J.L. Austin And the Philosophy of Speech Acts: Language, Meaning, And Action

Habibova Manzila Nuriddinovna

Teacher at the Department of Uzbek Language and Literature, Russian and English Languages, Bukhara State Medical Institute named after Abu Ali ibn Sina, Uzbekistan

Abstract: J.L. Austin played a pivotal role in the linguistic turn in philosophy during the twentieth century, particularly through his influence on both analytic and ordinary language philosophy. Unlike many philosophers who saw the study of language as a philosophical priority, Austin approached it as a matter of common sense and scholarly responsibility. His methods, focused on the systematic study of linguistic expressions, led to significant contributions in areas like lexical semantics, speech act theory, and the philosophy of perception. Austin's distinction between 'constative' and 'performative' utterances, and his development of illocutionary acts, paved the way for future work in speech act theory, influencing philosophers such as Searle. In his later work, Sense and Sensibilia, Austin applied his methods to the philosophy of perception, rejecting the view of direct perception of material objects and contributing to the debate on realism in perception. This paper explores Austin's methods, his theory of illocutionary acts, and his approach to philosophical analysis, highlighting their lasting impact on the philosophy of language and perception.

Introduction: J.L. Austin played a central role in the "linguistic turn" in 20th-century philosophy, especially in England and the United States. For Austin, philosophy begins with a systematic study of words and expressions that reflect deeper conceptual frameworks. Unlike many of his contemporaries in analytic and ordinary language philosophy, who approached language study out of philosophical conviction, Austin considered it a matter of common sense and scholarly responsibility.

The Dual Role of Linguistic Analysis

Such linguistic scrutiny serves two distinct purposes. First, it can contribute to the investigation of language itself, aligning with lexical semantics or theoretical semantics and pragmatics. Second, it can support philosophical inquiry by analyzing problems framed through specific linguistic expressions. Austin's How to Do Things with Words exemplifies the first, offering a framework for categorizing speech acts. His Sense and Sensibilia represents the second, applying linguistic analysis to philosophical theories of perception.

The results of such a systematic scrutiny of linguistic expressions can be used for two utterly different purposes. First, they can be used as part of an investigation the object of which is language itself. Second, they can be used as a stage in a philosophical analysis of certain problems and attempted solutions that are phrased in terms of expressions that include words and phrases of that family. The former use is related to the lexical semantics of English, or any other language, as studied by linguists, or to theoretical semantics or pragmatics, as developed by philosophers and linguists in adjacent areas. The latter use, familiar to students of philosophy, both ancient and modern, belongs to a philosophical tradition, stretching from Socrates and 'Plato to G. E. *Moore, of carrying out conceptual analysis of some kind before proceeding to a discussion of major claims of philosophical interest and significance made for critical or theoretical

purposes. How to Do Things with Words includes numerous examples of the first kind of use, since it develops a theoretical framework for describing and classifying speech acts in general. Sense and Sensibilia is an example of the second kind of use. It is a work in philosophy of perception, which employs an analysis of expressions used in common' "theories of perception", such as 'appear', 'look' and 'seem ', as well as ones used in previous philosophical theories of perception, such as 'sense data'.

METHODOLOGY

Studying Language through Expression Families

Austin's method of linguistic scrutiny of 'families' of expressions in volves has two noteworthy steps. First, a family of expressions is collected by a person or by a group of persons, such as Austin's 'Saturday morning group', described by G. J. Warnock in Berlin et al. (1973). This is done on the grounds of their natural linguistic competence as well as of dictionaries that point out different uses, specify synonyms, and show examples of usage. Such a process of the collection depends on the linguistic intuitions commonly held by whoever participates in it, quanative speaker of a natural language, and on decisions made by writers of dictionaries on grounds of their linguistic intuitions, quanative speakers. A dictionary rests also on some conception of what is a dictionary, but usually, this is not an articulate conception of language or any other object of philosophical discussion, such as perception. Second, participants in the process create 'stories' that involve using an expression that belongs to the delineated family, in a context of utterance that allows sitting but does not allow replacing it by some other expression or expressions of that family. A gain, portrayal of such a 'story' involves just linguistic intuitions for using certain expressions under certain circumstances. Thus the linguistic data collected and created during such a process of linguistic scrutiny is confined to linguistic intitions held by native speakers of a natural language, independently of any given conception of language or a theory in any branch of philosophy.

Toward Speech Act Theory: From Constatives to Performatives

Austin's first step towards his theory of illocutionary forces was to make the distinction between 'constative' and 'performative' utterances. The technical distinction rests on a seemingly simple observation: when I say 'The book is on the desk,' under certain circumstances, I describe a certain part of the situation. A natural question that arises is whether what I said is true or false. However, when I say 'I promise to put the book on the desk,' under some

circumstances I have bound myself to others and staked my reputation. Similarly, when I say 'I know that the book is on the desk,' I give others my word: I give others my authority for saying that the book is on the desk [1, 9]. When the latter utterances are made, the question of whether what I have said is true or false does not arise, though elements of the circumstances of utterance can be true or untrue.

