Speech Act Theory: The Force of an Utterance

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Abstract:
One of the most important theories in early Pragmatics is that of Austin's Speech Act Theory. In How to do things with words (1962), which was published posthumously, Austin uncovers the power of language in getting things done. Calling this power the FORCE of a speech act, Austin situates language within a larger enterprise of human actions. Speech Act Theory is the level of analysis that goes beyond naming entities or judging linguistic structures. By focusing on the non-literal meaning that arises in language in use, Speech Act Theory fosters a third level of analysis to language in use. This article attempts to trace the main claims of Austin' Speech Act Theory, with much focus on the difference between constatives and performatives. A major distinction states that while the former are either true or false, the latter are either happy or unhappy.
Keywords: Speech act, Pragmatics, Constatives, Performatives, Felicity Conditions.

1. Introduction

Investigating the human language has always been an interesting field of study to philosophers, grammarians, linguists, discourse analysts, and different practitioners in different language-related fields. All efforts have focused on deciphering the enigmatic nature of human language. How language is produced and how it is processed are vital questions. These gave rise to different views based on different conceptualizations to the nature of human language, ranging from a set of rigid structure to a flexible medium of interaction. Considering the non-linguistic behavior, especially in the spoken form of language in use, has even complicated the matter. It is now important to know how individuals use, harmoniously, linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors, relying on a certain set of rules and conventions to communicate

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and process a certain message in a certain context. Among the most important theories that provides another level of analysis to language in use is that of Speech Act Theory, the founder of which was J. L. Austin.

2. Overview of Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory (hereafter SAT) is a linguistic theory that is contextualized within the philosophy of language. As opposed to linguistic philosophy, that is interested in particularities of different languages, the philosophy of language is interested in investigating the phenomenon of human language in general (Searle, 1969). When Austin first introduced his theory of Speech Act, he stated that it was not a new phenomenon. However, it has not been paid attention to, "The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious, and it cannot fail to have been already noticed, at least here and there, by others. Yet I have not found attention paid to it specifically" (Austin, 1962, p. 1). What SAT brought into picture is the study of a non-literal meaning of language use. It is the study of how language users do things using words. Apologize, assert, order, request, etc., are examples of speech acts carried out by words.

Before SAT, the study of meaning has been limited to the study of literal meaning in both Lexical Semantics and Logical Semantics. No consideration was assigned to the non-literal meaning, where language is used *appropriately* to carry out a given act in a given context. This latter comes to be known as the field of Pragmatics, of which SAT is a subfield (Yule, 1996), Worthy of mention, the distinction drawn between Semantics and Pragmatics takes place for analytical purposes only as many scholars consider that the study of the non-literal meaning of an utterance cannot take place without considering its literal meaning "there is on this account no way of sorting out the context-free meaning of a linguistic expression, since even the strictly conventionalized usage is always related to a background of unstated assumptions and practices" (Searle, Kiefer, & Bierwisch, 1980, pp. x-xi). This justifies the non-use of the term 'Pragmatics' by many scholars such as Austin, Grice, and Searle in spite of being the pioneers of such field

> It is perhaps an ironic feature of the use of the expression "pragmatics" in the current philosophical and linguistic literature that many of the authors who are most commonly described as working within the area of pragmatics do not use this expression at all, for example, Austin, Grice, and Searle. (Searle, Kiefer, & Bierwisch, 1980, p. x)

3. A Theory of Action: A Third Level of Analysis

Earlier efforts to study language have focused on the structural properties of utterances. However, it was found that the focus on the properties of the abstract structure of utterances, alone, cannot determine which type of utterance is conventionally acceptable in a given context. In this context, Gee (2005) states that there are two Grammars

One grammar is the traditional set of units like nouns, verbs, inflections, phrases and clauses...The other - less studied, but more important - grammar is the "rules" by which grammatical units like nouns and verbs, phrases and clauses, are used to create patterns which signal or "index" characteristic *whos-doing-whats-whithin-Discourses.* (p. 41)

Attempts to consider both grammars gave rise to three fields of study: *Syntactics, Semantics,* and *Pragmatics.* These latter are interested in different, yet complementary, levels of analysis: *Form, Meaning,* and *Action* (van Dijk, 1977). So, while Syntax studies formal relations among signs, and Semantics examines the relations between signs and the objects they signify, Pragmatics is the study of how utterances relate to their users. That is, Syntactics is interested in the *well-formedness* of a given utterance, Semantics judges its *meaningfulness*, and Pragmatics checks the *appropriateness* of this former in a given context (van Dijk, 1977). A part of this appropriateness is the study of the speech act carried out in (locutionary and illocutionary) or as a result of (perlocutionary) a given utterance.

4. Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics

As stated above, Pragmatics is interested in the study of the non-literal meaning in a given context. Yule (1996, p. 3) states that "It has, consequently, more to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves." Taking into account contextual elements, along the linguistic ones, in producing and deciphering a communicative message necessitates the consideration of other elements that accompany the carrying out of a speech act. This takes place as interlocutors take into account factors like: their power statuses, their relationship, the spacio-temporal context, the degree of intimacy, politeness, etc. in order to realize an appropriate speech act.

As a consequence, SAT (founded by Austin (1962), and developed later by Searle (1969, 1979) has been followed by other language action theories, including: Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory, Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987)

Theory of Politeness, and others. All of which consider phenomena like: speech acts, respecting and violating Grice's maxims, politeness maxim, assumptions, implicatures, inferences, and other elements where "a great deal of what is unsaid is recognized as part of what is communicated" (Yule, 1996, p. 3). Yule adds that "The advantage of studying language via pragmatics is that one can talk about people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions (for example, requests) that they are performing when they speak" (1996, p. 4).

5. Austin's Criticism to Grammarians and Philosophers: Constatives vs. Performatives

Austin (1962) criticized grammarians and philosophers on different grounds. Both grammarians and philosophers do not deny that a sentence can stand for different functions i.e., a question, a command, a request, an apology, etc. in addition to that of stating a given fact. They also share the idea that grammatical structure alone cannot decide for the function of a given sentence. However, none them have studied particularities of form and/or context in which producing an utterance is the performance of a given act or as Austin (1962) calls it 'a *performative act*'.

In fact, philosophers have gone further to consider those utterances that do not stand for a given fact as pseudo-statements or nonsensical statements. Austin (1962, p. 2), for his part, not ignoring the existence of such category of nonsensical or meaningless utterances, states that a great part of what philosophers consider as pseudo-statements are not statements at all, "Yet we, that is, even philosophers, set some limits to the amount of nonsense that we are prepared to admit we talk; so that it was natural to go on to ask, as a second stage, whether many apparently pseudo-statements really set out to be 'statements' at all.". Austin refers to those cases where what philosophers call pseudo-statements are not meant in the first place to describe any reality. Still, they are judged upon such criterion. He explains (1962, p. 2) that "It has come to be commonly held that many utterances which look like statements are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the facts."

In addition to restricting the study of 'sentence' to that of 'statement', philosophers are also criticized for what Austin calls '*descriptive fallacy*' which states that "It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (1962, p. 1). The descriptive fallacy was accompanied by the verification test i.e., "a statement (of fact) ought to be 'verifiable', and this led to the view that many

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'statements' are only what may be called pseudo-statements" (1962, p. 2). As such, one given fact can be represented by two statements: a true statement and a wrong one. For instance, the fact that Earth turns around the sun can be referred to using the following statements:

(1)   Earth turns around the sun.   A true statement.
(2)   Earth doesn't turn around the sun.   A false statement.

Austin refutes such '*verification principle*' asserting that "Not all true or false statements are descriptions, and for this reason I prefer to use the word 'Constative'" (1962, p. 3). Philosophers are also criticized for not considering those cases where a statement stands for '*a performative act*' rather than '*a constative one*'. For instance, an utterance like 'You have a beautiful smile' does not state a fact. Rather, it stands for a performative act, that is, praise.

In short, Austin's Speech Act Theory was directed especially against philosophers' four main assumptions, including: classifying utterances into statements and pseudo-statements, judging utterances on a truth-condition basis where only statements can satisfy the verification principle, reducing the category of performatives to pseudo-statements as they fail the verification principle test, and ignoring cases where statements stand for performatives. Austin, for his part, states that while constatives respond to truth/falsehood dimension, performatives respond to happiness/unhappiness one i.e., a given performative can be said to be either happy (appropriate or successful) or unhappy (inappropriate or unsuccessful).

6. Constatives vs. Propositional Content

As stated above, Austin classifies meaningful utterances into constatives and performatives. He prefers the term constatives to that of statements as it considers, in addition to assertions, other cases where many seemingly descriptive statements are not meant to describe reality but "to indicate (not to report) the circumstances in which the statement is made or reservations to which it is subject or the way in which it is to be taken and the like" (1962, p. 3).

Austin gives different examples of constatives, including:

(3) The cat is on the mat
(4) John has five children
(5) France is hexagonal

All these utterances are judged upon truth/falsehood dimension. They are either true or false by reference to a certain fact.

In other words, in order to judge a given utterance as true or false, analysts check whether its propositional content (proposition) corresponds to

a given state of affairs. Van Dijk (1977, p. 21) defines a proposition stating that

> In the semantics of (propositional) logical systems, a proposition is simply defined as an object which is assigned a TRUTH-VALUE. In classical systems this means that a proposition is either assigned the value TRUE or the value FALSE (but not both). Some systems also use a third truth-value, viz NEITHER TRUE NOR FALSE or INDETERMINATE.

