

WHY TO DISTINGUISH PERFORMATIVE AND CONSTATIVE UTTERANCES ?

RISHIKANT PANDEY

Austin is one of those philosophers who firstly propounded his doctrine about utterances and later, rejected it. In his earlier formulation, he distinguished two sorts of utterances—the *constative* and the *performative*. He, however, felt some mistakes in this typology. So, he just rejected it and eventually, expounded a new theory of utterances, which is known as *speech act theory*. The speech act theory is considered as *core enterprise* or a *major contribution* of Austin, in the field of analytical philosophy.

Historically, Aristotle was the first philosopher, who distinguished between a sentence and a statement. Whatever we utter, are sentences, but not statements. Statements are only those sentences, which refer to some fact or state of affairs and which are always true or false. Thus, there are a number of utterances like Questions, Commands, Wishes, Exclamations and so forth, which neither indicate some facts nor are true or false. So, these are not statements. From the philosophical point of view, merely statements are considerable. *A statement, which does not indicate some fact or state of affairs is non-sensical or meaningless*, this position was given by *Logical Positivists*.

Later on, *Ordinary Language Philosophers* modified this position and asserted that language has not only one job to describe some fact. For example, L. Wittgenstein in his celebrated book *Philosophical Investigations*, argued for enormous variety of jobs of language, viz., language is not simply assertion of facts, portraying reality but also it is used for asking, thinking, cursing, greeting, praying, commanding, guessing, joking and the like.

Similarly, J.L. Austin also claimed that there are various uses of language.

A number of utterances are always used to do something rather than or more than used to say something. Let us consider some examples of Austin: *I do* (*sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife*), *I give and bequeath my watch to my brother*, *I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow*, and the like. None of these utterances are true or false, according to Austin. Of course, these are such types of utterances, which are always, *perform some acts or stimulated to perform some acts*. Therefore, he held that it will be wrong to say that language merely describes some fact and called it *Descriptive Fallacy*. As Austin wrote, "We very often also use utterances in ways beyond the scope at least of traditional grammar. It has come to be seen that many specially perplexing words embedded in apparently descriptive statements do not serve to indicate some specially odd additional feature in the reality reported, but to indicate (not to report) the circumstances in which the statement is made or reservations to which it is subject or the way in which it is to be taken and the like. To overlook these possibilities in the way once common is called the *descriptive fallacy*"¹.

In this regard, Austin distinguished utterances into two sorts—*the constative and the performative*. There are some utterances, which must refer to some fact, are constative. Whereas, some utterances are always used to operate or act something, are *performative*. Secondly, *constative* refers to some fact, so it is *true or false*, while *performative* does not refer to some fact, but always stimulate to do something. So, it is not true or false, but *happy or unhappy*. Here, it is important to mention that E.J. Lemmon², recently in his formulation, *On Sentences Verifiable by their Use*, admitted that I promise (such and such), which Austin considered as *performative*, is also verifiable by its use and fulfills all those touchstones, which are inevitable for a proposition or a statement. Lemmon, therefore, advocated I promise (such and such), as a self-verifiable statement, likewise, I am speaking now.

Later, Austin pointed some mistakes, so he discarded this distinction and expounded another theory, which is known as speech act theory. According to this theory, *every speech is an act*, viz., whatever we speak does not only describe something but it also performs some act. Each utterance, therefore, is used in the both senses, the *constative* and the *performative*. For example, when a person

asserts "I do take you as my lawful wedded spouse", then, on the one hand, he accepts someone as his spouse (performs some act), on the other hand, he also describes that I am not already married, if I am married, my wife is not living, sane and the like. Similary, when the Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University, on the occasion of inagurating a seminar, asserts that I inaugurate this seminar, then, indeed, he not only inagurates the seminar but also tells us that he is the chairperson of this seminar.

Later on, a number of philosophers, like Max Black and R.M.Chisholm endeavored to justify the above distinction and claimed that Austin's speech act theory rested upon some *fundamental misunderstandings*. Thus, Max Black, in his article *Austin on performatives*, gave two other definitions of *performative* utterances. The *first*, "An utterance is said to be *performative A*, when used in specified circumstances, if and only if its being so used counts as a case of the speaker's doing something other than, or something more than, saying something true or false. An utterance that is not *performative* is called constative"³. And, the *second*, "An utterance of the form I x [such and such] is said to be *performative B*, when used in a specified circumstances, if and only if its so being is used counts as a case of the speaker's thereby X-ing"⁴. Whereas, *X is variable and used for first person, singular, present, indicative active*. In both the definitions. Black advocated first rather than second, for happy performatives. The difference between the *performative* and the *constative* is doing and saying, merely the first definition fulfills this job, not the second, according to Black. In this regard, Black attempted to show that there are number of utterances, which are in the form of I X such and such, however, which are plainly *constative*. For example, I state that such and such, which is simply saying something rather than doing something. On the other hand, there are a number of utterances, which are not in the form of first person, singular, persent, indicative, active, in spite of this, these are plainly performative. For example, on the Cricket ground, an umpire utters out! then, the word, out! does not recite the citcumstances, indeed, it performs some act. Obviously, out! is performative and not constative. Black, therefore, advocated that merely first definition deserves for performative, viz., any utterances, of which form can be any thing at all, will be performatives, if it is used to do something. "I am therefore inclined to think that some such notion as that of performativeA will

serve the purposes of Austin and all the philosophers who have had high hopes of the notion, and that many if not all of the difficulties that Austin encountered will be overcome by this choice"⁵.