The Limits of the Constative/Performative Distinction

The 'descriptive fallacy, so common in philosophy', is to suppose that utterances are descriptive, disregarding the fact that utterances of expressions such as 'I promise,' etc., under ordinary appropriate circumstances, 'are not describing the action we are doing, but doing it' [1, 103].

Austin identified a recurring philosophical error—the "descriptive fallacy"—which assumes all utterances describe states of affairs. However, performatives like "I promise" are actions, not descriptions.

Although initially compelling, the constative/performative distinction proved difficult to maintain. For example:

• A constative statement ("The light is red") might also serve as a warning.

• A performative ("I claim the light was green") can raise truth-value questions, much like its constative counterpart.

• Both types of utterances share similar felicity conditions—preconditions required for the utterance to succeed.

To resolve these ambiguities, Austin proposed the theory of illocutionary forces, or speech act theory. Each utterance involves multiple layers:

• Phonetic act – producing sounds

• Phatic act – producing words with grammatical structure

• Locutionary act – producing meaningful expressions (sense and reference)

• Illocutionary act – performing an action (e.g., asserting, warning)

• Perlocutionary act – producing effects (e.g., persuading, deterring)

The illocutionary act is central—it represents the speaker's intent and the performative force of the utterance.

As much as the idea of drawing a clear distinction between constative and performative utterances seems plausible and applicable, it is easier said than done. Austin himself became aware of the shortcomings of the distinction as suggested. The

distinction makes sense when certain utterances are compared with each other, but it became apparent that the theoretical move from clear and seemingly illuminating examples to a general and fruitful, fully fledged theory is rather difficult. Each component of the distinction was found to be a source of problems. First, a constative utterance such as 'The light is red,' said by one person to another, when the two approach traffic lights, is descriptive, but at the same time it can function as a warning, which is not descriptive. Second, a performative utterance, such as 'I claim that the light was green,' said under ordinary circumstances, gives rise to the question of whether it was true or false that the light was green. Moreover, it does so to the same extent as the utterance of 'The light was green,' said under the same circumstances. Third, the infelicity conditions (the conditions under which 'something goes wrong and the act... is therefore at least to some extent a failure') [2,14] of utterances of both kinds seem quite similar to each other. Preconditions that have to be obtained for a constative utterance to be felicitous are on par with preconditions that have to be obtained for a performative utterance to be felicitous.

Austin's theory of illocutionary forces solves those problems; the theory of forces is actually a theory of speech acts. Whenever you make an utterance, in an appropriate context, you do something. As a matter of fact, what you do, in a context of utterance, can be described on different, related levels of action. Hence, in a context of utterance, you can perform, at one and the same time, a 'phonetic act' of making noises of certain phonetic qualities, as well as a 'phatic act' of uttering words and expressions of certain grammatical qualities. More interestingly, at the same time, you perform three other acts. First, there is a 'locutionary act' of uttering those words and expressions as having certain semantic qualities, in particular sense and reference. Second, there is an 'illocutionary act' of uttering those words and expressions, having their semantic qualities, including sense and reference, as having a certain force, such as that of asserting, warning, or promising. Third is a 'perlocutionary act' of uttering those words and expressions, having certain semantic qualities and having a certain force, as achieving certain effects.

Illocutionary Acts as the Core of Speech Acts

One of Austin's examples in How to Do Things with Words was:

Locution: He said to me, 'You can't do that.'

Illocution: He protested against my doing it.

Perlocution: He stopped me.

Although Austin specifies five different dimensions of language use, it is just one of them, the illocutionary act, that plays the major role in the theory. To put it in terms of speech acts, the first three dimensions (phonetic, phatic, and locutionary) involve elements of a speech act, while the fifth one (perlocutionary) has to do with effects of the speech act. The illocutionary dimension is that of the force of the speech act itself. Thus, Austin's theory points out the illocutionary act as the unit of language use. Accordingly, 'the total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating' [2, 148]. This deep insight paved the way to a whole research programme of language use that has included Searle's Speech Acts (1969) and many illuminating studies of speech acts in general and of particular ones (for a collection of the major ones, see Kasher 1998). An important shortcoming of that research programme, even in its more advanced stages, is that it has hardly brought philosophical theories of action to bear on philosophical theories of language use, which are first and foremost theories of illocutionary and other acts. Austin further proposed a preliminary classification of utterances into five classes, according to their illocutionary force.

The first, 'verdictives', are typified by 'essentially giving a finding as to something—fact, or value—which is for different reasons hard to be certain about' [2, 151]. Examples are those that involve the first-person singular present indicative active form of 'acquit', 'diagnose', and 'understand'.

