Performative Verbs and Performative Acts

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Searle (1989) posits a set of adequacy criteria for any account of the meaning and use of performative verbs, such as order or promise. Central among them are the following: (a) performative utterances are performances of the act named by the performative verb; (b) performative utterances are self-guaranteeing; (c) performative utterances achieve (a) and (b) in virtue of their literal meaning. He then argues that the fundamental problem with assertoric accounts of performatives is that they fail (b), and hence (a), because being committed to having an intention does not guarantee having that intention. We propose an assertoric analysis of performatives that does not require an actual intention for the successful performance of the relevant act. It thus delivers on (a-c) without positing an ambiguity between reportative and performative uses, satisfying another one of Searle’s adequacy criteria.

We illustrate our proposal with an analysis of orders. Concretely, the question is: what is the meaning of order so that it can have both a reportative use, as in (1), and a performative use, as in (2), which brings about the fact that there is an order?

(1) A ordered B to sign the report.
(2) [A to B] I order you to sign the report now!

The Reportative Use. An assertion of (1) implies that there was an act of communication from A to B and takes for granted that A presumed to have authority over B. What kind of communicative act is required for (1) to be true? (2) or any of (3a-c) would suffice:

(3) a. Sign the report now!
   b. You must sign the report now!
   c. I want you to sign the report now!

What do (2) and (3a-c) have in common? In the right context, all commit A to a particular kind of preference for B signing the report immediately. If B accepts the utterance, he takes on a commitment to act as though he, as well, preferred signing the report. The authority mentioned above amounts to this acceptance being socially or institutionally mandated. Of course, B has the option to refuse to take on this commitment, in either of two ways: (i) he can deny A’s authority, or (ii) while accepting the authority, he can refuse to abide by it, thereby violating the institutional or social mandate. Crucially, in either case, (1) will still be true, as witnessed by the felicity of:

(4) a. (1), but B refused to do it.
   b. (1), but B questioned his authority.

Effective Preferences. We can see the choices of agents as determined by all kinds of preferential orderings based on their desires, inclinations, personal moral codes, as well as preferential orderings imposed externally, like what the agent is required to do by law, social norms, and so forth. These preference orderings can be inconsistent internally and with one another (e.g. many people desire not to pay their taxes, but law requires them to do so and so they do). In order to use preferential orderings as a guide for action, an agent has to integrate them into a global, consistent preferential ordering, resolving any conflict. We refer to this global ordering as the agent’s effective preferences. An agent can be publicly committed to having such an effective preference. We write PEP(a, p) for “a is publicly committed to effectively prefer p”. 

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**Directive Communicative Acts.** An event $e$ is a Directive Communicative Act from $A$ to $B$ about $p$ ($DCA^d_{AB}(e,p)$) iff

- $e$ is a communicative event from $A$ to $B$ in a context $C$ (commonly, an utterance of $A$ addressed to $B$)
- in $C$, $e$ commits $A$ to effectively prefer $PEP(B,p)$

(5) $\text{order}(a,b,p,t)$

a. denotes: $\{w \mid w \models \exists e : DCA^d_{AB}(e,p) \& \text{OccursAt}(e,t)\}$

b. presupposes: $a$ presumes to have authority over $b$ with respect to $p$ ($= a$ presumes that if there is $e$ such that $DCA^d_{AB}(e,p)$, then $b$ is socially or institutionally obligated to publicly commit himself to effectively preferring $p$)

Our analysis of $\text{order}$ does not make direct reference to $B$’s actual compliance with the order. When accepting the performative, $B$ simply takes on a commitment to comply. Implications about future courses of events come about simply through knowledge about the consequences of violating a commitment. This will vary from context to context and from commitment to commitment, depending on socio-cultural circumstances. In this, we differ from Eckardt (2009), who tries to capture the notion of a commitment indirectly through the consequences that not complying will have for the hearer.

The crucial feature of our analysis, which distinguishes it from the kind of assertoric accounts Searle showed to fail, is that it does not require that the speaker have a preference/intention for an order to happen, but rather that the speaker be publicly committed to having such a preference. Searle’s adequacy criterion (a) is met as follows. When uttering (2), the speaker asserts (hence, commits himself to the truth of the proposition) that there is a communicative act (at the time of the utterance) that commits him to having a preference for $PEP(B, [B \text{ signs the contract}])$. But being committed to the existence of a commitment for $X$ entails being committed to $X$. Thus, in asserting (2), the speaker commits himself to effectively preferring $PEP(B, [B \text{ signs the contract}])$. But that just means that, in asserting (2), the speaker has ordered the hearer to sign the contract. Given that the utterance of (2) serves as a witness for its truth, it also follows that Searle’s criterion (b) is met. Clearly, both (a) and (b) are met in virtue of the literal meaning of $\text{order}$, hence adequacy criterion (c) is met as well.

An utterance can be a directive communicative act even if its conventional meaning does not involve reference to a commitment to effective preferences as long as such a commitment arises as a contextual implication of the utterance. The utterance of the imperative (3a), whatever its conventional meaning, surely commits the speaker to prefer that the hearer take on $[B \text{ signs the contract}]$ as a public effective preference. Hence this utterance verifies the existential claim made by (1). The same goes for (3b), on the assumption that must is ‘performatively used’ (see Schwager (2006) for an assertoric account of the effect of such uses). Finally, (3c) asserts that the speaker has a desire for $[B \text{ signs the contract}]$. Under the right conditions, this will contextually entail that this desire is an effective preference, and, given that it is up to the hearer for this desire to be satisfied, this effective preference amounts to a preference for $PEP(B, [B \text{ signs the contract}])$. Thus, in the right context, (3c) can commit the speaker to have a preference for the hearer to commit himself to a preference for signing the contract, verifying (1).

A consequence of our approach is that we can reconstruct the traditional distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ speech acts as one between those assertions that have a performative effect in any context in which they are felicitous and those assertions that have it only when the context is right. On such a view, it is not surprising that ‘indirect orders’ turn out to share one of the hallmarks of ‘performative utterances’ in Searle’s sense: They cannot be challenged as being false. For example, (3c), when it has the force of an order, cannot
be challenged with That is false!/That’s a lie! any more than (2) can. (3c) clearly has a truth value, and is arguably an assertion (certainly, it is not a declaration, as Searle proposes for explicit performatives). What is special about performative verbs and their performative uses is their lexical semantics, which allows them to be used in self-verifying assertions.

References

