

How Performatives work

Searle's challenge and analysis

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Outline

The problem of how saying so makes it so

Two kinds of assertoric accounts

Searle's (1989) challenge

Searle's analysis

Performatives based on extra-linguistic institutions

- ▶ Depending on who utters them and other concomitant circumstances, utterances of (1), (2), (3), can bring about a legally recognized marriage, adjourn the meeting, or transfer possession of the bike.

- (1) I pronounce you man and wife.
- (2) The meeting is adjourned.
- (3) The bike is (now) yours.

Explicit performatives

- ▶ Utterances of (4), (5), (6), in contrast to those of (7), or (8), *bring about* a promise or an order.
- ▶ The matrix predicate, the tense, and the type of subject all have to be of the right type for an utterance of (4), (5), or (6) to be performative.

(4) I (hereby) promise you to be there at five. (is a promise)

(5) I (hereby) order you to be there at five. (is an order)

(6) You are (hereby) ordered to report to jury duty. (is an order)

(7) I promised you to be there at five. (is not a promise)

(8) He promises to be there at five. (is not a promise)

Explicit performatives

- ▶ The conditions on predicate, tense and subject are necessary but not sufficient.
- ▶ (9), (10) report on the content of an information bearing object and do not constitute a promise or an order.

(9) In this email I promise you to finish the paper.

(10) In the letter I order you to sign the report.

Which verbs can have performative uses?

- (11) a. I (hereby) order you to be there at noon. (constitutes an order)
b. I (hereby) fry an egg. (does not constitute a frying)

- ▶ Naïve reaction to the contrast in (11): Ordering is something ‘that can be done with words’, frying an egg is not.
- ▶ But: There are many ‘things that can be done with words’ that cannot be done with explicit performatives:

- (12) a. # I (hereby) insult you.
b. # I (hereby) annoy you.
c. # I (hereby) frighten you.

- ▶ An account of explicit performatives should explain why (11-a) is an order, but (12-a) is not an insult.

Performative prefix?

- ▶ The matrix predicate spells out the illocutionary force of the sentence on a performative use.
- ▶ Propositional content and Illocutionary force:
 - ▶ propositional content of (4) = that I will be there at five
 - ▶ propositional content of (5), (6) = that you will be there at five
 - ▶ illocutionary force of (4) = PROMISE (by convention)
 - ▶ illocutionary force of (5), (6) = ORDER (by convention)
- ▶ PROMISE, ORDER, etc. come with their own preparatory, essential and sincerity conditions.
- ▶ Relation to compositional meaning?

Explicit performatives

- ▶ *Explicit performative* sentences are indicatives
- ▶ Ideally, they should have the same conventional effect as other indicatives
- ▶ There is no grammatical basis that **I promise/order**, in these cases, spells out a ‘performative prefix’ that is silent in all other sentences.
- ▶ The puzzle about explicit performatives:

How can there be a class of sentences whose meaning is such that we can perform the action named by the verb just by saying literally we are performing it?

Searle (1989, p. 538)

Explicit performatives

- ▶ Attractive idea, proposed time and again since Austin (1962) (Lemmon 1962, Hedenius 1963, Bach and Harnish 1979, Ginet 1979, Bierwisch 1980, Leech 1983, Bach and Harnish 1992, ...):

Explicit performatives are *assertions*, which, somehow, make themselves true.

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Performativity via inference

- ▶ Bach and Harnish (1979)-style accounts analyze explicit performatives as assertions that give rise to their performative meaning indirectly, by implicature-like inferences that the speaker intends the hearer to draw.

Ordinary performatives [= explicit performatives, CAC] are acts of communication and succeed as such if one's audience infers one's communicative intention, the intention to be expressing a certain attitude.

Bach and Harnish (1992, p. 94)

Performativity via inference

- ▶ Intended hearer inference (Bach and Harnish 1979):
 1. He is saying “I order you to leave.”
 2. He is stating (asserting) that he is ordering me to leave.
 3. If his statement is true, then he must be ordering me to leave.
 4. If he is ordering me to leave, it must be his utterance that constitutes the order. (What else could it be?)
 5. Presumably, he is speaking the truth.
 6. Therefore, in stating that he is ordering me to leave he is ordering me to leave.

