THE CONTRIBUTION OF JOHN LANGSHAW AUSTIN IN SPEECH ACT THEORY

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ABSTRACT
This article reviews John Langshaw Austin's speech acts contribution to discourse analysis. It further describes Austin's linguistic method and his speech act theory and describes the original contributions he made to epistemology and philosophy of action. It focuses on development of speech acts theory. Austin shed light on standard cases of successful communication, and to specify the conditions for a smooth functioning of a performative by focusing on standard cases and communicative failures.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Speech act theory is a sub-field programmatic concerned with the ways in which words can be used not only to present information but also to carry out actions. As introduced by Oxford philosopher John Langshaw Austin how to do with words, (1962) and further developed by American Philosopher J.R. Searle a linguistic speech-act theory considers the levels of action at which utterances are said to perform.

In linguistics, a speech-act is an utterance defined in terms of a spear's intention and the effect it has on the listener. It considers three levels or components of such utterances

1.   Locutionary Acts
2.   illocutionary Acts
3.   Perlocutionary Acts

2.   SPEECH ACTS

Austin's most celebrated contribution to contemporary philosophy is he's theory of speech acts, presents in 'How to do things with words" (Austin 1975). While for philosophers interested mainly in formal languages the main function of language is describing reality, representing states of affairs and making assertions about the world, for Austin our utterances have a variety of different uses. A similar point is made in philosophy Wittgenstein, who underlines the "countless" uses we may put sentences to (Wittgenstein 1953: 23). Austin contrasts the "desperate" Wittgenstein image perform – a taxonomy similar to the one employed by an = entomologist trying to classify the many (but not countless) species of beetles. Not all utterances then are assertions concerning states of affairs. Take Austin's examples;

1.   I name this ship the "Queen Elisabeth" as the course of the launching of a ship, or
2.   I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow, the utterer of (1) or (2) is not describing the launching ceremony or a bet, but doing it. by uttering these sentences we bring about new facts, "as distinguished from producing consequences in the sense of bringing about states of affairs in the "normal" way, that is, changes in the natural course of events" (Austin 1975: 117): by uttering (1) or (2) we modify the social reality, institute new conventions, and undertake obligations. In the first lessons of How to Do Things with words' Austin traces a tentative distinction between constatives and performatives, thus; constatives, on the one hand, are sentences like
3.   The ca I on the mat: they aim to describe states of affairs and are assessable as true or false. Performatives like (1) and (2), on the other hand, do rather than report something: they perform acts governed by norms and institutions (such as the act of marrying or baptizing) or social conventions (such as the act of betting or promising) and do not seem assessable as true or false.

According to Austin it is possible and fruitful to shed light on standard cases of successful communication, and to specify the conditions for the smooth functioning of a performatives, by focusing on non-standard cases and communicative failures. As we have said performatives cannot be assessed as true or false, but they are subject to different types of invalidity or failure, called "infelicities". In some cases the attempt to perform an act fails or "misfires". The act is "null and void" on the basis of the violation of two kinds of rules:

A1:   there must exist and accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances:

A.2:   that procedure must be invoked in adequate circumstances and by appropriate persons. Further infelicities concern the execution of the procedure, for it must be executed by all participants both.

B.1:   correctly, and
B.2: completely.
        Finally, there are cases in which the performance of an act is achieved, but there is an abuse of the procedure, due to the violation of two kinds of rules:
C.1:   the procedure must be executed by the speaker with appropriate thoughts, feeling or intentions:
C.2:   the participants must subsequently conduct themselves in accordance with the procedure performed.

As we said, in 'How to Do Things with Words" "Austin draws the distinction between constatives and performatives merely as a preliminary to the presentation of his main thesis, namely that there is a performative dimension in any use of language. The putative class of performatives seems to admit only specific verbs (like to promise, to apologize, and to order) all in the first person singular present. Any attempt to characterize the class with grammatical or lexical criteria, however, it bound to fail. We may in fact perform the act of, say, ordering by using an explicit performative, as in (4) I order you to close the door but also with (5) close the door! Similarly, there are performative verbs also for acts stating, asserting, or concluding, as in (6) I assert that the Earth is flat. The very distinction between utterances assessable along the dimension of felicity or infelicity (performatives) is a mere illusion. To show this, Austin presents two arguments:

- on the one hand, constatives may be assessed as happy or unhappy: like performatives, assertions require appropriate conditions for their felicitous performance (to give an example, it does not seem appropriate to make an assertion one does not believe);
- on the other hand, performatives may be assessed in terms of truth and falsehood, or in terms of some conformity to the facts: of a verdict we say that it is fair or unfair, or a piece of advice that is good or bad, of praise that it is deserved or not.

By (a) and (b) Austin is led to the conclusion that the distinction between constatives and performaives is inadequate: all sentences are tools we use in order to do something-to say something is always to do something. Therefore it is necessary to develop a general theory of the uses of language and of the acts we perform by uttering a sentence: a general theory of what Austin calls illocutionary force.
Within the same total speech act, Austin distinguishes three different acts; locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary.