A proposition has generally a triple division of Subject, Predicate (or Attribute), and Copula (Russell, 2009). For what concerns SAT, Austin has referred to the 'proposition' as a logical construction of a given utterance. However, he doesn't include any detailed analysis of the propositional content of different speech acts. Searle, for his part, talks about speech acts with and others without propositional content. He (1969, p. 64) states, for instance, that "In the utterance of "Hello" there is no propositional content". Yet, we do claim that regarding the implied meaning embedded in language in use, an utterance like 'hello' has an implicit propositional content i.e., the one we understand as interlocutors. Hence 'Hello' is understood as 'I salute you'; also 'Shh!' is understood as 'You stop talking!'.

7. Performatives vs. Felicity Conditions

As a matter of fact, the category of performatives is the central focus of Austin's work. As mentioned above, SAT's main assumption is the force of an utterance described as a linguistic act (speech act) or a performative. He (1962) explains that "The name is derived, of course, from 'perform', the usual verb with the noun 'action': it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action -it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (pp. 6-7). To draw a distinctive line between constatives and performatives, Austin states that performatives satisfy the following conditions (Austin, 1962, p. 5)

> A. they do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'; and

> B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as saying something.

As the book is meant first and foremost to tackle performatives, it includes many examples of performative acts including:

(6) I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.

(7) I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.

(8) I promise to do what you order me to do.

In these examples, it seems clear that to utter the sentences is to perform different speech acts: naming a ship, betting, and promising.

Also, as opposed to constatives that are either true or false, performatives are either felicitous (happy) or infelicitous (unhappy). In this regard, Austin (1962, pp. 14-15) sets six felicity conditions:

(A. I) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,

(A. 2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.

(B. I) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

(B. 2) completely.

(Γ. I) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further

(Γ. 2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.

As such, the first rule (A.1) states that there must be a certain accepted conventional procedure in which a given speech act takes place. This includes details about who doing what, when, where, etc. A.2 states that the persons and circumstances in question must satisfy the conditions stated in A.1. For instance, a lawyer cannot *order* a judge, children cannot *marry,* a child cannot be baptized in a mosque, etc. B.1 states that the procedure of performing a given speech act must be executed by all participants in a correct way. B.2 states that the procedure should be complete. Γ.1 states that participants should be sincere (i.e., they mean what they say). For instance, participants shouldn't be acting or joking. Γ.2 states that participants must act accordingly. For instance, a participant who sincerely (Γ.I) made a promise must keep his promise (Γ.2). Allan (1986, p. 188) states that "Austin's (Γ.2) is a fulfilment condition. It states that the participants in a speech act must conduct themselves in accordance with the thoughts and feelings invoked in the illocution. Austin's point is that many speech acts invoke behavioural expectations". He adds that "(A. 1-2) describe preparatory conditions, (B. 1-2) executive conditions, (Γ.1) a sincerity condition, and (Γ.2) a fulfilment condition" (p. 182).

Austin (1962, p. 15) states that "if we sin against any one (or more) of these six rules, our performative utterance will be (in one way or another) unhappy". However, he adds that there are different kinds of unhappiness

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depending on the violated rule. To clarify, Austin groups these rules into two big categories: A's and B's together (Misfires) against Γ's (Abuses). These categories are, further, divided into sub-categories (see Fig 1). Austin explains that

> If we offend against any of the former rules (A's or B's) -that is if we, say, utter the formula incorrectly, or if, say, we are not in a position to do the act because we are, say, married already, or it is the purser and not the captain who is conducting the ceremony, then the act in question, e.g. marrying, is not successfully performed at all, does not come off, is not achieved. Whereas in the two Γ cases the act *is* achieved, although to achieve it in such circumstances, as when we are, say, insincere, is an abuse of the procedure. Thus, when I say 'I promise' and have no intention of keeping it, I have promised but. . . (1962, pp. 15-16)