Performativity via inference

- ▶ Let us also consider performatives based on extra-linguistic institutions
- ▶ Intended hearer inference:
 1. He is saying “The meeting is adjourned.”
 2. He is stating (asserting) that the meeting is adjourned.
 3. If his statement is true, then the meeting must be adjourned.
 4. If the meeting is adjourned, it must be his utterance that brought this about. (What else could it be?)
 5. Presumably, he is speaking the truth.
 6. Therefore, in stating that the meeting is adjourned he is bringing the meeting to a close.

Performativity via inference

- ▶ Let us now consider utterances that cannot be performative
- ▶ Intended hearer inference:
 1. He is saying “I hereby insult you.”
 2. He is stating (asserting) that he is insulting me.
 3. If his statement is true, then he must be insulting me.
 4. If he is insulting me, it must be his utterance that constitutes the insult. (What else could it be?)
 5. Presumably, he is speaking the truth.
 6. Therefore, in stating that he is insulting me he is in fact insulting me.

Steps 2 + 5: assertions and presumption of truth

Assertions as expressions of an attitude:

- ▶ Bach and Harnish (1979, 42) take assertions to express belief
 - ▶ In uttering e , S asserts that P if S expresses:
 - i. the belief that P , and
 - ii. the intention that H believe that P . (42)
- ▶ Assumption: speaker expressed a true belief

Steps 2 + 5: assertions and presumption of truth

Assertions as proposals to update the the common ground

- ▶ Stalnaker (1978): the essential effect of an assertion, if accepted, is to update the common ground with the propositional content of the assertion (that he orders me to leave / that the meeting is adjourned)
- ▶ Assumption: speaker is an epistemic authority on the matter and attempts to make common ground only what he knows to be true

Direct performativity

- ▶ The utterance *is* the promise, order etc. No hearer inference is necessary.
- ▶ One *cannot but* speak the truth with an explicit performative utterance

“The crucial point is that an explicit performative utterance has the communicative sense specified by its utterance meaning if and only if the meaningful utterance on which it is based is true.”

Bierwisch (1980)

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Searle's (1989) challenge

- ▶ STEP 1: Desiderata for a theory of explicit performatives.
 - (a) performative utterances are performances of the act named by the performative verb;
 - (b) performative utterances are self-guaranteeing;
 - (c) performative utterances achieve (a) and (b) in virtue of their literal meaning.

Searle's (1989) challenge

- ▶ STEP 2: Speech act theory.
 - ▶ Making a promise requires the promiser to *intend* to make a promise, i.e. to intend to undertake the obligation to realize the content of the promise.
 - ▶ Similarly for issuing an order, etc.
 - ▶ Generally, the speaker must intend to bring about the *essential condition* associated with the corresponding speech act.

Searle's (1989) challenge

- ▶ STEP 3: The fundamental problem with assertoric accounts of performatives: (b) fails, hence (a) and (c) fail.

What self-verification amounts to and why it fails

“Can we show how the fact that one made a self-referential statement to the effect that one was making a promise that p is sufficient to guarantee that one had the intention to make a promise that p?”

Searle (1989, p. 544)

*“The intention to assert self-referentially of an utterance that it is an illocutionary act of a certain type, say a promise, is simply not sufficient to guarantee the existence of an intention in that utterance to make a promise. **Such an assertion does indeed commit the speaker to the existence of the intention, but the commitment to having the intention doesn't guarantee the actual presence of the intention.**”*

Searle (1989, p. 546)

Searle's basic assumptions

1. Indicative sentences are/have the force of statements (assertions)
2. A statement is an intentionally undertaken commitment to the truth of the expressed propositional content.
3. Performative statements are self-referential.
4. An essential constitutive feature of any illocutionary act is the intention to perform that act.
 - ▶ It is a constitutive feature of a promise, for example, that the utterance should be intended as a promise.

Searle's basic assumptions

Propositional content and Illocutionary force:

- ▶ The matrix clause is part of the propositional content of the sentence
 - ▶ propositional content of (4) = that I promise to be there at 5
 - ▶ propositional content of (5), (6) = that I order you to be there at 5
- ▶ A proper analysis of explicit performatives ought to show that
 - ▶ illocutionary force of (4) = PROMISE (given its meaning)
 - ▶ illocutionary force of (5), (6) = ORDER (given its meaning)
- ▶ Open question:
 - ▶ [[promise]] = PROMISE ?
 - ▶ [[order]] = ORDER ?

Searle's proposal for indicatives

- ▶ An utterance of an indicative commits the speaker to the truth of the expressed propositional content.
- ▶ On this view, utterance of an indicative has a *normative effect*.
- ▶ By uttering an indicative sentence the speaker takes on a commitment and, therefore, a change is effected.