2.1   The Locutionary Act is the act of saying something, the act of uttering certain expressions, well-formed from a syntactic point of view and meaningful. It may furthermore be analyzed into a phonetic act (the act of uttering certain noise), a phatic act (the act of uttering words, that is, sounds as conforming to a certain vocabulary and grammar), and a phetic (the act of using words with a certain meaning-sense or reference).

2.2   The Perlocutionary Act corresponds to the effects brought about by performing an illocutionary act, to its consequences (intentional or non-intentional) on the feelings, thoughts or actions of he participants. According to Austin the speaker, by saying what she says performs another kind of act (like persuading, convincing, or alerting) because she can be taken as responsible for those effects (compare Sbisa 2006 and 2013).
        Yet the perlocutionary consequences of illocutionary acts are non-conventional, not being completely under the speaker's control, but rather related to the specific circumstances in which the act is performed. Austin makes a further distinction between perlocutionary objects (the consequences brought about by an illocutionary act in virtue of its force – as alerting can be a consequences of the illocutionary act of warning) and perlocutionary sequels (the consequences brought about by an illocutionary act without a systematic connection to its force – as surprising can be a consequence of he illocutionary act of asserting) (Austin 1975:118).
        In the last lesion of 'How to Do Things with Words', Austin tentatively singles our five classes of illocutionary act, using as a starting point a list of explicit performative verbs: Vindictive, Executive, Commissives, Behabitives, Expositives.

- The class of Verdictives includes acts (formal or informal) of giving a verdict, estimate, or appraisal (as acquitting, reckoning, assessing, and diagnosing). These may concern facts or values.

- The class of Exercitives includes acts of exerting powers, rights or influence (as appointing, voting, ordering, and warning). These presuppose that he speaker has a certain kind of authority or influence.
- The class of Commissives includes act that commit the speaker to doing something (as promising, undertaking, consenting, opposing, and betting).
- The class of Expositives includes acts having to do with attitudes and social behavior (as apologizing, congratulating, commending, and thanking) these include reactions to other people's behavior or fortune, and are particularly vulnerable to insincerity (condition C.1).

3.   PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

Austin's contribution to the philosophy of action is traceable mainly to two papers: "A plea for Excuses" (1956a) and "Three Ways of Spilling Ink" (1966), where the notions of 'doing an action,' and 'doing something' are clarified by means of the linguistic analysis of excuses, that is, by considering "the different ways, and different words, in which on occasion we may try to get out of things, to show that we didn't act 'freely' or were not 'responsible'" (Austin 1966/1961, 273). According to the method dear to Austin, through the analysis of abnormal cases, or failures, it is possible to throw light on the normal and standard cases. An examination of excuses should enable us to gain an understanding of the notion of action, by means of the preliminary elucidation of the notions of responsibility and freedom. As for the case of 'knowing,' Austin's contribution is one of clarification of use, which sheds light on the notion of 'doing an action'.

According to Austin, from the analysis of the modifying expressions occurring in excuses (for example, 'unwittingly,' 'impulsively') and in accusations ('deliberately,' 'purposely,' 'on purpose'), it is possible to classify the different breakdowns affecting actions, and thus to dismantle the complex internal details of the machinery of action. Far from being reducible to merely making some bodily movements, doing an action is organized into different stages: the intelligence, the appreciation of the situation, the planning, the decision, and the execution. Moreover, apart from the stages, "we can generally split up what might be named as one action in several distinct ways.

4.   CONCLUSION

Austin characterizes the illocutionary act as the conventional aspect of language (to be contrasted with the perlocutinary act). As we said before, for any speech act there must exist and accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect (condition A.1): if the conventional procedure is executed according to further conditions, the act is successfully performed. This claim seems plausible as far as institutional or social acts (like naming a ship, or betting) are concerned: the conventional dimension is here manifest because it is our society (and sometimes our laws) that validates those acts. The claim seems less plausible as far as speech acts in general are concerned: nothing conventional, or semantic, makes of (5) an order, or a challenge, or an entreaty – the illocutionary force of the utterance is fixed by the context of utterance.

More generally, according to Austin the speaker's intention play only a minor role in the performance of a speech act (violation of condition C.1 leads to an abuse of the procedure, but not a failure of the speech act). Drawing on Gricean ideas, Peter Strawson a linguistic argues that what makes of (5) an illocutionary act of ordering instead of entreating are the speaker's intentions the speaker may (but need not) make available to the audience using linguistic conventions: I do not want to deny that there may be conventional postures or procedures for entreating…….. But I do want to deny that an act of entreaty can be performed only as conforming to some such conventions. What makes X's words to Y an entreaty not to go is something complex enough, no doubt relating to X's situation, attitude to Y, manner, and current intention (Strawson 1964, 444; compare Warnock 1973 and Harnish 1979).

5.   REFERENCES

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