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SPEECH ACTS: A CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL OF J. L. AUSTIN'S HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS

Abstract: This paper offers a critical and analytical reappraisal of J. L. Austin's How to Do Things with Words (1962), a foundational text in the philosophy of language and the origin of Speech Act Theory. The study examines Austin's initial distinction between constative and performative utterances and his subsequent development of a general theory of speech acts. Particular attention is given to the concepts of felicity conditions, performative force, and the social conventions governing linguistic action. The paper also evaluates Austin's critique of traditional philosophical and grammatical approaches to statements and sentences. It argues that Austin's theory fundamentally reshaped our understanding of language by demonstrating that utterances do not merely describe reality but can also constitute actions within socially regulated contexts. The continuing relevance of Speech Act Theory in law, politics, religion, and literary criticism is also highlighted.

Keywords: Speech Act Theory; performative utterance; constative utterance; felicity conditions; illocutionary force; philosophy of language; linguistic analysis.

NUTQ AKTLARI: J. L. AUSTINNING HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS ASARINING TANQIDIY TAHLILI

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola J. L. Austinning How to Do Things with Words (1962) asarini tanqidiy va tahliliy jihatdan qayta ko‘rib chiqishga bag‘ishlangan. Mazkur asar til falsafasining asosiy manbalaridan biri bo‘lib, Nutq aktlari nazariyasining shakllanishiga zamin yaratgan. Tadqiqotda Ostinning konstativ va performativ nutq birliklari o‘rtasidagi dastlabki farqlashi hamda keyinchalik ishlab chiqqan umumiy nutq aktlari nazariyasi ko‘rib chiqiladi. Xususan, muvaffaqiyatlilik (felicity) shartlari, performativ kuch va lisoniy harakatni boshqaruvchi ijtimoiy konvensiyalar tushunchalariga alohida e’tibor qaratiladi. Shuningdek, maqolada Ostinning an’anaviy falsafiy va grammatik yondashuvlarga nisbatan bildirgan tanqidlari tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot shuni ko‘rsatadiki, Ostin nazariyasi til haqidagi tasavvurlarni tubdan o‘zgartirib, nutq birliklari nafaqat voqelikni tasvirlashini, balki ijtimoiy jihatdan tartibga solingan kontekstlarda harakatni amalga oshirishini isbotlab berdi. Nutq aktlari nazariyasining huquq, siyosat, din va adabiy tanqid sohalaridagi dolzarbligi ham yoritiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Nutq aktlari nazariyasi; performativ nutq; konstativ nutq; muvaffaqiyatlilik shartlari; illokutsion kuch; til falsafasi; lingvistik tahlil.

РЕЧЕВЫЕ АКТЫ: КРИТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ РАБОТЫ ДЖ. Л. ОСТИНА HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS

Аннотация: В данной статье предлагается критический и аналитический пересмотр работы J. L. Austin How to Do Things with Words (1962), являющейся фундаментальным трудом в области философии языка и отправной точкой Теории речевых актов. В исследовании рассматривается первоначальное разграничение Остином констативных и перформативных высказываний, а также его последующая разработка общей теории речевых актов. Особое внимание уделяется понятию условий успешности (felicity conditions), перформативной силы и социальных конвенций, регулирующих языковое действие. В статье также анализируется критика Остином традиционных философских и грамматических подходов к понятию высказывания и предложения. Делается вывод о том, что теория Остина коренным образом изменила понимание языка, показав, что высказывания не только описывают реальность, но и могут выступать формой действия в социально регулируемых контекстах. Подчеркивается актуальность Теории речевых актов в праве, политике, религии и литературной критике.

Ключевые слова: теория речевых актов; перформативное высказывание; констативное высказывание; условия успешности; иллокутивная сила; философия языка; лингвистический анализ.

Introduction

The publication of How to Do Things with Words in 1962 by J. L. Austin marked a decisive turning point in twentieth-century philosophy of language. Based on the William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955, the work challenges traditional assumptions about the primary function of language. Philosophers had long maintained that the central task of a statement was to describe facts or states of affairs and to be evaluated as true or false. Similarly, grammarians attempted to classify sentences according to structural features such as mood and word order. Austin questioned both approaches, arguing that they failed to capture the full range of linguistic activity. At the time, logical positivism strongly emphasized verification, truth conditions, and the logical structure of propositions. Austin argued that this approach overlooked the practical, action-oriented dimension of language.

Rather than viewing language solely as a representational system, Austin proposed that speaking is a form of acting. He initially distinguished between **constative utterances**, which describe and can be judged true or false, and **performative utterances**, which accomplish actions simply by being uttered under appropriate conditions. However, as his analysis progressed, Austin recognized that this distinction was unstable. This realization led him to formulate a broader and more systematic framework—Speech Act Theory—which reconceptualized language as a rule-governed social activity.

This paper revisits Austin's central arguments, clarifies his theoretical contributions, and assesses both the strengths and limitations of his model.