Notation

$PB_S[u]$ The set of doxastic commitments of speaker S resulting from communicative event u .

$PEP_S[u]$ The set of preferential commitments of speaker S resulting from communicative event u .

PB_S^t The set of beliefs of S that become publicly manifest at time t .

PEP_S^t The set of maximal effective preferences of S that become publicly manifest at time t .

Postulates

Positive introspection for preference commitment

$$PEP(a, p) \Rightarrow PB(a, PEP(a, p))$$

Doxastic reduction for preference commitment

$$PB(a, PEP(a, p)) \Rightarrow PEP(a, p)$$

Doxastic reduction for doxastic commitment

$$PB(a, PB(a, p)) \Rightarrow PB(a, p)$$

Bridge principle for doxastic commitment

$$p \in PB_S[u] \Leftrightarrow (p \in PB_S^{t_u}) \in PB_S[u]$$

Bridge principle for preference commitment

$$p \in PEP_S[u] \Leftrightarrow (p \in PEP_S^{t_u}) \in PB_S[u]$$

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Desiderata for a theory of explicit performatives

- (a) performative utterances are performances of the act named by the performative verb;
- (b) performative utterances are self-guaranteeing;
- (c) performative utterances achieve (a) and (b) in virtue of their literal meaning.

Searle's plain assertoric analysis

1. Indicative sentences are/have the force of statements (assertions)
2. A statement is an intentionally undertaken commitment to the truth of the expressed propositional content.
3. Performative statements are self-referential.
4. An essential constitutive feature of any illocutionary act is the intention to perform that act.
 - ▶ It is a constitutive feature of a promise, for example, that the utterance should be intended as a promise.

Our perspective on Searle's challenge

- ▶ Searle's challenge rests on assumptions 2 and 4.
- ▶ With those assumptions, Searle's challenge is insurmountable, i.e., there cannot be an analysis of explicit performatives that meets desiderata (a), (b) and (c) without assuming a special kind of speech act.
- ▶ We have questioned the necessity of assumption 2 by providing an alternative.
- ▶ We have also refined 4 and done away with 3.
- ▶ The fact that Searle's own account of statements (assertions) is based on a notion of public commitment shows that not any kind of public commitments would do.

Performatives as declarations

- ▶ Performative utterances constitute both assertions and declarations
- ▶ Declarations are speech acts that make their propositional content true if they succeed (by definition)
- ▶ The truth of the statement derives from the declarational character of the utterance and not conversely

Supernatural declarations

- ▶ (13), (14), if uttered by God, are declarations
- ▶ (13) makes it the case by fiat that light exists, (14) erects a tower
- ▶ Given the structure of the world, ordinary humans cannot use (13) or (14) as declarations: their utterance will not have the same causal effect on the world as God's utterances do

(13) Let there be light!

(14) I hereby build a tower.

Declarations based on institutional facts

- ▶ Effecting change not by physical causation but by declarations
- ▶ In order to succeed declarations require
 1. An extra-linguistic institution.
 2. A special position by the speaker, and sometimes by the hearer, within the institution.
 3. A special convention that certain literal sentences of natural languages count as the performances of certain declarations within the institution.
 4. The intention by the speaker in the utterance of those sentences that his utterance has a declarational status, that it creates a fact corresponding to the propositional content.

Causal effects of declarations

As a general point, the difference between pounding a nail and adjourning a meeting is that in the case of adjourning the meeting the intention to perform the action, as manifested in the appropriate bodily movement (in this case the appropriate utterances) performed by a person duly authorized, and recognized by the audience, is constitutive of bringing about the desired change. When I say in such cases that the intention is constitutive of the action, I mean that the manifestation of the intention in the utterance does not require any further causal effects of the sort we have in hammering a nail or starting a car. It simply requires recognition by the audience.

Searle (1989, p. 548)

The necessary apparatus for explicit performatives

1. There is a class of actions where the manifestation of the intention to perform the action, in an appropriate context, is sufficient for the performance of the action.
2. There is a class of verbs which contain the notion of intention as part of their meaning. Illocutionary verbs characteristically have this feature. I cannot, e.g., promise unintentionally. If I didn't intend it as a promise, then it wasn't a promise.
3. There is a class of literal utterances which are self referential in a special way, they are not only *about* themselves, but they also operate on themselves. They are both *self-referential* and *executive*.