L.W. Forgason, in his article, *In pursuit of performative*, criticized Black's definition and asserted that any utterances, even those, which are constative [true or false], are also perform some act, Likewise, even those utterances, which are performative, are also true or false. Due to this, Austin himself rejected this distinction and emphasized on the *force of the utterances*. For example, *there is a vicious bull in the feild*. On the one hand, this utterance recites the situation, which can be true or false, like constative. On the other hand, it also performs some other acts, for example, firstly, if you have lost your bull, then by saying this that there is a vicious bull in the feild, I inform you. Secondly, suppose, your bull is eating my tomato crop, then by saying this I express my *anger*. *Thirdly*, suppose, you are about to go in the field, then by saying this I *warn* you. *Fourthly*, if you have seen a strange bull in the field, then by saying this I express my *surprise or terror* and the like.

Of course, there are many dimensions of the language; it can be simply an information, anger, surprise, terror and so forth. So, when we categorise it into two sorts, it is not correct. Thus, what is the nature of utterances? It is determined not only by *circumstances* but also by *the force of utterances*, in which an utterance would be used.

Another philosopher R.M. Chisholm also attempted to justify the above distinction like Black. He endeavored to determine some characteristics, which have plainly shown why an utterance would be performative? While emphasizing this, Chisholm, firstly distinguished performatives into two sorts - *performative in a strict sense and performative as in extended sense*. While defining the strict sense, he admitted, "There are acts (e.g. requesting), which have the following characteristic; when the circumstances are right, then to perform the act it is enough to make certain utterance (e.g. *I request...*) containing an expression which the speaker commonly uses to designate such an act.... Let us say, then, of anyone who performs an act in this way, that his utterance is a performative utterance - in a *strict sense* of this term"⁶. The above definition has plainly shown that an utterance

would be performative in the strict sense, if the circumstance is appropriate, and then it has been commonly supported and used to perform some act and which can't be accomplished by some other expressions. For example, *I promise, I request*, etc. When a person utters that I promise then he does not describe about promise, of couses, he does promise and this utterance can't be accomplished by some other ways. Likewise, *I request*, uttered by a person, then he does not say something very simply or does not inform about his request, indeed, he requests, which can't be replaced by some other expression and also *I request* has commonly been used for request, by English speaking man, in the appropirate juncture. Thus, *I promise* and *I request* are performatives in strict sense.

On the other hand, while defining the performative in the *extended sense*, Chisholm wrote, "I suggest that the utterance of an expression (e.g. *I want*) is performative in an extended sense of the term, if it is made in order to accomplish that act in virtue of which the utterance of some other expression (e.g. *request...*) can be performative, in the strict sense defined"⁷. Plainly, an utterance will be performative, in the extended sense. if and only if it is not only used to do something but also to say something and secondly, which has always been accomplished by some other expression. For example, *I want, I know* and the like. *I want* is performative in the entended sense, because on the one hand, it describes my choice or desire or interest, on the other hand, it also orders hearer to do something, and which can be accomplished by some other way like, *I request*. Similarly, *I know*, if a person utters *I know*, then by saying this he not only describes his psychological state, but also he gives guarantee about knowing. Thus, *I know* is related to *I guarantee*, whereas *I want* is related to *I request*.

Thus, there are some differences between Austin and Chisholm's classification. *I know, I want*, Austin accepted it as a performative, while, Chisholm considered it as a performative in the extended sense. According to Austin, *I want* and *I know*, do not describe any fact or state of affairs, while, Chisholm argued that these utterances have been used in both senses, so Austin's doctrine rested upon some mistakes and called it *performative fallacy*.

L.W. Forguson, however, commented upon Chisolm's formulation. According to him, Chisholm's distinction between strict sense and extended sense

could not solve the problem, which prevails in Austin's theory. Chisholm's distinction does not entirely differ from Austin's classification about utterance - *the explicit performative and the implicit performative*. Furthermore, he asserted that there may be some utterances, which Austin advocated as performative while, in view of Chisholm's definition, these are neither performative in the strict sense nor in the extended sense. For example, *I will*, when a person utters, *I will*, in the marriage ceremony, then he does not describe about the marriage, of course, he accepts someone as his lawful wedded spouse. However, in the virtue of Chisholm's definitions, this is not performative in the strict sense. As Ferguson argued, *I will* does not contain a word which is commonly used by the speaker to designate the act of marriage. Marry is marry and not another thing. So, when we express it by some other expression like *I will*, it will not be performative in the strict sense.

