

Performatives and the Role of Truth in Semantics

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ABSTRACT: According to Austin, in uttering I hereby X in a performative we are neither asserting nor saying anything true/false-assessable about what we are doing, our Xing. Still in producing the performative utterance we can be said to say we are Xing. So, we have the production of a declarative sentence, that is perfectly meaningful and not lacking in content in any way, that is nevertheless not produced in an assertion nor open to evaluation as true or false, despite the fact that it says something. In this paper, I argue that Austin's claim about performatives is correct. I then argue that Austin's thesis about performatives has radical implications for received ideas about role of truth and truth-conditions in the explanatory enterprise known as 'semantics'.

KEYWORDS: Austin – performatives – semantics – truth-conditions.

In *How to do Things with Words* Austin saw himself as attacking the idea that language is fundamentally a system for describing reality. By *describing* we can take Austin to mean an activity that is either asserting how things are or the production of sentences that can be said to be either true or false of the world, depending on how the world is. So he is against the idea that in using language we are always asserting or holding up truth/false-assessable sentences—sentences that are open to truth or falsity assessment. Austin proposes much of the activity we undertake is not describing in this sense. Naturally, enough people knew before Austin that there were orders and questions, which look neither like assertions nor like productions of truth/false-assessable sentences. So, what's the interesting insight is Austin offering? It lies in the phenomenon of the *performative utterance*. The canonical form of a performative utterance is:

I hereby X.

Here *X* will be a phrase whose main verb denotes a kind of linguistic performance, like ordering, declaring, stating, promising, and so on. Some performatives are: *I hereby pronounce you man and wife*, *I hereby name this ship Baggins*, *I hereby condemn you to death*, and so on. Take just about any non-assertoric illocutionary act and you can transform it into a performative utterance. Take an order, *Leave!*. Then its explicit performative form is *I hereby order you to leave*. Take a question: *Who did it?* Its explicit performative might be: *I request that you tell me who did it*. Take an assertion, *Smith did*. Then there is the performative: *I say Smith did*.

So what's interesting about performatives? It's this. According to Austin, in uttering *I hereby X* in a performative we are neither asserting nor saying anything true/false-assessable about what we are doing, our *X*ing. Still in producing the performative utterance we can be said to say we are *X*ing. So, we have the production of a declarative sentence, that is perfectly meaningful and not lacking in content in any way, that is nevertheless not produced in an assertion nor open to evaluation as true or false, despite the fact that it *says* something. Instead of asserting, what we do with *I hereby X* is *say*, in a non-assertoric, true/false-assessable sense, that we are *X*ing and we *X*.

Austin's idea of performatives then requires that there be declarative sentences that describe how things are, they have propositional content that encodes propositions that match reality, speakers want audiences to recognize that these states of affairs obtain, but they are neither assertions of these states of affairs, nor are they truth/false-assessable tokenings of declarative sentences. Evidently, performatives are *descriptions* in the sense that they have meanings that correspond to how things are. We know which performative is being undertaken from the words used by the speaker. *I hereby pronounce you man and wife*, deploys the performative verb *pronounce*. Because of the celebrant uses this verb we know that a pronouncing is going on. The adjective *pronounce* is satisfied by the activity undertaken. Suppose you have produced the performative, *I hereby pronounce you man and wife*. The next day you can assert, using the same words but with some grammatical modifications: *I hereby pronounced you man and wife yesterday*. That is not a performative, but it is used with effectively the same words as the performative utterance, and clearly can be used to assert what the performative merely indicates.

So there is, and Austin admits this, a correspondence between the words used in the performative locution and the performance undertaken. But this involves no assertion. Austin's idea of saying without asserting is not totally obscure when we consider, for example, orders. In uttering *George, leave!*, I use the term *leave* to specify an act, *George is leaving*. But I am not asserting that this act will happen. So here we have another kind of saying that is not a describing or asserting of fact. So maybe performatives are like this (though we shall see that one crucial sense, there is a way that they are not).

According to Austin, instead of being truth/false-assessable, performatives are only felicity- and infelicity-apt. The felicity is correctness of performance, in which all the conditions for the correct performance of the speech act are met. Infelicity is a defective performance. Felicity conditions are not truth-conditions.

Why exactly is Austin's contention about performatives interesting? It is at odds with a very well entrenched paradigm about meaning and truth and the link between them. The thesis *RT* sums up one aspect of the link:

RT A sentence *S* is true/false-assessable iff *S* has propositional content, it is a representation of how things might be.

Of course, not everyone accepts the correspondence theory of truth, but the bland thesis invoked in *RT* does not amount to a theory of the property of truth but just of what is necessary and sufficient for possessing truth, whatever truth turns out to be. *RT* conveys a semantic idea of truth: the thesis that meaning is given by truth conditions. But Austin's contention about performatives is inconsistent with *RT* and so inconsistent with truth-conditionalism about meaning. That's because he is claiming declarative sentences with propositional content may not be true/false-assessable, contra *RT*.

The vision of language that Austin was attacking with his performatives is alive and well. It's just the standard view. Despite the attractions of the standard view, I think Austin is right, in his contention, and his views about performatives have quite radical implications about how we are meant to approach the issue of meaning.