Fig 1. Infelicities (Austin, 1962, p. 18)
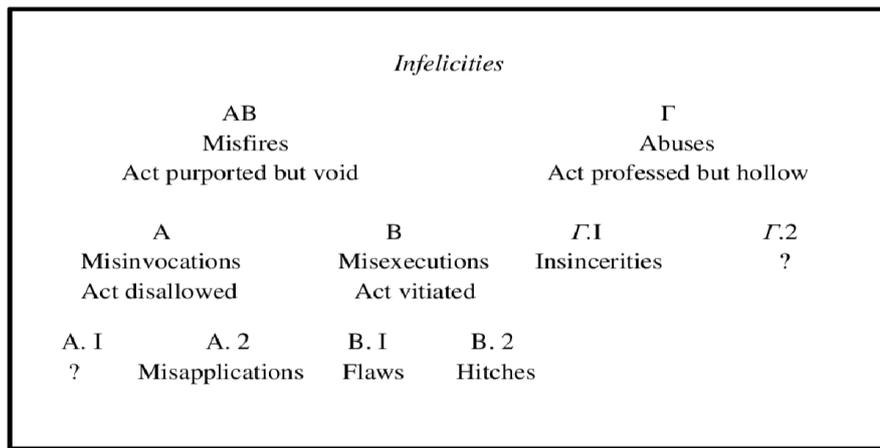
As shown in the above scheme, Austin couldn't suggest names for violating rules A.1 and Γ.2. For our part and relying on the definitions provided by this former to both rules, we can suggest to name the first infelicity '*Non-Existence*' as it implies that there is no such procedure at all. We also suggest to name the last infelicity (Γ.2) '*Non-commitment*' as the participant violating such rule does not commit to the requirement(s) of performing a given speech act.

8. Austin's Self-Criticism

Austin's stated his book claiming for a clear-cut distinction between constatives and performatives. While the former reply to truth-falsehood conditions, the latter reply to felicity ones. In the first ten lectures (1962), Austin keeps defending this dichotomy stating examples from each category. However, lecture eleven comes to misbalance this distinction as he (p. 132) wonders: "Were these distinctions really sound?" He also adds

> Our subsequent discussion of doing and saying certainly seems to point to the conclusion that whenever I 'say' anything (except perhaps a mere exclamation like 'damn' or 'ouch') I shall be performing both locutionary and illocutionary acts, and these two kinds of acts seem to be the very things which we tried to use as a means of distinguishing, under the names of 'doing' and 'saying', performatives from constatives. If we are in general always doing both things, how can our distinction survive? (p. 132)

In other words, Austin has revised his initial distinction between constatives and performatives and found out that truth-falsehood criterion as well as felicity conditions can be applied to both categories. To clarify, he states that when we *state* something we are *doing* something (performing the act of 'stating') just like performing any other performative: warning, apologizing, promising, etc. Hence, constatives are, in addition to being true or false, also liable to be happy (felicitous) or unhappy (infelicitous). Also, an utterance like 'I warn you that it is going to charge' is both a warning (a performative) and a true or false statement (that it is going to charge) (Austin, 1962, pp. 134-135). Hence, it replies to both: truth-falsehood criterion and felicity conditions.

Now, what is left from the aforementioned distinction is a matter of focus where:

> (*a*) With the constative utterance, we abstract from the illocutionary (let alone the perlocutionary) aspects of the speech act, and we concentrate on the locutionary... (*b*) With the performative utterance, we attend as much as possible to the illocutionary force of the utterance, and abstract from the dimension of correspondence with facts. (pp. 144-145)

9. Taxonomy of Speech Acts

As mentioned above, SAT states that any *saying* is, in a way or another, *doing*. Hence, any meaningful utterance is a speech act. Austin (1962) classifies speech acts according to their illocutionary force into five categories: Verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behavitives, and expositives which he defines as

the verdictive is an exercise of judgment, the exercitive is an assertion of influence or exercising of power, the commissive is an assuming of an obligation or declaring of an intention, the behabitive is the adopting of an attitude, and the expositive is the clarifying of reasons, arguments, and communications. (p. 162)

Austin gives a large numbers of examples within each category. Analyse, class, and interpret are good examples of *verdictives*. *Exercitives* include for instance: concede, urge, argue, insist, etc. Examples of *commissives* are: define, agree, accept, maintain, support, testify, and swear. *Behavitives* include, for instance, demur, boggle at. Report, adhere to, object, inform are examples of *Expositives*. Yet, he claims that these categories do not exclude each other. As such, a given performative can take place in more than one category. State, describe, swear, know, defend, disagree, etc. are good examples of this former.

10. Conclusion

To conclude, Austin's Speech Act Theory is a very credible work. It is a theory of action that analyses meaningful utterances as linguistic acts (speech acts). Accordingly, its importance lies in uncovering the force of an utterance in getting things done. However, as the non-literal meaning is, in a way or another, based on the literal one, there is an urgent necessity to find out how both of them relate. This cannot be achieved without understanding the nature of the illocutionary force, and examining the difference existing between the different forces as well as the utterances used to perform them. Hence, we do claim that an analysis of the deeper structure of speech acts can help bring some answers. However, without relating this former with theories of *form* and *meaning*, hence decontextualizing the force of an utterance from its context of use, we will not do much. In other words, there should be a shift from considering the dichotomy of *Form-Meaning* to considering a three-level analysis of *Form-Meaning-Action*.

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