

Lingua Inglese 1

Lecture 2

DOTT.SSA MARIA IVANA LORENZETTI



Speech-Act Theory

- Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) is the work which is held to have introduced the so-called *Speech Act Theory*.
- He starts by challenging the view held by logical positivists that "the business of a statement can only be to describe some state of affairs, or to state some fact, which it must do either truly or falsely" (1962:1)
- He argues that statements are only one class of meaningful utterances, since there are also utterances which have no truth-value, but are used to do something, rather than to describe some state of affairs

Constative vs. Performative Utterances

- **Constative utterances** are characterized as “utterances that say what they mean”
- **Performative utterances**, on the other hand, are utterances “that do what they say”
 - A. I like the red one
 - B. I choose the red one
- With (A), we describe a personal preference, with (B) we act on that preference, → we perform an act of choosing

Constative vs. Performative Utterances (2)

- The question to be asked about constative utterances is whether they are **true or false**
- Such a question is inappropriate in the case of performative utterances
 - A. John and Mary are husband and wife
→ **is it true?**
 - B. I pronounce you husband and wife
→ ***is it true?**
- With (A) the constative assertion may be true or false (cf. Is what he said true?), but no marriage is effected thereby.
- With (B), we may ask whether the performative act is **felicitous** or **infelicitous** (successful or unsuccessful).

Constative vs. Performative (3)

- The distinction between constative and performative utterances rests upon the difference between *saying* something, and *doing* something by means of language, i.e. **by virtue of the words uttered**

An utterance in a dialogue is an **action**

Felicitous vs. Infelicitous

- Performative utterances are not truth-conditional. But simply uttering the right words is far from being the sole thing necessary for the felicitous performance of a certain act
 - **Circumstances** and the **persons** must be somehow appropriate
 - It is not enough to say "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth" for a ship to acquire an official name, but "there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances" (Austin 1962:26).

Felicity conditions

- **Felicity conditions:** make performatives successful:

Condition 1:

The must be a conventional procedure following a conventional effect: e.g. getting married – proposal should be followed by the conventional ceremony; divorce – different conventional procedures in different countries

The circumstances and the persons must be appropriate:
e.g. I cannot marry two people.



Felicity Conditions (2)

Condition 2:

The procedure must be executed:

- **Correctly:** e.g. wedding vows: Appropriate Formulas (Those whom God joined together let no one put asunder. /Groom's name/ You may kiss your bride);
- **Completely:** procedure must be carried out completely in order to be effective

Condition 3:

Often:

- The person must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure: e.g. arranged marriages, remnants of the old tradition in modern superstitions;
- If consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must do so: e.g. the consequent behavior of the married couple.

Primary and Explicit Performatives

- A further distinction is that between *explicit* and *primary performatives*
- It is possible to perform an act of promising in two ways, by saying
 - *I will be there tomorrow at ten o'clock.*
 - *I promise I'll be there tomorrow at ten o'clock.*
- The first utterance contains a **primary** performative, while the second one an **explicit** one

Primary and Explicit Performatives (2)

- **Explicit performative** utterances make plain how the action should be taken or understood.
- If someone says "*I will be there tomorrow at ten o'clock*", he might reasonably claim that he was merely predicting that at given time he would be able to get to some place on the following day.
- On the contrary, someone who says "*I promise*" cannot subsequently deny of having made a promise.

Explicit Performative Utterances

- Explicit performative utterances usually take the form of declarative sentences with a first-person subject and the **performative verb** in the simple present tense
 - *I christen this ship the Queen Elizabeth*
 - *I deny having stolen Mrs. Smith's necklace*
 - *I congratulate you on winning the match*
- There are some exceptions, and it is possible to find the verb in the second or third person (singular or plural) and the verb in the passive voice, as in
 - Passengers are requested to fasten their seat belts
 - You are hereby authorised to pay

Some Problems with this Classification

- The verb in the first person singular present active as a criterion to indicate that an utterance is performative is not enough
 - It can be used also to describe an habitual action, or behaviour, as in "*I bet him (every day) sixpence that it will rain.*" which does not absolutely mean that I am (hereby) performing an act of betting
- The suggestion that it is possible to substitute a performative verb for making explicit something we are undoubtedly doing by saying something is equally defective.
 - It is not possible to say *"I insult you"*, in place of expressions such as *"Go to hell!"* or *"I exclaim"* in place of *"How marvellous!"*

Some Problems with this Classification (2)

- In the face of the convergences observed between constative and performative utterances, Austin moved to a more general comprehensive scheme



The Doctrine of Illocutionary Acts

Speech-Acts: A Threefold Structure

- Austin distinguishes between three sorts of things which one does in the course of producing an utterance
 - **Locutionary Act:** an act of saying something, and it includes "the utterance of certain noises (*phonetic act*), the utterance of certain words in a certain construction (*phatic act*), and the utterance of them with a certain "meaning", i.e. with a certain sense and reference (*rhetic act*)"(Austin 1962:94).

Speech-Acts: A Threefold Structure (2)

- **Illocutionary Act:** an act performed in saying something, as opposed to the locutionary act. It has to do with the way in which a certain utterance should be interpreted.
 - An illocutionary act is always internal to a locutionary act, in that once a locutionary act has been performed, so has the illocutionary act. The illocutionary act aimed at by producing an utterance is called its **illocutionary force**, and is to be understood as the status of an act as a promise, a warning, a suggestion etc.
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Speech-Acts: A Threefold Structure (3)

- **Perlocutionary Act:** an act performed by saying something. It is related to the effects in terms of feelings, or actions which a certain utterance is supposed to produce on the addressee (i.e. fear, joy, persuasion, surprise etc.)
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Speech-Acts: A Threefold Structure (4)

- A speaker who says "*Open the door!*" can be said to have performed
 - a locutionary act, relating to the production of the sounds making up the words, and with a certain meaning;
 - an illocutionary act, which can be made explicit as in "*I hereby order you to open the door*",
 - a perlocutionary act, consisting in causing someone to open the door
 - He also introduced the notion of *uptake*, that is the addressee's recognition of the speaker's illocutionary force
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Austin's Classification of Speech Acts

- Austin classifies speech acts through the presence of prototypical performative verbs
 - **Verdictives**: acts expressing a verdict, or a judgement, as to value or fact, i.e. *assess, value, estimate, hold, calculate, rate, describe* as etc.
 - **Exercitives**: speaker exerts his power to obtain a certain action, i.e. *offer, advise, press, enact, resign, pardon, recommend, appoint, dismiss, warn, order* etc.
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Austin's Classification of Speech Acts

(2)

- **Commissives:** acts which commit the speaker to do something, i.e. *promise, swear, undertake, consent, guarantee* etc.
- **Behabitives:** acts in which the speaker reacts to somebody's behaviour, or expresses one's attitude to someone else's past or imminent conduct, i.e. *criticize, resent, thank, congratulate* etc.
- **Expositives:** acts which clarify the way our speech fits into the course of an argument or a conversation, i.e. *remark, correct, mention* etc.

Criticism to Austin's Classification

- Austin posits his classification of speech acts on the analysis of verbs "using the simple test of the first person singular present indicative active form, (i.e. *I hereby promise that I'll do it*), and going through the dictionary, but "he has no consistent principle of classification" (Searle)
- He does not provide a criterion to discriminate between illocutionary verbs and the set of all verbs
 - Illocutionary verbs describe the acts (*threaten*)
 - Performative verbs obtain the act, they reach an effect (*warn*)