J. L. Austin – How to Do Things with Words (I)

This is the first part of a review of J. L. Austin’s “William James” lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955. Each lecture will be reviewed individually; for a more broad introduction take a quick look at Wikipedia’s unusually good (and still short) section here.

Austin begins by listing some of the prevailing, though latent, features of a traditional problem: the (false) impression that language is here mainly, or even solely, to describe the world. In history, those unfortunate pseudo-statements that managed to evade the world-reporting principle, ethical statements among others, were usually thought of as (“strictly speaking”, one often heard) nonsensical. Austin begins by separating the two classes, the constative and the performative. When uttering a performative, the speaker: (a) does not describe, report or constate anything, but (b) is (partly) doing something. When saying (1) I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow, the speaker is not describing himself as doing, or having done, something: but doing it. Same with (2) I name this ship Queen Victoria and others. Before jumping to the conclusion that sometimes saying is doing, one must allow for two further qualifications (p. 7-8). First, the action might be performed in other, not necessarily verbal, ways. Second, the observation that even if, in these instances, the uttering of the words is an important part of the act, some other things must be in place; some circumstances, that is, must be in some way or another appropriate. I cannot name the ship by uttering (2) if I am a nobody throwing a bottle of champagne at it. One might, mistakenly, invoke some other inward acts or “spiritual shackle” one describes when uttering a performative, but these “fictitious acts” (p. 10) need not trouble one’s analysis.

At the end of the lecture, Austin notes briefly another aspect which supports a performative-constative distinction: when some of the “concomitants” (i.e. needed conditions) is not in place, we do not describe the act as false. We say it was “void, in bad faith, or not implemented” (p. 11). Even when we speak of a false promise, we do not use the adjective “false” to characterize a misreport, a incorrect representation, but rather as when we speak of a false move: a misleading act.

J. L. Austin – How to Do Things with Words (II)

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After a brief summary of how one can do things by or in saying something, that is, after reviewing what has been said in the first lecture, Austin proposes to take a closer look at the ways in which those “appropriate circumstances” could be studied and organized. As has been shown, when something goes wrong we do not speak of falsehood (as in the case of constatives) but rather of a sort of unhappiness or infelicity.

His first attempt renders this scheme:

(A. 1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure of uttering certain words in certain circumstances.
(A. 2) The persons uttering those words must be the accepted ones.
(B. 1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and...
(B. 2) ... completely
(Γ. 1) Where the procedure is designed for persons having certain thoughts or intentions, the persons in question must indeed have those thoughts.
(Γ. 2) Where a subsequent conduct is part of the procedure, the persons must conduct themselves accordingly.

Every difference in the labels shown in brackets stands for something. For instance, the difference between the infelicities caused by lack of any of the conditions A and B and those pertaining to conditions Γ is this: when e.g. you’re not the right man trying to christen a ship (A.2) or you’re not doing the necessary procedure correctly (B. 2), then the act is not achieved, does not come off.
Austin terms these **Misfires**. In the case of \( \Gamma \)-infelicities, the act *is* achieved, but you are being e.g. insincere (\( \Gamma \), 1), so the act is **void or without effect**. Austin names these **Abuses**.

The difference between \( A \)- and \( B \)-infelicities is also significant. \( A \) cases are called **Misinovcations** because there is either a lack of procedure or a inability to apply the procedure in question. Austin further terms the latter category **Misapplications**. Instances of \( B \)-infelicity are called **Misexecutions**: Flaws, when the procedure is not executed correctly, **Hitches** – when it is not executed completely. So, for now, the doctrine of infelicities looks something like this:

Three questions seem to be in place. First, what sort of ‘act’ is prone to infelicity? We have so far discussed the acts of uttering words[1] but there are arguably other types of acts that can “go wrong” in similar ways. Austin writes: “infelicity is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all conventional acts” (p. 19). Second, one might ask whether the classification above is a complete one. As has been established, the uttering of words in those circumstances is a case of performing an action and *qua* actions they are subject to a whole array of unsatisfactoriness.

Also, as utterances, they might be uttered in a particular language activity which is, in some way or another, parasitic; for instance poetry, acting, soliloquy are some such instances. Austin also mentions misunderstanding but does not pay much attention as to how is this type of infelicity is to be connected to the already mentioned ones. A third, simple, question ends this lecture: are they mutually exclusive. Not only that the presence of one impediment does not exclude the presence of another, but more often than not the types of going wrong “shade into one another” to the effect that an analytical decision would be, in various ways, arbitrary.

**J. L. Austin – How to Do Things with Words (III)**

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This lecture starts by tackling more thoroughly the concept of Misfire. In the previous lectures, \( A \). 1 infelicities were described as those acts for which the rule that “there must exist an accepted procedure” does not obtain. But what does **accepted** mean? Austin gives the example of “I divorce you” said to a Christian spouse, thereby producing no effect; he shows that depending on how we define the procedure we could classify the \( A \). 1 cases both as \( A \). 2 or even \( B \) cases. Whatever we decide, the procedure and its acceptance should always be seen as more than merely an inductive existence: the complete performance “involves more than for it merely to be the case that it is in fact generally used” (p. 29). Often, whether a procedure does not *exist* or a procedure does *exists* but it is not accepted in the circumstances in question, it is a matter of precedent.

