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**Speech-Act Theory**

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**Abstract**

J. L. Austin claims that to say something is to do something and divides all utterances into performative utterances (henceforth performatives) and constative utterances (henceforth constatives). Then, he endeavors to establish a criterion for distinguishing performatives and constatives, but he fails to do so. As a result, he abandons the criterion for separating utterances into performatives and constatives, and reaches a conclusion that all utterances are performatives. But his analysis of utterances causes an infinite regress, which means that his logic collapses.

**Key Words**: performative, constative, infinite regress

**Introduction**

Austin insists that to say something is to do something and endeavors to distinguish performatives from constatives. He searches for a criterion for distinguishing performatives from constatives but cannot find any. So he concludes that all utterances are performatives. Austin’s idea is also summarized in Philosophical Papers 2nd edition (1969). Can his insistence be verified from a logical point of view?

The present author has written a paper entitled “A Critique of J. L. Austin’s Speech-Act Theory (Araki 1992: 15-26).” Here is its abstract:

J. L. Austin divides utterances into performatives and constatives and then tries to establish a criterion for distinguishing one from the other. But his efforts all end in failure. This means that utterances cannot be classified into performatives and constatives against his assumption. However, he abandons the criterion and regards all the utterances as performatives. In fact, the first person expression, which he interprets as a typical performative, is a self-objectified one and essentially the same as the second and the third person one. Therefore, it is impossible from a logical point of view to attempt to draw a distinction between performatives and constatives. All the utterances are constatives and should not be construed as performatives. (Araki 1992: 15)

In this present paper, Austin’s theory is examined from a different point of view from Araki’s (1992).

1. **Performatives and Constatives** :

Austin insists that the following sentences are neither a description nor a statement of an act, but that saying them is nothing but actually doing the act itself:

I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.

I give and bequeath my watch to my brother.

I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow. (Austin 1962: 5)

He names these sentences above *performatives*, distinguishing them from other sentences he calls *constatives*. According to him, performatives do not say anything or they do not only simply say something but also do something. Also they do not report anything true or false about some kind of topic. Austin says:

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it. (Austin 1962: 6)

Moreover, Austin insists that performatives are either happy (appropriate) or unhappy (inappropriate), depending on the circumstances. On the other hand, constatives are either true or false, depending on the situations. Austin says:

Let us first at least concentrate attention on the little matter already mentioned in passing [Austin 1962: 6]—this matter of ‘the appropriate circumstances’. To bet is not, as I pointed out in passing, merely to utter the words ‘I bet, &c.’: someone might do that all right, and yet we might still not agree that he had in fact, or at least entirely, succeeded in betting. […] Besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action. What these are we may hope to discover by looking at and classifying types of case in which something goes wrong and the act—marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not—is therefore at least to some extent a failure: the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general unhappy. (Austin 1962: 13-14)

**2. True-False and Happy-Unhappy** : Next Austin seeks the distinction between *performatives* and *constatives*, thinking that the former is either happy or unhappy, but that the latter is either true or false. But in some cases, *performatives* are either true or false and *constatives* are either happy or unhappy, he admits, and he cannot deny such a distinction is imperfect. Austin says:

So that considerations of the happiness and unhappiness type may infect statements (or some statements) and considerations of the type of truth and falsity may infect performatives (or some performatives).

We have then to take a further step out into the desert of comparative precision. We must ask: is there some precise way in which we can definitely distinguish the performative from the constative utterance? (Austin 1962: 55)

Moreover, grammatical criteria are also denied when Austin tries to distinguish between performatives and constatives. Austin asks himself: Well, is the use of the first person singular and of the present indicative active, so called, essential to a performative utterance? (Austin 1962: 57)

And he answers this question himself:

A very common and important type of, one would think, indubitable performative has the verb in the second or third person (singular or plural) and the verb in the passive voice: so person and voice anyway are not essential. Some examples of this type are:

(1) You are hereby authorized to pay . . . .

(2) Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only. Indeed the verb may be ‘impersonal’ in such cases with the passive, for example:

(3) Notice is hereby given that trespassers will be prosecuted. (Austin 1962: 57)

For example, Austin says that a sentence beginning with I state … is not only a *performative* but also a *constative*, and that it is certain that the sentence can be *true* or *false* (Austin 1962: 91-92). This means that he denies his criterion that *performatives* are either happy or unhappy and *constatives* are either true or false. The reason is that he admits that one and the same sentence beginning with I state … can be both a *performative* (which is either happy or unhappy) and a *constative* (which is either true or false) at the same time. Austin says:

Now let us consider where we stand for a moment: beginning with the supposed contrast between performative and constative utterances, we found sufficient indications that unhappiness nevertheless seems to characterize both kinds of utterance, not merely the performative; and that the requirement of conforming or bearing some relation to the facts, different in different cases, seems to characterize performatives, in addition to the requirement that they should be happy, similarly to the way which is characteristic of supposed constatives. Now we failed to find a grammatical criterion for performatives, […] we still have utterances beginning ‘I state that …’ which seem to satisfy the requirements of being performative, yet which surely are the making of statements, and surely are essentially true or false.

It is time then to make a fresh start on the problem. We want to reconsider more generally the senses in which to say something may be to do something, or in saying something we do something (and also perhaps to consider the different case in which by saying something we do something). […] When we issue any utterance whatsoever, are we not ‘doing something’? (Austin 1962: 90-91)

**3-Unification of Performatives and Constatives:** Eventually Austin develops his argument from the distinction between performatives and constatives to a general theory of speech acts. He analyzes speech acts as *locutionary act* (saying something), *illocutionary act* (what you’re trying to do by speaking), and *perlucutionary act* (the effect of what you say). Austin says:

The act of ‘saying something’ in this full normal sense I call, i.e. dub, the performance of a *locutionary act*, (Austin 1962: 94)

To perform a *locutionary act* is in general, we may say, also and eo ipso to perform an illocutionary act, as I propose to call it. (Austin 1962: 98)

There is yet a further sense (C) in which to perform a locutionary act, and therein an illocutionary act, may also be to perform an act of another kind Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them; and we may then say, thinking of this, that the speaker has performed an act in the nomenclature of which reference is made either (C. a), only obliquely, or even (C. b), not at all, to the performance of the locutionary or illocutionary act. We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act or perlocution. (Austin 1962: 101)

We have here then roughly distinguished three kinds of acts—the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary. (Austin 1962: 102-103)

Surprisingly enough, Austin goes on to insist that constatives perform illocutionary act and perlocutionary act just as performatives do. As a result, he completely abandons the distinction between performatives and constatives. Finally, Austin comes to a conclusion that all speech acts (utterances) are performatives. He classifies them into the following five types:

(1) Verdictives.

(2) Exercitives.

(3) Commissives.

(4) Behavitives.

(5) Expositives.

(Austin 1962: 150)