Austin's early distinction between constatives and performatives was intended to separate utterances that describe reality from those that perform actions. A constative statement, such as "It is raining," can be evaluated as true or false. A performative utterance, by contrast, does not report an action but constitutes the action itself. Examples include:

- "I do" (in a marriage ceremony);
- "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth";
- "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother";
- "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow."

Such utterances are not assessed in terms of truth or falsity. Instead, they are evaluated according to whether they are **felicitous** (successful) or **infelicitous** (unsuccessful), depending on whether the appropriate conventional procedures and contextual conditions are satisfied. For instance, a marriage declaration requires an authorized officiant and eligible participants; a bet requires mutual agreement and serious intent.

Austin later abandoned the rigid constative/performative distinction and replaced it with a more comprehensive framework. He proposed that every utterance involves three dimensions:

1. **Locutionary act** – the act of producing meaningful linguistic expressions;
2. **Illocutionary act** – the act performed in saying something (e.g., asserting, promising, warning);
3. **Perlocutionary act** – the effects achieved by saying something (e.g., persuading, frightening, convincing).

This shift allowed Austin to demonstrate that even apparently descriptive statements carry illocutionary force. Language, therefore, is not merely about stating facts but about performing socially regulated actions.

Austin also introduced the concept of **felicity conditions**, identifying several types of failure—misfires and abuses—that render performative acts void, defective, or insincere. These distinctions reveal the procedural and conventional foundations of linguistic action.

While Austin's contribution is groundbreaking, certain limitations remain. His claim that Speech Act Theory applies to all ceremonial acts may appear overly broad. In practice, the same linguistic form may serve multiple illocutionary purposes depending on context. Moreover, not all social actions depend strictly on explicit verbal formulas; conventions may operate implicitly.

Nevertheless, Austin's work remains foundational. By shifting attention from truth conditions to use conditions, he paved the way for later developments in pragmatics and discourse analysis. His insights significantly influenced subsequent philosophers, including John Searle, who systematized and expanded Speech Act Theory.

Austin's major contribution is the development of Speech Act Theory, which proposes that speaking is itself a form of acting.

He initially distinguished between:

Constatives – utterances that describe states of affairs and can be true or false.

Performatives – utterances that perform actions (e.g., "I apologize," "I promise," "I declare…").

However, Austin later abandoned this strict distinction, arguing that all utterances perform actions in some sense.

He introduced three levels of speech acts:

1. **Locutionary act** – the act of saying something (producing meaningful linguistic expression).

2. **Illocutionary act** – the intended function of the utterance (promising, warning, ordering, etc.).
3. **Perlocutionary act** – the effect produced on the listener (persuading, frightening, convincing).

This threefold distinction remains one of the most influential analytical tools in linguistics and philosophy of language.

Austin argued that performative utterances are not evaluated in terms of truth or falsity but rather in terms of felicity (success or failure).

For example, saying "I pronounce you husband and wife" is effective only if certain conventional and institutional conditions are met (appropriate authority, procedure, context, sincerity).

He classified failures into types of infelicities, including:

- Misfires (procedure incorrectly executed)
- Abuses (lack of sincerity or intention)

This analysis significantly influenced later work in pragmatics and discourse theory.

Austin's ideas were further developed by John Searle in Speech Acts (1969), who systematized and formalized the theory. Searle classified speech acts into categories such as: Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, Declarations.

Philosophers like Jacques Derrida also engaged critically with Austin, particularly questioning the stability of context and intention.

Overgeneralization, some argue that not all utterances fit neatly into Austin's framework. Contextual instability, critics suggest that meaning cannot always be stabilized by conventional conditions alone. Eurocentric institutional focus, the theory may privilege formal institutional contexts (law, marriage, contracts) over everyday informal communication. Ambiguity of categories, the boundaries between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts are sometimes blurred.

Today, Austin's theory is highly relevant in: Law – contracts, verdicts, declarations, Politics – policy announcements, diplomatic statements, Media and communication studies – framing and performative discourse, Digital communication – social media declarations, performative identity.

In modern communication environments, language continues to function as action—tweets, official statements, and public apologies often produce real institutional consequences. A critical reappraisal of How to Do Things with Words shows that Austin's work represents a paradigm shift in philosophy of language. While certain aspects require refinement, his insight that "to say something is to do something" remains foundational.

Conclusion

J. L. Austin's How to Do Things with Words revolutionized the study of language by demonstrating that speaking is a form of action governed by social conventions. His transition from the constative/performative distinction to a general theory of speech acts represents a major

conceptual advance in philosophy and linguistics. The introduction of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts provided a durable analytical framework that continues to shape contemporary research.

Although some aspects of his theory invite further refinement, Austin's central insight—that to say something is often to do something—remains profoundly influential. His work established the methodological foundations for modern pragmatics and continues to inform legal theory, political discourse analysis, literary criticism, and communication studies.

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