At this point, Austin mentions the distinction between implicit and explicit performatives. In a nutshell, ‘I bet...’ or ‘I promise...’ and all the ones we have considered so far are said to be explicit and rather unambiguous. If a speaker says ‘Go’, this is an implicit performative (to be disambiguated
by context, if at all), which can be a command, an advice, a request etc. Austin considers explicit constatives like ‘There is a bull in the field’ along the same lines: they are implicit performatives since the utterance may or may not be a warning; as he puts it, “the procedure in question was not sufficiently invoked” (p. 33), which makes implicit performatives B.1 (or maybe B.2) cases.

Turning now to A. 2 cases, the infelicities called misapplications, virtually any instance where the speaker is not appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure can serve as an example; for instance, trying to name a ship which you were not appointed to name. The possible distinctions between ‘circumstances’ and ‘persons’ and those between ‘incapacity’ and ‘wrong person’ (in the case of the performer) are shown to be a slippery matter.

Next type of infelicities, flaws, are those that infringe B. 1 (“the procedure must be executed by all participants correctly”). Austin offers the rather debatable examples of vague formulas or uncertain reference (“if I say ‘my house’ when I have two”, p. 36), along with the above mentioned cases of implicitness performatives. Simpler examples such as “I bet you will win this bet”.

Hitches (B. 2), are cases where the procedure does not end well. For instance saying “I do” when the spouse says “I don’t”, or decreeing “I hereby open this library” but breaking the key in the lock etc. Austin warmly add: “Here again, in ordinary life, a certain laxness in procedure is permitted – otherwise no university business would ever get done!”.

J. L. Austin – How to Do Things with Words (IV)

Read the previous part here | Last to be examined, Γ-infelicities (“gamma infelicities”), are those that occur not when the act is void due to a, or some, procedural flaw(s), but when there is a case of insincerity or other infractions of this sort. We remember, Γ-rules were, in an abbreviated form: (Γ. 1) Where the procedure is designed for persons having certain thoughts or intentions, the persons in question must indeed have those thoughts. (Γ. 2) Where a subsequent conduct is part of the procedure, the persons must conduct themselves accordingly.

Austin makes a tentative distinction between not having the requisite feelings (e.g. ‘I congratulate you’ when you feel annoyed by the other’s performance), not having the requisite thoughts (e.g. ‘I advise you to’ when you do not believe the future act will benefit the hearer), and not having the requisite intentions (e.g. ‘I promise to’ when you don’t have in plan to perform the future act). There are many interrelations and connections one can establish among these rather feebly defined categories. Austin scrutinizes some meticulously and even isolates a certain class of performative utterances he calls verdictives (‘Guilty!’ said by the judge, or ‘Out’ said by the referee), for which both the problem of adequate thoughts and of subsequent conduct is slightly trickier. In any normal case, when Γ-rules are broken, the act is merely purported or professed.

Now that A-, B-, and Γ-types of have been looked at, Austin reformulates one of the starting points thus: “certain conditions have to be satisfied if the utterance is to be happy – certain things have to be so. And this, it seems clear, commits us to saying that for a certain performative utterance to be happy, certain statements have to be true.” (p. 45) This is not to say that the truth of these statements makes up the truth of the performative – the first lecture has rejected this kind of correspondence – but that the happiness of ‘I apologize’ makes it the fact that I am apologizing. Therefore, when I perform the utterance ‘I promise’ successfully, I imply the truth of sentences like (a) it is true that A-rules obtain, or (b) it is true that rules Γ-obtain, (c) it is true that I am committed
to doing something subsequently etc. What is then the relation between these implications and the “regular” ones, known through verbs like to entail, to imply, to presuppose?

In the remainder of this lecture, Austin undertakes to spell out the relations of entailment, implication and presupposition for constative utterances (or statements). Entailment is in fact defined by way of pointing out to its opposite, i.e. contradiction, when Austin says that “All men blush” entails “Some men blush” because we cannot say “All men blush but not any men blush”. Implication is represented via G. E. Moore paradox in relation to which it is said that the uttering of “The cat is on the mat” implies that the speaker believes that the cat is on the mat. Presupposition takes the form of Jack having children when “All Jack’s children are bald” is true[1]. Both presupposition and implication are unlike entailment since the relation ‘if p entails q, then non-q entails non-p’ cannot be applied with ‘if p implies q…’ The way in which the falsity of the Moorean-implication says nothing about the statement which implies it, and the way in which presupposition “holds under negation” are mentioned as evidence. A more important observation (which will influence the next lectures) is the closeness between uttering “The cat is on the mat” and not believing it, and performing “I promise to …” and not intending to.

Both are, in some way, cases of insincerity which allows Austin to note that promising and not intending “is parallel” (p. 50) to stating and not believing it. Same with presupposition; Austin restates Strawson’s answer, i.e. that if the presupposition is false “the question [of the statement’s truth-value] does not arise”, in the form of “the utterance is void”.

The sharp distinction between performatives and constatives seems threatened by the tight connections between these two classes, and Austin mysteriously ends: “Perhaps indeed there is no great distinction between statements and performative utterances”.

[1] Austin here ignores the fact that the expression “Jack’s children” is vague, since it can stand for “the children Jack fathered”, “the children Jack takes care of”, “the children’s Jack is supposed to remember” etc. So technically speaking “All Jack’s children are bald” does not presuppose that Jack has children unless the context is such that the expression “Jack’s children” refers to the children of Jack and his spouse. So, when Austin says “We cannot say ‘All Jack’s children are bald but Jack has no children’, or ‘Jack has no children and all his children are bald.’” one can retort that if we’re in a kindergarten and we try to make a table with all the teachers, their classes and their personal life, one can say about Jack that “All Jack’s children are Irish…” (as regards his classes) “... but Jack has no children” (as regards his personal life).