

How Performativity Work : What exactly is a performance

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The word 'performative' has had a very confusing history and I need to make clear at the start how I am using it. Austin originally introduced the notion of performatives to contrast them with constatives; and his idea was that performatives were actions, such as making a promise or giving an order; and constatives were sayings, such as making a statement or giving a description. Constatives, but not performatives, could be true or false. But that distinction didn't work, because stating and describing are just as much actions as promising and ordering, and some performatives, such as warnings, can be true or false. Furthermore statements can be made with explicit performative verbs, as in "I hereby state that it is raining." So it looked for a while as if he would have to say that every utterance was a performative, and that would render the notion useless. Another distinction which didn't work is that between explicit and implicit performatives, e.g., the distinction between "I promise to come" (explicit) and "I intend to come" (implicit). This distinction doesn't work because in the sense in which the explicit performatives are performatives the implicit cases aren't performative at all. If I say, "I intend to come," I have literally just made a statement about my intention (Though, of course, in making such a statement, I might also indirectly be making a promise.)

I believe the correct way to situate the notion of performatives within a general theory of speech acts is as follows: some illocutionary acts can be performed by uttering a sentence containing an expression that names the type of speech act, as in for example, "I order you to leave the room." These utterances, and only these, are correctly described as performative utterances. On my usage, the only performatives are what Austin called 'explicit performatives.' Thus, though every utterance is indeed a performance, only a very restricted class are performatives.

If we adopt this usage, it now becomes essential to distinguish, between performative utterances, performative sentences, and performative verbs. As I shall use these expressions a performative sentence is a sentence whose literal utterance in appropriate circumstances constitutes the performance of an illocutionary act named by an expression in that very sentence in virtue of the occurrence of that expression. A performative utterance is an utterance of a performative sentence token, such that the utterance constitutes the performance of the act named by the performative expression in the sentence. A performative verb is simply a verb that can occur as the main verb in performative sentences. When such a verb occurs in such a sentence in a performative

utterance I shall speak of the performative use of the sentence and the verb. An utterance of

(1) Leave the room!

can constitute the performance of making of an order, but it is not performative, whereas an utterance of

(2) I order you to, leave the room.

would normally be performative.

Furthermore not every sentence containing a performative verb in the first person present indicative is a performative sentence.

(3) I promise to come on Wednesday.

is a performative sentence, but

(4) I promise too many things to too many people.

is not a performative sentence. In English most, but not all, performative utterances contain occurrences in the first person present singular indicative of the performative verb. There are also some occurrences in the present continuous, e.g.,

(5) I am asking you to do this for me, Henry, I am asking you to do it for me and Cynthia and the children.

and some performative utterances use verbs in the plural, e.g.,

(6) We pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

Furthermore, some performative sentences are in the passive:

(7) Passengers are hereby advised that all flights to Phoenix have been cancelled.

Sometimes the performative expression is not a verb and it may be in a separate clause or sentence, as in

(8) I'll come to see you next week, and that's a promise.

Not every occurrence of a performative sentence is a performative use. Thus, e.g., (3) could be used to report a habitual practice: "Whenever I see you on Tuesday I always do the same thing: I promise to come and see you on Wednesday."