Explicit performatives

Searle (1989, p. 552)

- ▶ The sentence uttered as an assertion and uttered as a performative mean exactly the same thing.
- ▶ But when they are uttered as performatives the speaker's intention is different from when uttered as assertives.
- ▶ Performative speaker meaning includes sentence meaning but goes beyond it.
- ▶ In the case of the performative utterance, the intention is that the utterance should constitute the performance of the act named by the verb.
- ▶ The word “hereby” makes this explicit, and with the addition of this word, sentence meaning and performative speaker meaning coincide.
- ▶ The “here” part is the self referential part. The “by” part is the executive part.

Searle's derivation of self-verification

1. S uttered the sentence “I hereby order you to leave” (or he uttered “I order you to leave” meaning “I hereby order you to leave”).
2. The literal meaning of the utterance is such that by that very utterance the speaker *intends* to make it the case that he orders me to leave.
3. Therefore, in making the utterance S *manifested an intention* to make it the case by that utterance that he ordered me to leave.
4. Therefore, in making the utterance S manifested an intention to *order* me to leave by that very utterance.
5. Orders are a class of actions where the manifestation of the intention to perform the action is sufficient for its performance, given that certain other conditions are satisfied.
6. We assume those other conditions are satisfied.
7. S ordered me to leave, by that utterance.
8. S both said that he ordered me to leave and made it the case that he ordered me to leave. Therefore he made a true statement.

Another pass at Searle's derivation of self-verification

1. S uttered the sentence “I hereby order you to leave” (or he uttered “I order you to leave” meaning “I hereby order you to leave”).
 - ▶ If the speaker utters simply “I order you to leave”, the hearer has to recognize that the speaker meant this as a declaration, that is, that it is to be understood as if it contained a “hereby”.

Another pass at Searle's derivation of self-verification

2. The literal meaning of the utterance is such that by that very utterance the speaker *intends* to make it the case that he orders me to leave.
 - ▶ Let u^* be an utterance of “I hereby order you to leave” in context C^* and world w^* .
 - ▶ Given the equivalence/entailment (?) that Searle assumes, the content of the utterance is equivalent to/entails (15):

(15)

$$\{w \mid w \models \textit{intend}(S, \{w' \mid w' \models \textit{Cause}(u^*, \{w'' \mid w'' \models \exists e : \textit{order}(e, S, \textit{Leave})\})\})\}$$

where $\textit{Leave} = \llbracket \textit{you leave} \rrbracket_{C^*}$

Another pass at Searle's derivation of self-verification

3. Therefore, in making the utterance S *manifested an intention* to make it the case by that utterance that he ordered me to leave.
 - ▶ Let $ManifestAtt_S[u]$ be the set of attitudes speaker S manifests via utterance u . Then

$$(16) \quad w^* \models (15) \in ManifestAtt_S[u^*]$$

Another pass at Searle's derivation of self-verification

4. Therefore, in making the utterance S manifested an intention to *order* me to leave by that very utterance.
 - ▶ Assuming that *Cause* implies *by* and that *intend* is closed under entailment, (15) entails (17) and, therefore, (18) holds:

(17)

$\{w \mid w \models \textit{intend}(S, \{w' \mid w' \models \exists e : \textit{order}(e, S, \textit{Leave}) \wedge \textit{by}(e, u^*)\})\}$

(18) $w^* \models (17) \in \textit{ManifestAtt}_S[u^*]$

Another pass at Searle's derivation of self-verification

5. Orders are a class of actions where the manifestation of the intention to perform the action is sufficient for its performance, given that certain other conditions are satisfied.
6. We assume those other conditions are satisfied.
7. S ordered me to leave, by that utterance.

► (18) implies (19):

$$(19) \quad w^* \models \exists e : \text{order}(e, S, \text{Leave}) \wedge \text{by}(e, u^*)$$

Conclusion

- ▶ Searle's challenge is real
- ▶ How explicit performatives work
 - ▶ The explanatory weight is carried by the lexical semantics of performative verbs, together with the conventional dynamic effect of indicative sentences.
 - ▶ $[[\text{order}]] \neq \text{ORDER}$, $[[\text{promise}]] \neq \text{PROMISE}$, etc.
 - ▶ This is true of our analysis as well as Searle's.
 - ▶ Is **ORDER**, in contrast to the verb **order**, ever linguistically relevant?
 - ▶ How are commitments resulting from an utterance to be circumscribed?

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