

ON AUSTIN'S THEORY OF SPEECH-ACTS

IN *How to do things with Words* Austin worked his way from the distinction between constative and performative utterances towards a general theory of what we do when we say something, a general theory of "speech-acts", as he called it. The upshot of *Words* is that the deceptively simple constative—performative distinction should be abandoned in favour of a more general distinction between locutionary and illocutionary speech-acts. This new distinction has now been made the theme of a doctoral dissertation (Mats Furberg, *Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts. A main theme in J. L. Austin's Philosophy*, Gothenburg Studies in Philosophy I, Göteborg 1963). Mr. Furberg's book is of considerable interest as the first large-scale examination of Austin's philosophy, but it seems to me that Furberg is mistaken (i) when he identifies Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts with Hare's distinction between phrastics and neustics; (ii) when he says that Austin identified locutions with statements. This is to mis-represent the nature of both the locutionary and the illocutionary act, as I shall try to show in this note, and makes much of Furberg's commentary and criticism seem rather misguided.

Austin's classification of speech-acts. Saying something involves, according to Austin, uttering certain noises (performing a "phonetic act") as belonging to a certain language with a certain vocabulary and grammar (performing a "phatic act"). If what one says has meaning (sense and reference), he is further performing a "rhetic act", and performing all these acts together amounts to performing a "locutionary act". The utterance should also be taken in a certain way (as a statement, an advice, a promise, an apology, etc.): it has got an "illocutionary force", and uttering it involves performing an "illocutionary act". Further, the speaker tries to produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience—he performs a "perlocutionary act". In the latter part of *Words*, Austin explores these distinctions (which undoubtedly contain "a strong element of the undeniable") in some detail.

It is, as Austin pointed out himself, perhaps a bit confusing to talk of different "acts" involved in one and the same speech-act: there is just one act looked at from so many points of view. Similarly, there is just one utterance made in the act which can be described from various points of view. Thus a *locution* is an utterance looked at from the locutionary point of view, an *illocution* is an utterance where the illocutionary force is also taken into account, and a *rheme* is an utterance regarded from the meaning point of view. (It is easy to refine upon Austin's classification. An utterance can e.g. be regarded as a string of phonemes, and uttering such a string could then be said to constitute "a phonemic act"; and so on.)

The locutionary act. Furberg says that "'phrastic' and 'locutionary act' are two names of the same phenomenon: the meaning-cum-reference which different kinds of speech-acts—such as stating,

ordering, and appealing—may have in common ” (201). But (i) a phrastic is no act at all ; it is the meaning and reference common to *e.g.* ‘ Shut the door ’ and ‘ You are going to shut the door ’. (ii) Neither is the phrastic identical with the result of the locutionary act, the locution. ‘ Shut the door ! ’ and ‘ You are going to shut the door ’ have the same phrastic, but they are not the same locution, since they differ both on the phonetic and phatic levels : they contain different sounds, words, and constructions. Locutions are “ the full units of speech ” where both sounds, words, grammar and meaning are taken into account (*Words*, 94). (iii) Nor are the two utterances rhetically identical : if they have the same sense and reference (which is perhaps questionable), then they are rhetically equivalent but not rhetically identical (since they contain different words and constructions) ; see *Words*, 97-98.

Locutions and statements. Furberg also proposes another interpretation of the locutionary act : “ *Words* 144 f. puts it beyond doubt that he/ Austin/ identified a statement with a locutionary act ” (200). But Austin makes it quite clear that “ stating is only one among very numerous speech acts of the illocutionary class ” (*Words*, 146 ; *cf.* *Words*, 133). To say that Austin identified statements with locutionary acts is to miss the whole trend of *Words*. That book is a passage from the constative—performative distinction to the locutionary—illocutionary distinction. In it Austin rejects the simple notion of a constative which can be assessed as true or false irrespective of the illocutionary aspect ; to say that locutions are true or false is simply to revert to Austin’s old position. (How confusing it is not to distinguish clearly between Austin’s old view and the new one in *Words* is demonstrated by Furberg’s discussions of truth and knowledge (chap. 3) and performatives (chap. 4).) Since the identification of statements with locutions will not do, Austin is *not* committed to the view that performatives are true or false in their locutionary aspect (*cf.* Furberg, 200). And of course he did not hold that orders can be made true or false by abstracting from their illocutionary force (*cf.* Furberg, 217). If you abstract from the illocutionary force of ‘ Get out of here ! ’, you are not left with a statement which is true or false but with a locution—words in a certain order, with a certain intonation and meaning. And at least outside philosophy, locutions are not assessed as true and false (*Words*, 144 ff.).

The illocutionary act. Locutions are used in various ways : as statements, advices, apologies, etc. Every locution has some function or other, a certain *force*. Sometimes the illocutionary force is brought out by the non-verbal context, sometimes by special illocutionary devices (preambles like ‘ I state that ’ and ‘ I guess that ’, adverbs like ‘ perhaps ’ and ‘ probably ’, etc.). Austin hinted that a study of illocutionary forces might shed new light on *e.g.* the problems of truth and meaning, but the immediate use he made of the idea was in connection with performatives. His main thesis in

Words was that the locutionary—illocutionary distinction is more general than the constative—performative distinction (*Words*, 147) : performative acts are a special kind of illocutionary acts. According to Mr. Furberg, Austin was mistaken in this contention. The class of illocutionary acts is heterogeneous (Furberg, 216) : an act may be either performatory or force-showing or both, but there is nothing in common to all illocutionary acts (211). Austin concentrates on utterances which are both performatory and force-showing, and so he comes to take “performatoriness and force-showing as two sides of the same act” (211). “/I/t seems as if Austin has arrived at his illocutionary act by conflating a performatory and a force-showing one” (*ibid.*). Again, “there are passages /in *Words*/ suggesting that he thought of the performatory and the illocutionary function as connected “aspects” of the very same type of speech-act, the illocutionary act. If he did, he was mistaken” (188).

It seems to me that this criticism is unjustified. Certainly Austin did not seriously defend the thesis that all illocutionary devices are of a performative nature (although he was confused sometimes on the way ; see *Words*, 103n). But he did maintain that performatory devices are a special kind of illocutionary devices. Now Furberg tries to show that there are performatives which are not force-showing : the class of performatives which Austin called “behabitives”—*e.g.* “I apologize” and “I bid you welcome”—are sometimes used to show how an utterance should be taken, “but it is not their standard function” (Furberg, 214). But surely “I apologize” shows how it should be taken : the utterance ought to be taken as an apology, and the illocutionary vehicle is here the performative construction itself.—Again it seems that Furberg has been misled by his identification of illocutionary devices with neustics. Behabitives do not lend themselves so easily to the phrastic—neustic analysis, he argues ; they have no phrastic ; if there is no phrastic, there is no neustic ; therefore utterances like “I apologize” are not illocutionary (*cf.* 214-215). But (i) if my interpretation of Austin is right, locutions are not the same as phrastics, and illocutionary devices not the same as neustics. An illocutionary device shows how a locution should be taken, but it does not necessarily remove an ambiguity from a locution, as a neustic does ; for there may be only one standard way of taking the locution. And (ii) Furberg’s argument is not convincing even on his view of the locutionary—illocutionary distinction. A performative like “I apologize” can easily be split into a (left-out) phrastic (*e.g.* “My being rude to you yesterday”) and a neustic (*e.g.* “Apologies”) as Furberg seems to realize on p. 203. Such a neustic is a device for freeing an expression from force-ambiguity. If there is any snag here, Mr. Furberg has not succeeded in making it clear to me.

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