To defend Austin, I will argue that performatives contra theorists like Bach and Harnish (1979) and Searle (1989)—are not assertions, unless, that is, they are of the form *I assert/say/state that P*. I will then argue that they are not true/false-assessable either. I then consider the implications of these conclusions.

1. Unasserted

Bach (1975) and Bach and Harnish (1979) think that Austin is wrong that performatives are not assertions. According to them, in producing a performative one asserts that one X s and one X s. The performative involves an indirect speech acts. An example of an indirect speech act is this. You ask me: *Are you going to the party tonight?* I answer: *I have to work.* I indirectly answer your question—I indirectly perform the assertion of *I am not going*, answering your question, through another speech act, which I explicitly perform. Bach and Harnish see performatives as doing just this: I assert, *I hereby X*, and I am asserting that I am X ing, but I indirectly X .

Bach and Harnish's picture is integrated into a Gricean framework of conversational implicature driven by speakers' following conversational norms. In taking in speaker U's production of a performative, an audience H is meant to reason as follows (drawn from Bach 1975, 234):

- (1) U is saying 'I X '.
- (2) U is stating that she is X ing.
- (3) If true, then U is X ing.
- (4) If U is X ing, then it must be this utterance that constitutes the X ing.
- (5) Presumably, U is speaking truly.
- (6) Therefore, in uttering 'I hereby X ' U is X ing.

Their view then is that performatives are assertions about an illocutionary act that the speaker indirectly performs.

Should we accept Bach and Harnish's view? I think not. Consider the reasoning we as audiences are meant to undertake in interpreting a speech act as a performative. Step (4) is meant to be an inference to utterance of 'I hereby X ' constituting the performative. That inference looks open to doubt. If I look you in the eye and assert, *I am ordering you to leave*, there is still some question about the order itself. When was it given? Is it somehow being implicitly given? Is this an announcement that an order will be issued at some stage? All these questions arise. But why should the assertion itself be taken to be the order? If someone asserts: *I am adjourning this meeting*, there is some question about whether the meeting is adjourned. For example, one could say, without redundancy: *I am adjourning this meeting: meeting adjourned*. So, asserting *I am adjourning this meeting* does not constitute adjourning the meeting as such. But saying *meeting adjourned* or

I hereby adjourn the meeting can constitute adjourning the meeting. In response to *I am adjourning this meeting*, an audience could always ask, *Is it adjourned?* Whereas, they cannot pose the same question in response to *I hereby adjourn the meeting*. In the latter case they can dispute that it is a good time to adjourn, but not that the directive to adjourn the meeting have been issued.

Bach and Harnish's theory that performatives are assertion used to perform indirectly non-assertoric illocutionary acts does not explain this basic fact. The issue is the step (4) in the reasoning above. Why conclude that the act of assertion is also the act of *Xing*? It seems all the audience can conclude is that *Xing* will go on sometime.

One might object: what secures the inference in (4) is the fact that in performatives we use *hereby*. I say, *I hereby X*, as in *I am performing with this very utterance a curse on you*. But there are several things to say here. First, it strikes me that in saying, *With these very words I am cursing you*, I invite the reply: *You are cursing me?* or *Is that a curse?* Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we do not have to put *hereby* in with performatives to carry out the performative. I say, *I curse you*, and that is my curse. But change slightly the tense, to make it clear I am making an assertion, as in *I am cursing you*. My assertion of *I am cursing you* is not as such a curse. Perhaps an audience can infer that I am inwardly cursing you, but my utterance as such is not the curse. That is despite the fact that my audience can through inferential mechanisms infer that I have certain dispositions to undertake cursing. But no act of cursing has been undertaken. Whereas utterance of *I curse you* does not leave any of this open and does constitute a curse.

According to the Bach and Harnish line, we infer that *U*'s utterance constitutes an *Xing*. But what is it to utter a sentence and directly *X*? It is presumably to produce a sentence *S* with such and such intentions. That's what constitutes the *Xing*. So if I curse you, I produce an utterance with intentions that my deep hatred with what you have done is manifest, and I make no assertion. Cursing cannot be a secondary inferred speech act! Cursing is upfront, primary, overt, and direct, otherwise it is not cursing.

This suggests another problem with the indirect-speech-act view. Why would speakers want the extra illocutionary act to get in the way of the *Xing*, since *Xing* is the main point. What we want is that the phrase, the description, *I hereby X*, indicates what I am up to, but we don't want anything as heavy duty as an assertion. Perhaps, *I hereby X* remains unasserted,

but plays the role of describing. Describing can go on without asserting. This may be exactly the kind of describing that goes on when I utter, in an order, *George, leave the room!*. In this case, the speaker describes a possible state of affairs, the one they want realised, but no assertion goes on. Still, with my utterance of *You are leaving!* I directly perform an order, as much as I do with *I order you to leave*. This does not quite capture what is going on in the performative. The utterance of the phrase *I curse you* is a non-assertive description of my act of cursing and it does correspond to something that is the case. But it's just an indication of a state of affairs, somewhat like the way we indicate something through *conventional implicature*—see Barker (2003). In saying, *Even Granny got drunk* I communicate that it is comparatively surprising for me that Granny got drunk, but I do not assert that it is so.

