

# Speech Acts

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Philosophy of Language » Lecture 10

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# Performatives and Speech Acts

# Saying and Doing

- › So far we have focussed mostly on **declarative sentences**: sentences that have truth conditions, and express propositions when uttered.
- › But, as Austin points out, to focus on the **truth-expressing** use of declarative sentences can be to miss the point.
- › Suppose you say, in the appropriate circumstances,
  - (1) I call upon the persons here present to witness that I, A B, take thee, C D, to be my lawful wedded wife.
- › What you say has truth conditions: it is true if indeed you call upon them, etc., etc., and false otherwise.
- › But of course you do more than state a truth in uttering (1) – you get married! You **do something** by saying something.

# Performative Utterances

...it would be absurd to regard the thing that I say as a report of the performance of the action which is undoubtedly done... we should rather say that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action. When I say 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' I do not describe the christening ceremony, I actually perform the christening; and when I say 'I do'... I am not reporting on a marriage, I am indulging in it.

Now these kinds of utterance are the ones we call *performative* utterances. (Austin 1956: 235)

# Performatives and Performances

- › A **performative** – what Austin calls the **illocutionary act** associated with an utterance (Austin 1975: 98) – is one **you can perform by saying that you are performing it**, when in appropriate circumstances:
  - (2) I assert that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ;
  - (3) I promise to be on time tomorrow;
  - (4) I hereby appoint you captain of the team;
  - (5) I demand you remove your hand from my knee;
  - (6) I quit!
- › The above example sentences would, if uttered appropriately, constitute performative acts. They are also all **performative sentences** (Austin 1956: 241). But the connection is **contingent**:
  - › Uttering *You are now the captain* can perform the speech act of appointing someone, but is not a performative sentence (contrast (4)).
  - › Uttering *I quit!* while sleeping, or while performing a role on stage, is an utterance of a performative sentence but is not a performance of the relevant speech act.

# Speaker Meaning

- › **Speaker meaning** is what a speaker might **mean by** doing some activity, not necessarily linguistic (Grice 1957).
- › Like an implicature, it is supposed to be calculable by the audience.
- › If a speaker means  $p$  by some action, they must intend to produce a belief that  $p$  in their audience, and intend that this intention is recognised by that audience (Green 2021: §5.1). (This may not be everything that is required for speaker meaning.)
  - › One can only manage to do this generally if there is a widely understood **convention** that assists the audience to recognise the intention.
- › So when a child performatively slams a door, it means they are angry: they intend to produce this belief in their audience, and intend that their action be understood as having this aim, exploiting a widely accepted stereotype about the ways that anger manifests.

# Speech Acts and Speaker Meaning

[A] *speech act* is a type of act that can be performed by speaker meaning that one is doing so. (Green 2021: §2)

- › A speech act is to **speaker mean that one is doing something**, and to have the intention that one's audience believes that thing to be done, on the basis of recognising that intention, given the appropriate conventions.
  - » So *I quit*, said to one's boss, aims to cause the boss to recognise your intention to quit.
- › While **performatives**, speech acts that have material consequences
- › To assert  $p$  is also a speech act, though not one that guarantees the truth of its content  $p$  – so it cannot always produce that belief in hearers. But it does produce the belief in hearers **that the speaker believes  $p$** , and an audience of an assertion will understand that an assertion is intended to reflect the speaker's opinion.



# Speech Acts and Performatives

- › Performatives are speech acts: they are acts that are performed by **literally saying** one is performing them.
- › But since one can mean something by an utterance that one does not literally say, not all speech acts are performatives.
  - › As we saw already, *You are now the captain* speaker means that the addressee is appointed captain, and that is why that utterance is the speech act of appointing to the captaincy without being an explicit performative.
- › Austin seems to have been particularly impressed by performatives, but the class of speech acts in general is broader.

# Appropriate Circumstances

- › Speech acts are acts as well as speech. But they can only be acts if the **circumstances** are right.
- › In particular: there needs to exist an agreed **convention** in the linguistic community that one can perform the act in question by means of an utterance.
  - › In the *Marriage Act 1961* (as amended), the precise form of words is prescribed: saying something else isn't a performative, whatever the speaker's intention.
  - › In other cases, such as *I promise to water your plants*, no precise form of words is needed, but speakers and hearers agree that a sincere utterance of that sentence makes a promise come into existence.
- › If a speech act depends on uptake from the hearers – recognition of the act that was intended by the speaker – then we can see why these conventions need to exist. Without them, hearers will often not be in a position to work out the speech act being performed, and then speakers will not be able to appropriately intend that they be understood in a particular way.

