

jl austin how to do things with words

jl austin how to do things with words delves into the profound philosophical insights offered by J.L. Austin's groundbreaking work. This article aims to demystify Austin's theories on performative utterances and illocutionary acts, providing a comprehensive understanding of how language functions not merely to describe but to do things. We will explore the evolution of Austin's thought, from his initial focus on performatives to his more nuanced concept of illocutionary forces, and examine the practical implications of these ideas for communication, linguistics, and philosophy. Understanding how to do things with words is fundamental to grasping the performative nature of speech and the complex relationship between language and action.

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Introduction to J.L. Austin's Philosophy of Language

J.L. Austin, a towering figure in 20th-century philosophy of language, fundamentally reshaped how we understand the nature and function of speech. His seminal work, "How to Do Things with Words," introduced a revolutionary perspective, challenging the prevailing view that language's primary role was descriptive. Austin argued passionately that utterances are not merely passive reflections of reality but active interventions that bring about changes in the world. This paradigm shift laid the groundwork for speech act theory, a field that continues to influence linguistics, philosophy, and communication studies. By meticulously dissecting the way we use language, Austin revealed the inherent performative nature of our utterances, suggesting that speaking is a form of acting.

The Birth of Performative Utterances

Austin's initial investigations, as detailed in "How to Do Things with Words," were spurred by an observation about certain types of linguistic expressions that seemed to do more than just state facts. He identified utterances that, when uttered in appropriate circumstances, performed an action. These he termed "performative utterances." This was a radical departure from the traditional focus on constative statements, which are primarily concerned with truth and falsity. Performatives, on the other hand, are assessed in terms of their felicity or infelicity – whether they succeed or fail in performing the intended act.

Understanding Performative vs. Constative Utterances

The core distinction Austin drew was between performative and constative utterances. Constative utterances are statements that describe a state of affairs and can be judged as true or false. For example, "The sky is blue" is a constative utterance. Performative utterances, however, do not describe but enact. When someone says, "I promise to be there," they are not describing a promise; they are actually making a promise. Similarly, "I christen this ship the 'Queen Mary'" is not a description of a christening but the act of christening itself. This distinction was crucial for Austin's early work, as it highlighted a dimension of language use that had been largely overlooked.

The Five Wrongs: When Performatives Fail

Austin recognized that performative utterances, like any action, could go wrong. He categorized these potential failures into what he called "the five wrongs." These are circumstances under which a performative utterance may be rendered unhappy or void. Understanding these categories is key to grasping how performatives function and what conditions are necessary for them to be successful.

- **A Felicific Utterance:** A performative utterance that is successfully performed.
- **A Mis-execution of Procedure:** The procedure or ceremony called for by the utterance is not executed correctly. For example, if a judge pronounces a sentence without following proper legal procedures.
- **A Mis-Application of Procedure:** The procedure is executed correctly, but it is applied to the wrong circumstances or people. For instance, saying "I apologize" to someone who is not offended.
- **Lack of Involvement:** The participants in the act are not properly involved or do not have the necessary authority. For example, a person not authorized to marry saying "I now pronounce you husband and wife."
- **Absence of Intention or Feeling:** The speaker does not genuinely intend to do what the utterance says or does not possess the required feelings. For example, saying "I accept your apology" without actually accepting it.
- **Failure to Follow Through:** The speaker does not follow through with the commitment made by the performative utterance. For instance, saying "I promise to help" but then failing to offer assistance.

The Evolution to Illocutionary Acts

As Austin delved deeper into the nature of performatives, he realized that his initial framework of performative versus constative was too simplistic. He observed that the act of saying something often involves multiple layers of meaning and intention. This led him to refine his theory, moving beyond the focus on performatives to the broader concept of "illocutionary acts." The illocutionary act is the intended meaning or force of an utterance.

The Three Faces of the Speech Act

Austin proposed that every utterance can be analyzed as having three distinct but related acts: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. This tripartite distinction is fundamental to understanding how language is used to achieve effects beyond mere description.

Locutionary Act

The locutionary act is the act of saying something, the performance of an utterance with a certain meaning. It is the literal meaning of the words spoken, including their grammatical structure and phonetic properties. For example, the locutionary act of saying "It's cold in here" involves uttering the sounds, forming the words, and conveying the literal meaning that the temperature is low.