I think that shows that performatives are not indirect speech acts but primarily performances of orderings, commandings, adjournings, that is, of *X*ings, and not acts that are constituted by assertions allowing us to infer that a performance of *X*ing is going on.

Searle (1989) agrees that performatives are not indirect speech acts. But he thinks they are assertions as well as *X*ings. His argument that they are assertions is simply that their utterance brings about a state of affairs that makes the propositional content of the performative true. My utterance of *I hereby X* brings about my *X*ing and that corresponds to the content of the sentence I utter. But it does not follow from this fact that performatives are assertions. The fact that a sentence has content that corresponds to how things are—in other words, descriptive content—does not make self-standing utterance of the sentence an assertion.

We have positive reasons to think that performatives are not assertions. Here's a test for assertiveness. If I really produce an assertion that *P*, I can append my claim with *that's my belief*. Take the following case. I can say: *I hereby pronounced them man and wife: that's my belief*. There is no issue here of reflexivity being the problem. I can say: *I am now commanding you to leave: or that's my belief*. But try this with the performative: *I hereby command you to leave: or that's my belief*. That's odd. So, it seems that in producing a performative, the speaker is not expressing belief with the sentence. Or at the very least, we have some evidence that this is the case.

Another test for assertion is that along with an assertion we can insert a sentence that comments the state of affairs that the assertion commits us to. If I really assert *P*, then I can follow it up with some commentary on

the state of affairs that we are asserting is the case, such as *But the people did not like it*. So, one can say something like this: *I thereby declared the game over. But people didn't like it*. One can say: *I will declare/have just declared the meeting over. But people won't like it*. But one cannot say (this is the performative): *I hereby declare the meeting over. But people won't like it*. In this case, the question of what *it* in the commentary sentence is referring to arises. But why should that be if there is an assertion going on? The fact that one is doing something else as well should not be an issue. So why cannot one comment on the state of affairs to which the assertion commits us? If we can make no comment that would suggest that we have made no assertion.

We cannot explain the inability to make comments of this kind in relation to performatives with the hypothesis that we cannot comment on secondary assertions. Even if an assertion is secondary, say in a non-restrictive relative clause, it looks accessible to commentary. Take this case: *The Queen, unlike the PM, likes people. That fact won't please the PM's wife*. We can access the secondary assertion, that the PM does not like people, with the right context. But there seems to be no way to access the assertion in the performative, as we have seen above. But that suggests that no assertion is being made with a performative.

Another test for assertion involves inference. Imagine this dialogue. *A: Are you going to come to a movie? B: I am at the office. A: You are working too hard*. That's perfectly fine. In other words, *B's* primary assertion involved in an indirect speech act can be the basis for an inference by *A*, that is, that *B* is working too hard. A secondary assertion produced in a relative clause can also be the basis of an inference: *The Queen, unlike the PM, likes people. So, the Queen differs from the PM*. It does not matter if assertions are ensconced in some broader context as secondary assertions, or if they're deployed in indirect speech-acts. As assertions they can be the basis for inferences. But it is odd to say: *I curse you, curse you. So, I am angry with you*. On the other hand, one can infer: *I am cursing you right now—under my breath—so I am very angry with you*. One cannot say: *I wonder if he is mad. So, I am puzzled*. Whereas, one can say: *I was wondering, then, if he was mad, so I was puzzled*.

Not all sayings are assertions, even if the sayings are used to indicate that some state of affairs obtains. I think there is a genuine motivation for speakers to want to exploit non-asserted indications or sayings of how things are. We do not want all such indications of how things are to be assertions, since indications that are assertions bring what should otherwise be background to the foreground. To make an assertion is to treat a given

subject matter as a topic of a conversation. But in a performative, the fact that one is performing a specific kind of illocutionary act shouldn't be the topic of conversation when the performative is issued. That would be self-defeating.

Others have made this point about the nature of assertion being in conflict with the idea that performatives are not asserted. Jarry (2007), invoking Barker (2004), proposes that assertions are *defensive*, and democratic, whereas, other speech-acts, like orders, are autocratic. The point of assertion is to raise a commitment to the level of dialectical engagement. That means that the purpose of assertion is to manifest a disposition to display reasons for a commitment. This is an approach in the spirit of Brandom (1998). In contrast, other speech-acts, like orders, are acts whose purpose is to manifest a state, like desire. The order produced by uttering *Leave the room!* involves the speaker manifesting a desire that the audience leave the room. This is distinct from an assertion of *You ought to leave the room*. This is an utterance in which a speaker defends the state of desiring that the audience leaving the room. Its purpose is to invite a potential response from the audience to provide reasons for such a desire in themselves. They can reject the desire—not forming the intention to leave—and express that rejection by affirming that the speaker's utterance is false. Truth/falsity-assessment is to the fore because the utterance is an assertion, and indeed, the speaker in uttering *You ought to leave the room*, is implicitly inviting such response, in contrast to the issuing of the order, *Leave the room!* One can say precisely the same thing for *I order you to leave the room*.