The second, 'exercitives', are typified by 'exercising of powers, rights, or influence' [2, 151]. Examples are 'appoint', 'dismiss', and 'name'.

The third, 'commissives', are typified by committing the speaker to doing something, for example 'promise', 'swear', and 'vow'.

The fourth, 'behabitives', 'are a very miscellaneous group, and have to do with attitudes and social behavior' [2, 152]. Austin's examples include 'apologize', 'blame', 'thank', and 'welcome'.

The fifth class is 'expositives', which 'are difficult to define.

They make plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation, how we are using words, or, in general, are expository' [2, 152]. Examples (which Austin classified into twelve sub-classes) include 'postulate', 'quote', 'revise', 'turn next to', and 'withdraw'. Austin's proposed classification was followed by a different one put forward by Searle in 1975. Classifications are useful to the extent to which they serve as a starting point for some explanation or theory. But Austin's and Searle's classifications have not been widely used for explanatory exposition or

theory construction. A notable exception is Vanderveken (1990, 1991), which is an attempt to construct all speech acts from a core of certain speech acts and a few additional distinctions.

Among the five dimensions of speech acts, the illocutionary act is the focal point. It reflects the force behind the utterance, not just its structure or effect. This insight laid the foundation for future research, notably John Searle's Speech Acts (1969) and the broader development of speech act theory.

Austin proposed a five-part classification of illocutionary acts:

1. Verdictives – giving judgments (e.g., "diagnose", "acquit")

2. Exercitives – exercising authority (e.g., "appoint", "dismiss")

3. Commissives – committing the speaker (e.g., "promise", "swear")

4. Behabitives – expressing attitudes (e.g., "apologize", "thank")

5. Expositives – clarifying discourse (e.g., "postulate", "quote")

Searle later offered an alternative classification in 1975. Though not widely used for formal theory construction, Austin's categories inspired later attempts, such as Vanderveken's work (1990, 1991) to build a comprehensive taxonomy of speech acts.

Broader Impacts and Applications

Another fruitful branch of philosophy of language that has emerged from Austin's How to Do Things with Words is that of the study of performative utterances. (For the major contributions to this field, by Urmson, Searle, Bach and Harnish, and Recanati, see Kasher 1998). Austin's other major work, Sense and Sensibilia, is a discussion of a certain theory of perception, put forward by the contemporary philosophers A. J. Ayer, H. H. Price, and G. J. Warnock. According to that theory 'we never directly perceive or sense material objects (or material things), but only sense-data' [3, 22]. Austin's analysis of the meaning of 'perceive' and related terms led him to the conclusion that 'there is no one kind of thing that we "perceive" but many different kinds' [3, 4]. The full nature and exact number of those kinds is a matter of scientific research rather than of philosophical investigation. In a highly illuminating application of his methods of philosophical discussion, Austin rejected the claim 'that we ought to be "realists", to embrace, that is, the doctrine that we do perceive material things' [3, 3]. Chapter VII of the book is devoted to an elucidation of the meaning of 'real', as contrasted with 'makeshift', 'fake', 'artificial', 'dummy', and other expressions. In understanding Austin's

methods and results, it is important to notice that he did not consider a theory of perception to be a theory of perception-expressions in a language. As Sense and Sensibilia shows, Austin was just as interested in the facts of language as in the facts of perception, and the same holds when he discusses any other topic of philosophical investigation.

CONCLUSION

J.L. Austin's contributions to the philosophy of language have had a profound and lasting impact on the field. His innovative approach to the study of linguistic expressions, particularly through his focus on ordinary language and its underlying conceptual frameworks, revolutionized the way philosophers and linguists engage with language. Austin's work on speech acts, including his distinction between constative and performative utterances, laid the groundwork for the development of speech act theory, influencing subsequent thinkers such as John Searle. Moreover, his analysis of illocutionary acts, which highlights the force behind utterances rather than their mere descriptive function, has become central to understanding language use in both philosophical and practical contexts.

Austin's methods, which blend linguistic intuition with philosophical analysis, provided valuable insights into a wide range of topics, from the semantics of ordinary language to the nature of perception. His rejection of direct realism in Sense and Sensibilia and his insistence on the importance of examining language in its everyday use shifted philosophical debates in significant ways, particularly within the philosophy of perception and realism. Ultimately, Austin's legacy remains crucial to modern philosophy, particularly in the areas of language, meaning, and action. His work continues to inspire scholars across disciplines, offering a unique perspective on how language functions both as a tool for communication and as a fundamental part of human experience. The influence of his theories on speech acts and the careful examination of linguistic expressions ensures that Austin's contributions will remain a cornerstone in the study of language and philosophy for years to come.

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