Illocutionary Act

The illocutionary act is the communicative intention behind the utterance, the speaker's purpose in saying something. This is the core of Austin's later work and what he truly meant by "doing things with words." The illocutionary act is the act performed in saying something. For instance, the illocutionary act of saying "It's cold in here" might be to request that someone close a window, to complain about the temperature, or to prompt someone to turn up the heating. It is the force or function of the utterance.

Perlocutionary Act

The perlocutionary act is the effect that the utterance has on the listener or the world. It is the consequence of saying something, the achievement of a certain outcome through the utterance. Following the example, the perlocutionary act of saying "It's cold in here" could be that the listener closes the window, turns up the heating, or perhaps feels annoyed by the complaint. The perlocutionary effect is often unintended and goes beyond the speaker's direct communicative goal.

The Significance of Illocutionary Force

The concept of "illocutionary force" is central to Austin's theory. It refers to the specific type of action

performed by an utterance, such as promising, warning, ordering, apologizing, or questioning. The illocutionary force is what distinguishes one speech act from another, even if they use the same words. For example, the utterance "The door is open" could have different illocutionary forces: it could be a statement of fact, a warning, or a request to close the door. Identifying the illocutionary force is crucial for understanding the speaker's intent and the overall meaning of the communication.

How to Do Things with Words: Practical Applications

Austin's work has profound implications for understanding human interaction and communication. By recognizing that language is performative, we can become more aware of the power of our words and the impact they have. In interpersonal relationships, understanding illocutionary acts helps in interpreting intentions and avoiding misunderstandings. In legal and political contexts, the precise wording of agreements, laws, and declarations is critical precisely because of their performative nature.

The ability to identify and distinguish between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts allows for a more sophisticated analysis of conversations and written texts. It helps us understand not just what is said, but why it is said and what effects it aims to achieve. This analytical framework is invaluable in fields ranging from rhetoric and persuasion to pragmatics and discourse analysis. It emphasizes that communication is an active process, where participants are constantly performing actions through their speech.

Beyond Austin: Contemporary Relevance

Although J.L. Austin's "How to Do Things with Words" was published in the mid-20th century, its insights remain remarkably relevant today. Speech act theory, as developed from Austin's work, is a foundational concept in pragmatics, the study of language use in context. It continues to inform research into politeness, indirect speech acts, and the nuanced ways in which meaning is conveyed beyond the literal. In the digital age, understanding how words perform actions is even more critical, with social media posts, emails, and online reviews all carrying performative weight and the potential to influence opinion and action.

FAQ

Q: What is the central thesis of J.L. Austin's "How to Do Things with Words"?

A: The central thesis of J.L. Austin's "How to Do Things with Words" is that utterances are not merely descriptive but are often performative acts that do things in the world, such as promising, ordering, or warning.

Q: How did Austin differentiate between performative and constative utterances?

A: Austin differentiated between performative utterances, which perform an action when spoken (e.g., "I promise"), and constative utterances, which describe a state of affairs and can be true or false (e.g., "The cat is on the mat").

Q: What are the "five wrongs" Austin identified in relation to performative utterances?

A: The "five wrongs" are categories of failure for performative utterances: mis-execution of procedure, mis-application of procedure, lack of involvement, absence of intention or feeling, and failure to follow through.

Q: What are the three acts that constitute a speech act according to Austin?

A: The three acts are the locutionary act (the act of saying something), the illocutionary act (the communicative intention or force), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the listener).

Q: What is the importance of the illocutionary act in Austin's theory?

A: The illocutionary act is the most important aspect of Austin's theory as it represents the speaker's communicative purpose and the actual action being performed by the utterance, distinguishing it from its literal meaning or its eventual impact.

Q: Can you provide an example of an illocutionary act?

A: An example of an illocutionary act is when someone says "It's raining." The locutionary act is stating the fact of rain, but the illocutionary act could be to warn someone to take an umbrella, to suggest staying inside, or simply to inform.

Q: How does Austin's work influence modern linguistics and philosophy?

A: Austin's work laid the foundation for speech act theory, which is a core component of pragmatics and continues to influence research in semantics, discourse analysis, philosophy of language, and communication studies.

Q: Are performative utterances always explicit?

A: No, performative utterances can be explicit, using performative verbs like "promise" or "order," or they can be implicit, where the performative force is understood from context and convention.

Q: What is the relationship between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect?

A: The illocutionary force is the speaker's intended action through an utterance, while the perlocutionary effect is the actual consequence or impact that utterance has on the listener, which may or may not align with the intended force.

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