If this point about identification of assertion with a certain dialectical purpose is correct, then we don't want to think of performatives as assertions. Assertion gets in the way, since it invites audiences to have a dialectical response to possession of the kind of mental state the speaker is expressing with the whole performative, which is to say, an epistemic state about the speakers *Xing*. We have no interest in thinking of performatives as assertions if we think of assertions in this way. This amounts to wasting the specific power of assertion, which has one job to do, whereas performatives have another—each job depending on what the *Xing* is. Assertion could only get in the way. This explains some of the phenomena we have observed above.

Indeed, a certain class of performatives, which we have not yet looked at, only confirms the no-assertion thesis being made here. These are performatives of the form:

I assert/state/claim etc. that P

So an example is:

I state that I have never been in the vicinity of Prague.

Here it seems we have all the marks of an assertion of *I have never been in the vicinity of Prague*. Someone can respond to the above performative with, *You liar! You have been there*. Or with *And that's a fact*. Or, *Yes, I believe you: you have never been there*. And so on. The content of the assertion is not that the speaker is making an assertion, that which the whole performative sentence describes, but the content corresponding to the complement sentence, namely, that the speaker has never been to Prague. We don't have a double assertion.¹

This confirms the idea that the act the speaker is in fact performing with the performative is what they are describing themselves as doing. In the case of an utterance of *I order you to leave* they are performing an order, as they describe. In the case of utterance of *I state that I have never been to Prague*, it is a statement, that is, the assertion that the speaker has never been to Prague. In other words, in uttering the performative, *I hereby X*, the speaker performs an *X*ing and describes themselves as going so. However, the act of describing is not an assertion.

2. Unasserted but true/false-assessable?

Let us suppose then that performatives are not assertions. So, we can agree with Austin that in uttering a performative, *I hereby X*, the speaker says something with the whole sentence but that this saying something is not an assertion that they are *X*ing. This concession, however, does not mean in itself that the sentence *I hereby X* is not true/false-assessable—Austin's second thesis about performatives. Being unasserted does not imply not being true/false-assessable. For example, constituent sentences of a logical compound are not asserted, but they are true/false-assessable. In other words, we can ask in relation to unasserted sentences whether they are true or false: *The sky is blue. (Unasserted) True or false?* The

¹ The very phenomenon we are examining here is the performatox of Boër and Lycan (1980) which they see as a paradox for compositional semantics.

speaker is not asserting the sentence concerned, but the enquiry about its truth makes sense as does an answer of *true* or *false*. So, the question in play is whether we should think of performative sentences *I hereby X* and so on, as being in the class of unasserted but nevertheless truth/falsity-assessable sentences.

Here is a phenomenological argument against truth/falsity-assessability. Performatives just don't feel like they are true/false-assessable. If someone intones, *I curse you*, the response, *false*, looks inappropriate. In relation to the utterance of *I hereby adjourn this meeting*, the response: *true* looks wrong. Or, take this dialogue: Smith asks Jones: *say something true*. Jones replies: *I order you to stop making that request*. Smith cannot say that he has got Jones to do what he wants, namely, to say something true. Suppose, in a ceremony, you intone: *I appoint you president of the club*. Do I say something false, if you are already president? I think not.

These phenomenological arguments for non-true/false-assessability may not move you at all. Instead of trading intuitions about the appropriateness of true/false-assessment, we can move to a prior question: why wouldn't performatives be true/false-assessable? Given the representationalist thesis *RT* above, surely they are. But maybe, contra *RT*, being a sentence with propositional content does not make you true/false-assessable. Just consider declaratives used to perform non-assertoric illocutionary acts. Take the following case. I am very angry with you for having taken some money from my piggy bank with the intention of spending it on a beer. I say: *You are going to put that money back*. The response: *false* (or *true*) is inappropriate. To reply, *false* involves a subtle misunderstanding of what I am up to in making the utterance. I am ordering you to put the money back and not making a predication about what you will do. Indeed, an audience can enquire: *Is that an order or a prediction?* Depending on how the speaker responds, the judgment of true/false-assessability follows accordingly. Or take a question. I can ask: *Fred has a lot of time on his hands*, with a certain rise in tone at the end of the sentence indicating a question. Clearly I am posing a question. A response *true* or *false* is not appropriate. Or I say *This meeting is adjourned* (banging a gavel). The response, *That's false*, is inappropriate. In all these cases we have sentences that correspond to states of affairs that are the case (or not), but true or false are inappropriate. But according to *RT* they are all true/false-assessable.

Here is a general line of argument for the thesis that performatives are not true/false-assessable. Take any sentence that is produced with a non-

assertoric force. In any such case the sentence may be a declarative sentence used with non-assertoric force—say, *You are leaving* (as an order)—or non-declaratives, *George, leave!*. In all these cases we can see the sentence as providing a representations of how things are, even if there is no explicit declarative form in the sentence produced that expresses the representation. (See Price's 1988.) For example in the case of an order, *George, leave!*, there is a representation, say, that I want George to leave. For clearly, in producing the order one is representing the fact that one wants someone to leave. But that is a representation with propositional content. So why isn't the resulting sentence, which is a production of that representation, true/false-assessable? One also represents a state of affairs that George leaves. If that state of affairs obtains, which it may do, then there is a fact, represented by the sentence, that obtains. If so, why isn't it true?