# Performative Infelicity

- › Even if the right convention exists, an attempted speech act can fail, or be **infelicitous**.
  1. A speech act can **misfire**, if the circumstances aren't right (Austin 1956: 238; Searle 1975: 349). I can't appoint you to the bench, or knight you, or name you (though I have been able to name some people). If you are already married, you can't marry again, even if everything else in the circumstances is fine. You can't object, without something to object to (Searle 1975: 348).
    - » Speaker meaning is fine, but the speaker might lack the relevant authority to perform the act indicated.
  2. A speech act can be **abused**: you might be in the right circumstances, but your inner state isn't right, so your speech doesn't in fact mean what your audience might take it to mean.

if you use one of these formulae when you do not have the requisite thoughts or feelings or intentions then there is an abuse of the procedure, there is insincerity. (Austin 1956: 239)

For example, you may say *I promise to feed your cat*, knowing full well you have no intention to feed the cat, so you have not sincerely promised; or you may say 'Congratulations' while you feel only malice, in which case you have not congratulated.

# Illocution and Perlocution

**Locutionary act** The utterance of a meaningful sentence *S*.

**Illocutionary act** The speech act done by that utterance of *S*, in those circumstances; e.g., that utterance may be an assertion of *S*, or a promise conveyed by *S*, or a performance of the act of getting married.

**Perlocutionary act** The **characteristically intended consequence** of performing a given illocutionary act; e.g., the hearers of an assertion might come to believe not only that the speaker believes *S*, but they come to share that belief. The hearers of a promise might come to expect its fulfilment.

saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience...: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them... (Austin 1975: 101)

- › Examples of perlocutionary objectives might be *to persuade/convince, to harass, to annoy, to frustrate,...*

# Force and Content

- › What is the **content** of *I quit*, uttered while on the stage? Apparently, it is true iff the speaker is quitting at the time of utterance.
- › When you utter it to your boss, you also also performing the **illocutionary act** of quitting. When you utter it on the stage, you are not: you are merely pretending to perform that act (just as you pretend to do other things there), though you do manage to perform the illocutionary act of **pretending**.
- › This difference is not a difference in **content**; it is a difference in the **(illocutionary) force** of the utterance.
  - › This is more general: I can **pretend** *I am a boiled egg*, which has as its content the proposition that I am a boiled egg, but I do not assert it, or implicate that I believe or know it, etc.
- › Content and force are **independent** (Green 2021: §2.1).
  - › In the pretence case, we can pretend to assert any content, so arbitrarily varying content while keeping force fixed.
  - › We can vary force while keeping content fixed: *You'll be more careful next time* can be a threat, a report, a request for assent, etc.; I can observe that the door is closed, request or command that it be made true that the door is closed, question whether it is true, etc.

# Classifying Speech Acts

- › Searle (1975: 344–50) offers a number of classificatory features of illocutionary acts (see also Green 2021: §3.3). Some of the most important include:

**Illocutionary point** The intent of the illocutionary act; this might be the typical perlocutionary effect, but may not – as Searle notes, a promise has a point but no typical effect in its hearers . This includes the ‘direction of fit’: whether the point is to ‘get the words to match the world, [or] to get the world to match the words’ (Searle 1975: 346). Assertions and explanations might aim to fit words-to-world; commands and promises aim to fit world-to-words.

**Sincerity condition** The mental state indicated by the act; belief in the case of assertion, desire in the case of a command, intention in the case of a promise. Acts that are abused indicate this mental state in its absence (Searle 1975: 347).

**Strength** ‘Both “I suggest we go to the movies” and “I insist that we go to the movies” have the same illocutionary point, but it is presented with different strengths.... Along the same dimension of illocutionary point or purpose there may be varying degrees of strength or commitment’ (Searle 1975: 348)

# Performative Truth?

# Truth and Performativity

- › Austin has a distinctive view on performatives, claiming that they are not really statements, despite their overt grammar, and ‘are not true or false’ (Austin 1956: 237).
- › Austin claims that performatives aren’t true or false. Since they seem to be, we need an **argument**. Here’s one:
  - (7) Performative utterances are not assertions of their content;
  - (8) Only assertions can be true or false;
  - (9) Therefore, performative utterances are not true or false.
- › On (8): Truth and falsity apply to content; assertion is a kind of force category. So while maybe only assertions **commit the speaker** to the truth of the utterance (Searle 1975: 354–55); or perhaps truth only **matters** for assertions (as opposed to pretence); still, the content merely pretended, etc., is true or false.



