicit what precise act it is that we are performing when we issue our utterance" [245]. In saying "Warning: do not cross," the speaker is simultaneously performing a warning in issuing it to a listener. One potential source of confusion with explicit performative utterances arises when a sentence such as "The cat is on the mat" is saddled with one of these precursory phrases such as "I state that…" Should one consider "The cat is on the mat" and "I state that the

cat is on the mat" to be synonymous? If there is no cat on the mat, it would seem that the former sentence is false, but what of the latter? To call it false would suggest that the speaker did not state that the cat was on the mat, when it is evident that they did.

Matters are complicated further when Austin introduces his second example:

> "A second case that has come to light is the one about John's children- the case where somebody is supposed to say 'All John's children are bald but John hasn't got any children'. Or perhaps somebody says 'All John's children are bald', when as a matter of fact- he doesn't say so- John has no children" [248].

This example complicates what would normally be a relatively simple discussion. Russell championed the notion that a sentence with no referent is false; in this case, it would seem that if Austin's statement was simply "All John's children are bald," then it would be an open and shut case because John happened to not have children. But something shifts when the speaker makes explicit the fact that John indeed has no children. Austin would argue that the aforementioned sentence is void due to a lack of reference [249]. Another example, to return to the feline theme, is the statement, "The cat is on the mat, but I don't believe it." Technically, the statement is not contradictory: both parts of the sentence can be held simultaneously, though intuitively a user of language knows they wouldn't be. Austin suggests that one ought to assess performative utterances "in a general dimension of correspondence with fact" [250]. It is nonsensical to believe that the status of John's children is simultaneously true and false; this is where Austin's notion of voidness (which is distinct from misfiring) occurs. It appears that correspondence with fact is less demanding than a truth value judgement, and statements such as that of John's children meet the threshold of the former but not the latter.

To analyze notion further, it will be beneficial to discuss Russell's famous example sentence: "The King of France is bald." This statement was and always has been, according to Russell, false. There is currently no King of France, and despite the fact that there has been, there has never been a bald one. However, the truth functionality of this statement seems to change when preceded by one of Austin's first person singular present indicative active statement such as "I state that." Russell's initially false statement becomes void as a result of this modification. To this point, Austin highlights that "[I]lls that have been found to afflict statements can be precisely paralleled with ills that are characteristic of performative utterances" [249]. Complications regarding truth and falsity have been expanded to also include normal statements. This argument in tandem with performative utterances bringing truths into existence complicates Russell's initial picture of how truth functionality operates within sentences.

The analyses presented by Austin effectively shed light on the limitations of seeing language as exclusively truth functional. Performative utterances demonstrate the intricacy of many contexts in which language is effectively deployed. These utterances also explain the creation, modification, and dissolution of facts. It seems that Austin raises more questions than answers, but his insights create room for a more holistic understanding of language, and may even go as far as to provide a legitimate challenge to our typical understanding of truths. At the risk of providing more source material than what is usually acceptable, I can't help but refer to Austin a final time, as he fittingly states, "If, then, we loosen up our ideas of truth and falsity we shall see that statements, when assessed in relation to the facts, are not so very different after all from pieces of advice, warnings, verdicts, and so on" [251].

Resources:

J.L. Austin: *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979)