We have then three classes of sentences to think about:

1. Non-declarative sentences used in non-assertoric speech acts, as in *Leave, George!*;
2. Declarative sentences used in non-assertoric speech acts, as in *You will leave!*;
3. Sentences used in performatives, that is sentences that can be said to offer descriptions of illocutionary acts being formed with those very sentences, for example, *I order you, George, to leave.*

I think we want to say that class 1 sentences are not true/false-assessable. Similarly, class 2, orders and questions performed with declaratives, are not true/false-assessable. Given that class 2 sentences are not truth/falsity-assessable, then we have reason to believe that performatives are not truth/falsity-assessable, since they too are just unasserted declarative sentences with non-assertoric force. Class 2 sentences describe possible states of affairs, but their doing so does not mean they are truth/falsity-assessable. Similarly, class 3, the performatives, describes states of affairs, but that in itself cannot mean they are true/false-assessable as such.

Pan truth-conditionalism is the idea that all sentences are truth/false-assessable. The principle *RT* implies a pan truth-conditionalism. Such views have been held. Lewis's (1970) conception is a paradigm example of such pan truth-conditionalism. According to Lewis, all speech-acts are like performatives, and all are truth/false-assessable. They all have the form:

I hereby *X* that P.

On this view, assertion isn't the specialised act, one amongst others, that it seems to be. Rather, it has a privileged place. It is the representational act *par excellence*. On the Lewis view all speech-acts are this kind of act. Lewis's position, however, just looks like defiance in the face of evidence to the contrary. Indeed, it may be the view that all the evidence to the contrary is just in the sphere of the don't-cares. But this is a vast sphere, and surely ordinary speakers cannot be so wrong about the nature of their own language. Any view of meaning as constrained by use cannot agree with Lewisian high-handedness.

Davidson's view is a more tempered version of pan truth-conditionism. Davidson's (1979) conception is very similar insofar as all declarative sentences are true/false-assessable. For Davidson, mood-modified sentences, like *You, leave the room!*, are really two sentences,

- (S) You will leave the room.
- (R) This is an order.

Davidson's analysis is meant to explain hesitation to assign truth or falsity to these sentences, even if they are basically true/false-assessable. The hesitation is meant to be there because we are disinclined to assess sequences of sentences, *S*, *R*, for collective truth or falsity, unlike, say conjunctions, (*S* & *R*). However, Davidson's conservative light touch explanation is not that convincing. Why shouldn't we assess sequences of sentences for truth? Cannot I say in response to a text involving more than one sentence that it is all true? If someone issues a sequence of sentences like the above, one can say: *True, you have given me an order*. But that kind of response cannot be made to an actual order, produced through a sentence in the imperative. Davidson's position looks untenable.

3. The tripartite analysis and compositional semantics

That is my assembled evidence for the non-truth/false-assessability of performatives as a general class. I think Austin's original intuition is right. Performatives are not assertions and not true- or false-assessable. But in producing a performative one says something. But the saying is just the production of a declarative sentence with content, indeed, representational content. Although we speakers intend to say how things are, intending to say how things are is not asserting or producing true/false-assessable words.

Why are these matters of real concern? Why not just admit, as surface considerations and some general considerations about assertion seem to show, that performatives, and the other sentences we have looked at, are not assertions, and not true/false-assessable as such?

In fact, there is a general, theoretical reason to be very concerned with the question of the true/false-assessability of such sentences. In *How to do Things with Words?* Austin begins with the constative/performative distinction. He sees constatives as contrasted with performatives. Performatives are doings in a way in which constatives are not doings. But that distinction begins to break down, as he proceeds in his lectures. The supposed characteristics of performatives also seem to be shared by constatives. Constatives are also speech acts, doings, but just a different kind. That in fact is confirmed by the fact that the *X*ing that a performative can describe is asserting, as in *I say you are such a fool*.

That leads to a revision in which performatives lose their place as a fundamentally different kind of activity with language. What replaces it is Austin's analysis of speech-acts. Self-standing speech acts with sentences have a tripartite structure of three nested acts. The first act is the production of a grammatical sentence. The second and third acts are the *locutionary* and *illocutionary* acts respectively:

Phrastic act: utterance of a grammatical sentence.

Locutionary act: utterance of a sentence with reference and linguistic meaning and a propositional content.

Illocutionary act: utterance of a sentence with a certain propositional content and a force.

By *force* we mean a specific use made of a proposition in relation to an audience. The standard view goes roughly (but not necessarily accurately) as follows: assertive force is intending others to come to believe *P*, commissive force is intending others see to it that *P* is made true, and so on. There is also a fourth act: the perlocutionary act, which is the securing of an effect in the audience. We shall not be closely concerned with it here.