# Abuse and Implicature

- › A broken promise is still a promise; and it's still a promise even if I formed the intention never to keep in even before making it.
- › Nevertheless, if you hear me promise, and have no evidence about my wayward intentions, you will **assume** that I am a cooperative speaker, and assume that I will act as I have promised.
  - › There is no contradiction in a broken promise, but there is nevertheless a rational expectation that a promise will be kept.
- › This fits with a theoretical framework we've already seen: **implicature**.
  - › One may say, then, that a promise implicates that the promise will be kept without entailing it.
- › An abuse is then naturally seen as a failure of implicature.
  - ▮ But how can an utterance have an implicature if it is neither true nor false?

# Assertion and other speech acts

- › An assertion is a characteristic kind of speech act, which claims truth for the content asserted (Wright 1992: 23–24).
- › **Objection:** If we accept that performatives have content, then doesn't a successful performance make its content true, and commit speakers to belief – just like assertion (Bach 1975)?
- › Here we might distinguish between (i) ensuring that a given content is true, and (ii) saying of that content, that it is true. The speaker might do the former without the latter.
- › Yet contrast *I name you 'Sylvester'* and *I named you 'Sylvester'*.
  - ›› The former is a performative; the latter a report on the earlier performative, and is an assertion (Austin 1956: 242). But then what would an assertion of the content expressed by *I name you 'Sylvester'* look like, if not the performative?
- › We might think performatives are like **self-verifying** assertions: e.g., *Someone is speaking*, or *A sentence exists*.

# Speech Which Acts on Hearers

# Perlocution and Hate Speech

- › Perlocution can help us understand **hate speech** (Anderson and Barnes 2023).
- › Other aspects of speech cannot explain why hate speech needs special regulation:
  - › The **content** of a hate speech utterance can be true – consider the example of *it's okay to be white* from **lecture 9** (it has a false implicature, but it is true). Even when false, we don't police falsehoods in general, so wouldn't explain why hate speech should be distinctively legislated against.
  - › The **force** of a hate speech utterance may be merely assertion.
- › If there is problem caused by hate speech, it is likely to be on the basis of its **perlocutionary** effects. E.g., in the Australian context, it is

unlawful for a person to do an act, otherwise than in private, if the act is reasonably likely, in all the circumstances, to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people; and the act is done because of the race, colour or national or ethnic origin of the other person, or of some or all of the people in the group. (*Racial Discrimination Act (Cth) 1975 §18C*)

To offend, insult, and intimidate are all perlocutionary acts.

# Pornographic Speech

- › Pornography, as Langton intends to use it, following Catherine MacKinnon, is any representation that depicts people – but in practice, almost always women –
  - dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt; in postures of sexual submission or servility or display; reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context which makes these conditions sexual. (Langton 1993: 293-94)
- › US rulings that pornography is speech, and thus is protected by US constitutional provisions ensuring **freedom of speech** (Anderson and Barnes 2023: §4), have guided the debate over the harms of **pornography**.
- › If hate speech ought to be policed, perhaps other harmful speech – including pornography – ought to be likewise policed.

# The Harms of Pornography

- › Pornographic representations, like all representations, have propositional content.
  - › This is of course easy to see in the case of written pornographic fiction.
  - › But any representation will divide possibilities into those which it accurately represents, and those it does not, so we can associate a set of possible worlds with the representation.
- › It seems very plausible that exposure to this sort of content **causes** harms; it desensitises consumers to the suffering of women, it creates unrealistic expectations in consumers of women's sexual availability and pliancy, it reinforces harmful stereotypes and gender roles. Those are among the perlocutionary effects of pornographic representations.
- › But Langton wants to argue for something stronger: the act done by putting forward a pornographic representation – **pornographic speech** – is **itself** a harmful speech act, regardless of what it is apt to cause.

# Subordination and Silencing

- › Langton argues that pornographic speech is a speech act; this act has content, perlocutionary effects, and is moreover a distinctive kind of performative act, which does something simply by saying.
- › The two kinds of illocutionary force associated with pornographic speech, according to Langton, are:
  1. **Subordination:** the act of putting forward a pornographic representation in which women are represented as the subjects of sexual degradation is an act of subordinating women.
  2. **Silencing:** it is, or can be, also an act of silencing women. This is particularly pertinent in responding to 'free speech' defenses of pornography.

# Silencing and Power

powerful people can generally do more, say more, and have their speech count for more than can the powerless. If you are powerful, there are more things you can do with your words.