The view about performatives we are contemplating as Austin's does not sit well with this general speech-act analysis. The problem is the status of the saying that goes on in the production of a performative *I hereby X*. In that act, the speaker *U* is meant to be describing the illocutionary act, the particular *X*ing, *U* is undertaking, but that describing is a saying that is neither an asserting nor true/false-assessable. It is like the kind of saying

that goes on in production of *You will F* produced as an order. But since this kind of saying is not an illocutionary act, we might, in the light of our tripartite analysis, want to say it is a locutionary act. But sentences tokened in locutionary acts, we might suppose, are true/false-assessable. At least, that is the orthodox view, which is, more or less summed up in *RT*, and the representationalist idea of true/false-assessable sentences. If so, performatives must be true/false-assessable, contrary to our recent arguments and Austin's contentions.

However, I have argued, following Austin that performatives are not true/false-assessable. Neither are all the sentences performed in non-assertoric illocutionary acts. But if that is right, sentences produced in the performance of locutionary acts cannot be true/false-assessable. But now we face the crunch. The idea that true/false-assessable sentences are just sentences produced in locutionary acts is central to truth-conditional approaches to meaning. The truth-conditional approach to meaning claims that the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth-conditions. Meaning here means *propositional content*: the meaning a sentence has excluding its force, which is to say, the meaning possessed by a sentence in a locutionary act. In other words, to possess a propositional content is to be a sentence performed in a locutionary act, which means having truth-conditions, and so being true/false-assessable.

The sense/force distinction

The tripartite analysis is at one with the sense/force-distinction. The latter is often seen as the heart of compositional semantics. It's claimed that the only way we can give a systematic account of the content is by separating content from deployment or use of content. Take three mood-modified sentences, as below:

Lucky jumps.

Does Lucky jump?

Lucky, jump!

All involve the same basic vocabulary but combined differently. The content that *Lucky jumps* shares with the other sentences must be independent of its assertoric use, since the other sentences are not, apparently, associated with assertion. Thus the common content must be assertion-independent. What is this assertion-independent content if it is not propositional con-

tent? Let's denote it by $\langle\langle\text{Lucky jumps}\rangle\rangle$. If we accept this hypothesis, then, the structure of the three sentences is given as below, where A , Q and O are the three distinct forces:

Lucky jumps	$A\langle\langle\text{Lucky jumps}\rangle\rangle$
Does Lucky jump?	$Q\langle\langle\text{Lucky jumps}\rangle\rangle$
Lucky, jump!	$O\langle\langle\text{Lucky jumps}\rangle\rangle$

That there is a common content seems to be confirmed by the fact that the truth-conditions for the declarative sentence, affirmative-answer conditions for the interrogative, and compliance conditions for the imperative can all be specified by the same condition: that Lucky jumps. It's this common content that is the object of semantic investigation, and whose assignment to sentences is a function of the semantic composition of those sentences.

If this is right, all sentences have a truth-conditional component, which is $\langle\langle\text{Lucky jumps}\rangle\rangle$. But this picture of compositional semantics and the force/sense-distinction gives rise to two problems:

Problem 1: A force-operator, supposedly, is not like a logical operator like negation. If a speaker U utters *Not-S*, then one cannot say that U has said something true, namely that S , or something false, that S . In short, S is not true/false-assessable in an utterance of *Not-S* despite the fact that in uttering *Not-S*, U utters the sentence S and expresses a proposition that S thereby. The reason, obviously, is that negation prefixes S . Because negation contributes to truth-conditional content, it seals off S from true/false-assessment in the sentence *Not-S*. But force operators don't contribute to truth-conditional content. They don't incorporate the content in their scope within some larger truth-conditional content. So, they don't seal it off from true/false-assessment. If that is right, then why can't we access all illocutionary acts in terms of truth and falsity, given that all of them involve a component of their meaning, which is the locutionary act, supposedly, a true/false-assessable act?

Problem 2: We are assuming, as seems to be right, that a force operator is not making any truth-conditional contribution to a sentence. But now consider *grammatical mood*, the linguistic indicator of force. Grammatical mood in a sentence indicates that a force is in place. Why isn't mood a truth-conditional contributor to the content of a sentence? In other words why can't the mood operator be seen as the Lewisian suggests, as being like a performative verb, so that the whole mood-modified sentence

comes out as: *I X that P*, where *X* is a force verb? In which case, why aren't all mood-modified sentences true/false-assessable?²

One cannot reply here that it is just a matter of stipulation that mood-operators are not truth-conditional content contributors. Natural languages are not the result of stipulation, like artificial 'languages'. In other words, we have to come up with a general theory of what it is for an expression in a language to contribute to truth-conditional content. We need in other words a theory of what truth-conditions are as a phenomenon. Clearly, we don't want mood operators to come out as truth-conditional operators. But now note. Any explanation of why mood-operators are not contributors to truth-conditions is probably also going to have the result that in performatives, the indicator of performance, 'I hereby X' is not going to be a truth-condition contributor. In other words, performative sentences are not going to come out as true/false-assessable sentences. That is, we should accept:

Mood-modifiers are not truth-conditional operators iff performatives are not true/false-assessable.

This naturally enough supports all the arguments we rallied above for the Austinian thesis that performative are not true/false-assessable.

So here is our problem: why aren't mood-modifiers truth-conditional?

Problem 3: If the objects of attitudes are propositions, and propositions are the primary truth-bearers, in the sense of locutionary-contents of the tripartite analysis—then why are beliefs truth/falsity-assessable whereas desires are not truth/falsity-assessable, given that both are mental states with propositions/thoughts/locutionary-contents as their objects? So, we accept *B* but we don't accept *D*:

B: My belief that the world will get better is true

D: My desire that the world will get better is true.

There is a close connection between our current concerns with illocutionary acts and this problem about attitudes. Orders if anything correspond to desire states, and assertions correspond to beliefs. This is a bit crude, of course, but it has some validity. This correspondence is reflected in speech acts. Saying *I want you to leave* to someone is as good as a request, a kind of commissive,

² In effect this is the question explored in Price (1989).

that they leave. I have expressed, indeed, I have represented the mental state that I want you to leave. It seems we explain why beliefs are truth-apt whereas desires are not, by appeal to direction of fit. But as an explanation, that assumes that it's not propositions, thoughts, that are truth/false-assessable, but mental states with a certain relation to the world, the state-world direction of fit. But the position of the tripartite analysis is that it is sentences expressing thoughts that are truth/falsity-assessable.

The Predicament in Outline. These three problems are all related in different ways to the thesis that there are *locutionary acts*—force-neutral acts performed with sentences—and that these acts, or the propositions they express, are the primary objects of true/false-assessment. Truth, in short, cannot play the theoretical role that truth-conditional semantics proposes that it does, as the key property that allows us to theorize locutionary content. So where can we go from here?

One obvious line of solution is to find an alternative understanding of locutionary acts. We need another property that sentences can have, which isn't truth, which defines locutionary content, that is, a substitute for truth-conditions.

4. Truth: divide and conquer

There is a simple proposal on how to do this. That's to divide truth into two kinds. So, Stenius (1967) and Sadock (1985), propose that there are two kinds of truth, one applying to the proposition—the force neutral content—and one applying to assertions or sentences thought of as being potential assertions. Call the second *folk-truth*. The idea then is that we cannot apply folk-truth to performatives, and orders, and so on, because they are not associated in the right way to assertion, whereas we can apply theory-truth to them.

The problem with this approach is that we have no reason to think that the term *true* is ambiguous in this way. We never say things like: *This sentence is true, but it's not true* in the way that we can say *This is a bank, but it's not a bank*, pointing at the shore of a river, indicating thereby that the sentence should be interpreted: *This is a bank (river edge), but it's not a bank (financial institution)*. One response to this problem is that *theory-truth* is not really a term in ordinary parlance. It simply isn't part of the non-theoretical lexicon. But then we have to ask what grounds we have for bes-

towing the term *true* on this theoretical property, supposedly playing a theoretical role? In other words, no interpretative theory can justify the thesis that *theory-true* is a disambiguation of the term *true*. I don't think the ambiguity theory can be right for that reason.

One might object that this is a minor concern. We can forget about who owns the term *true*. Why not propose that semantics just describes in a compositional way how sentences get a certain, theoretically defined property in terms of the semantic properties assigned to sentence constituents and their mode of composition. The property is not *having-such-and-such-**truth**-conditions*. Let's suppose rather that it is *having-such-and-such-**representation**-conditions*. So, all sentences, let's say, are used to represent how things might be, but this does not make them true/false-assessable. Being true/false-assessable is not merely about having representational content. Sentence content—locutionary-act content—is linked to representation conditions and not to truth-conditions.

What are representation conditions? For example, using the tools of possible-worlds semantics, we could identify the representational conditions of a sentence with, say, a set of worlds. We propose then that a sentence matches the world @, when @ is in the set of worlds. This used to be called truth, in possible worlds semantics. But now we are rejecting that identification. We are just saying it is *matching*, or *describing*, where these are purely theoretical terms. We then work out a compositional semantics in which sentences are assigned worlds in a systematic way, based on assignments of reference to their ultimate constituents.

Which set of worlds gets assigned to a sentence? Here we encounter a slightly embarrassing issue for the possible worlds approach. We cannot say that the worlds are those in which the sentence is true, since that is to bring in truth and implicitly the idea of a truth-bearer. So our analysis would be, at best, circular. We need to find something common to all works, apart from the truth of *S*—that can tie them all to *S*. The obvious idea is that what's common to all the worlds is a state of affairs, in the sense of an abstract, non-concrete one, and the sentence is tied to this state of affairs. But if we have to bring in states of affairs in this way, we ought to drop worlds—they have now become entirely redundant.

Think then of representation conditions in terms of abstract, non-concrete states of affairs. States of affairs are structured entities that correspond to the form of a concrete (actual) state of affairs, in the sense of Armstrong (1997). We can then say that the sentence *describes* the

world @ if and only if the state of affairs it represents is realized in @ by some fact. This is very much in the terrain of the correspondence theory of truth. But again, I emphasise, we are not proposing at this point to identify truth with correspondence.

What is this relation we have called *representation* that holds between a sentence and a state of affairs? It's easy to think we can say *representing a state of affairs* and think we know what we are talking about. But that appearance of clarity may be mere appearance. What is *representing* here? It cannot be *denoting*. We don't want the sentence to be a referring term, of the form: *the state of affairs that S*. Sentences don't denote states of affairs. Of course, we can see some expressions as denoting states of affairs, phrases like, *the state of affairs that S*. But such phrases are not sentences.