This bears on the question about silence. If you are powerful, you sometimes have the ability to silence the speech of the powerless. One way might be to stop the powerless from speaking at all. Gag them, threaten them, condemn them to solitary confinement. But there is another, less dramatic but equally effective, way. Let them speak. Let them say whatever they like to whomever they like, but stop that speech from counting as an *action*. More precisely, stop it from counting as the action it was intended to be. ... Some speech acts are *unspeakable* for women in some contexts: although the appropriate words can be uttered, those utterances fail to count as the actions they were intended to be. (Langton 1993: 298-99)



# Three Kinds of Silencing (Langton 1993: 314-15)

1. We can **intimidate** or **threaten** a person or group into silence: they will literally not say anything, thus failing to even produce an utterance.
2. We can **undermine** the speaker's intended effects. She may say *I urge you to reconsider*, an attempt to perform the perlocutionary act of **persuading** someone. But we've already told the hearer that she's untrustworthy; or the hearer believes she's untrustworthy because she's a women. So her attempt will not come off, she cannot perform the act she wants to.
3. We can **disable** the speaker, ensuring that she will not even manage to perform a speech act by her utterance. Her utterance of *Please stop doing that* will not even be treated as a **protest**, which is the intended force of her speech act.

# Disablement in other domains

Imagine this: the actor is acting a scene in which there is supposed to be a fire.... It is his role to imitate as persuasively as he can a man who is trying to warn others of a fire. 'Fire!' he screams. And perhaps he adds, at the behest of the author, 'I mean it! Look at the smoke!' etc. And now a real fire breaks out, and the actor tries vainly to warn the real audience. 'Fire!' he screams. 'I mean it! Look at the smoke!' etc. (Davidson 1984: 269)

- Something about the circumstances means that his act of warning is not recognised as such; his attempt is infelicitous, and the act misfires. He cannot **do by saying**.
- Langton's other examples: same sex couples unable to marry by saying 'I do' even though circumstances are propitious in other respects; the inability of blacks in apartheid South Africa to have their marking a ballot paper count as voting; etc.

# Refusal

Pornography might ... silence refusal, by doing something other than eroticizing refusal itself. It may simply leave no space for the refusal move in its depictions of sex. In pornography of this kind there would be all kinds of locutions the women depicted could use to make the consent move. 'Yes' is one such locution. 'No' is just another. Here the refusal move is not itself eroticized...: it is absent altogether. Consent is the *only* thing a woman can do with her words in this game. Someone learning the rules of the game from this kind of pornography might not even recognize an attempted refusal. 'Coming from her, I took it as consent,' he might say. Refusal would be made unspeakable for a woman in that context.

If young men can rape without knowing it, then women sometimes fail to secure uptake for their attempted refusals. This is the silence, not simply of frustration, but of disablement. (Langton 1993: 324-25)

# Testimonial Injustice

identity power is an integral part of the mechanism of testimonial exchange, because of the need for hearers to use social stereotypes as heuristics in their spontaneous assessments of their interlocutor's credibility. ... Notably, if the stereotype embodies a prejudice that works against the speaker, then two things follow: there is an epistemic dysfunction in the exchange - the hearer makes an unduly deflated judgement of the speaker's credibility, perhaps missing out on knowledge as a result; and the hearer does something ethically bad - the speaker is wrongfully undermined in her capacity as a knower. (Fricker 2007: 16-17)

The speaker sustains such a testimonial injustice iff she receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice ['prejudice ... against people owing to some feature of their social identity'] in the hearer. (Fricker 2007: 28)

## Cautions (Saul, Diaz-Leon, and Hesni 2022: §2.1)

- › Who is the speaker of pornographic speech acts? Do they have the authority and political power to silence and subordinate? Can pornography really be speech: is it an utterance in a context?
  - › Maybe none of this matters – all that matters is pornographic depictions of sexual interactions are pervasive enough to influence young men’s conception of what is a normal and appropriate **sexual script**.
  - › Does this shed light on ‘rape culture’?
- › Why can’t we say: *they are refusals, but they are not acknowledged*. Why does the act misfire just because the **hearer** doesn’t cooperate?
  - “No” not only means *no* but is a refusal, however blind to the speaker’s intention the hearer may be. (Bird 2002: 13-14)
  - › In South Australia, the **offense of rape** requires that the offender ‘knows, or is recklessly indifferent to, the fact that the other person does not ... consent’. If Langton is right, this element of the offense will be almost impossible to establish; so there will be

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