You might say that the representational content of *S* is fixed compositionally. That *S* represents a state of affairs is a function that of *S*'s parts and their mode of combination. We might suppose the representational content of a predicate is its denotation, a property, and that of a singular term, is an object. In which case, where *S* is an atomic sentence, we get:

The sentence *O is F* represents the state of affairs $\langle x \text{ is } y \rangle$, in which *O* denotes *x* and *F* denotes *y*.

But would specifying all such axioms required for a compositional account of sentence representation tell us what representation is? No. It will not since such an enterprise assumes the very relation of sentential representation we are trying to illuminate. It just tells us which states of affairs are represented. It does not tell us what representation of a state of affairs *is*.

We might see parallels between the present proposal and Wittgenstein's Tractarian view of sentences as word-pictures of states of affairs. Sentences picture states of affairs, which is a kind of isomorphism between the sentence with its grammatical constituents and the state of affairs. Indeed, this might give us our representing. *S* represents just in case constituents in *S* denote constituents in $\langle s \rangle$, and the order of *S* mirrors the order in $\langle s \rangle$. This might work, as long as we have a theory of constituenthood of sentences and that of states of affairs. But there are well-known problems with such ideas.

We might insist that the relation of representing a state of affairs is a primitive. In other words, there is just a kind of language-world relation—distinct from denotation—that sentences have to states of affairs. This is perhaps objectionable, and would be seen as a retrograde step back

into the obscurities of past theory. Moreover, there are all sorts of ontological concerns about this kind of approach, and indeed, about states of affairs as an ontological category. I will not dwell on these here, since there is a more serious concern, residing in how exactly this approach is going to solve our problem of true/false-assessability.

We see the problem when we focus on what the story of true/false-assessable is going to be. Supposedly, the view is this. Given S represents a state of affairs, S is true/false-assessable just in case it is asserted, or thought of as a potential assertion. (In short, the illocutionary act of assertion fixes what true/false-assessability is, and not the locutionary act.) For this account to work, we need to give an account of assertion. An assertion, say, drawing on the Brandomian picture, is the following kind of act. U utters S with purpose of defending a mental state that is a commitment to S 's *describing* reality. That means U is expressing a disposition to offer reasons for a mental state, commitment to S 's matching how things are, that is, S represents a state of affairs that is realized.

In uttering a performative, goes the line of thought, one is not doing this. Rather, one is merely expressing the commitment that S describes how things are. The dialectical element of intending to defend this commitment is missing in the second case. Hence performatives are not truth-apt. Thus although performative sentences, *I hereby X*, describe the act of X ing that is going on, they are not assertions about it, nor are they true or false. In other words, we have sentences that describe reality, in our rather technical sense of *describing*, but which are not truth-falsity-assessable. They are simply not being used with the purpose of being viewed in that way.

That something is not entirely resolved in the present proposal comes out when we look again at our treatment of assertion. The current idea is that a speaker U asserts that S then U utters S with the purpose of defending a mental state, namely: Commitment to S describing how things are. This commitment looks like a propositional attitude. You may not think of commitment as belief, strictly speaking, but it looks like an attitude towards a *thought*. The thought is: *S describes reality*. But if this is a thought then our account of true/false-assessability already presupposes that there is something prior to assertion that is true/false-assessable, namely, the objects of attitudes: *thoughts*. But if this is right, then it seems it will be difficult for us to deny that sentences that simply express thoughts in this sense are true/false-assessable. But then we shall be firmly back in semantic

orthodoxy and unable to explain why performatives are not true/false-assessable.

In essence, the problem is that we are treating assertion as an act whose mental antecedents are states—commitments to thoughts—that already have content of the very kind we are meant to be explicating, viz, true/false-assessable content. We need, it seems, to deny that the mental antecedents of assertion are mental states that have content, in the sense of true/false-assessable thoughts, as their objects. What theory of assertion could meet this condition? Two approaches are:

- (i) Brandom (1998) treats assertion as expressing commitment not to sentences representing how things are, but commitment to engaging in activity with sentences, which lack content as such. Rather, the activity with the sentences somehow bestows content on them. Needless to say, Brandom calls this activity inferential activity. In short, inferential behaviour is prior to sentence content.
- (ii) We treat assertion as expressing mental antecedents, but give up the idea that we should think of them in terms of content or even in terms of commitment. One way of doing this is to generalize certain basic ideas of expressivism to all assertion. Moreover, instead of giving a theory of sentence content, we provide a kind of expressivism about content. This approach has been sketched in Barker (2007; 2014).

It may be with one of these approaches we can deal with our three problems, articulated in the last section above. Both ways, however, undermine the tripartite analysis to some degree. Both are closer to the idea that we explain assertion first, and can then talk of true/false-assessable sentences afterwards. Both seriously undermine the idea that truth and truth-conditions have a central role to play in the theory of meaning.

I will not explore the prospects of such approaches here. Perhaps there are other possibilities to explore. We have faith that some kind of theory is out there somewhere. But my intention here is not to arrive at that theory. It is rather to show the radical kind of critique of received ideas about sentence content implicit in Austin's ideas about performatives, and why they are still here to challenge us now.³

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