On the other hand, *I will* is also not performative in the extended sense, as defined by Chisholm. As Ferguson argued, there is no other word except *I will*, which is commonly used by the speaker to do this job, in the English speaking world. Indeed, *I will* has commonly been used by the speaker, in the marriage ceremony, and which can't accomplish by some other expression (there are no words like, *I marry*), so it would not be performative, even, in the extended sense.

Furthermore, Ferguson claimed that in the virtue of Chisholm's definition, an utterance would be performative in the strict sense, if and only if, it does not accomplish by some other words. However, there are no such types of words, which can't express by some other expressions. Every word can be replaced by some other ways, according to Ferguson. He therefore, discusses some example; which is plainly performative in the strict sense, while it can be accomplished by some other ways. For instance, *I request you to go home*, Ferguson narrated it in the following ways.

"Oh, why don't you go home?"

"Please go home now"

"Don't let me keep you from another engagement"

"It's getting rather late, don't you think?"

"I am afraid, I must get up early tomorrow"

"Where has the time gone? and so on"⁸

Eventually, Forguson asserted that the distinction between the constative and the performative could not survive. Every utterance has two poles, viz., every utterance has not only been used to do something but also to say something. Forguson, therefore, supported Austin's doctrine and also expressed disagreement about Black and Chisholm's classification. As he wrote, "The important point that Austin saw and Chisholm and Black seem to have missed is that there really is no good reason to distinguish between performative and other *sorts* of utterances at all. All utterances have their *performative* role to play in discourse: simple assertions as well as promises and requests"⁹.

Although, Forguson criticized that Chisholm's distinction between the strict sense and the extended sense. However, when we subtly examine Forguson's argument, we can plainly show that his argument rested upon some *logical contradiction*. *I will* is neither performative in the strict sense nor in the extended sense, in virtue of Chisholm's definition, according to Forguson. It is not performative in the strict sense, because marry is marry and not another thing. So, when we express it by *I will*, of course, it would not be performative in the strict sense. Forguson, however, missed an important point, if marry is expressed by some other expression like *I will* indeed, it will be performative in the extended sense -- as claimed by Chisholm. On the other hand, it must be performative in the strict sense, because Forguson himself asserted that there is no any other word (like marry), rather than *I will* for marriage, in English speaking world. Thus, *I will*, can't accomplish by some other expression. We can, therefore, assert that *I will*, would be performative in the both senses -- strict and extended, which Forguson did not consider.

Furthermore, Forguson argued that an utterance has many dimensions like; it can be an order, a warning, an advice, surprise, terror and so forth. However, we may consider some utterances, as plainly constative, not performative. Suppose, Ram and Shyam both have Santro cars and in their discussion, Ram asserts as to Santro's performance is better than other cars. Here, Ram does not advice Shyam to purchase the Santro car. He simply gives an information. The utterance is, therefore, constative and not performative. Likewise, a number of utterances are

used merely in the descriptive sense. For example, Descartes was the father of the modern western philosophy. Atom is the simplest form of matter. There is Tajmahal in Agra. Allahabad fort was constructed by Akbar. Birbal was the chief advisor of Akbar. Lord Buddha was the founder of Buddhism. Delhi is the capital of India. Calcutta was the capital of India before 1911. Prof. A.C.Mukharjee was the former Head of the Department of Philosophy Allahabad University. Samkhya philosophy is one of the oldest philosophies in India. Mount Everest is one of the highest mountains of the world. Ved Vyas was the author of Ramayana. Harvard University is located in U.S.A. Of course, these utterances do not perform acts, except they give some information. So, these are merely constative, not performative.

On the other hand, there may be some utterances, with many dimensions. However, all the dimensions of an utterance are not possible at a time and at a place. *If all the dimensions of an utterance would be possible at a time, and at a place, then the question of indeterminacy of meaning must emerge.* Of course, an utterance is used in various contexts and times and according to context and time, it acquires the meaning. For this, merely context is not adequate. There are several cases, where contexts do not clarify the accurate meaning of utterances. For example, *Saindhava*, the Hindi word *Saindhava* means salt and horse both. When a soldier exclaimed *Saindhava* in the war field, it's meaning would be horse, not salt. While, when a person used the same word on the dining table, it's meaning would be salt, not horse. However, we may consider this problem in some other way. Suppose, I am on the dining table and taking food, in the meantime, someone has come and informed me that enemies are about to attack you. To hearing this, I just exclaimed *Saindhava*, of course it's meaning would be horse, not salt. However, the context could not clarify the actual meaning. This problem compels us to reconsider about the issue as to, *whether the contextual theory is adequate?* In virtue of the above discussion, we may say that *contextual meaning is not enough to know the actual meaning of any word.* There may be some circumstances, where the speaker's intention is much more important than the context. By and large, when a speaker used any word, we just avoid or ignore his intention (which is subjective) and according to context (which is objective) we judge the meaning which may not be correct as appropriate. In spite of this, there may be possible some contexts, where, speakers intention performs major role. Therefore, it is my

conviction that there are two things, which are very important for the clarification of the meaning of an utterance: *the first, contexts or circumstances and the second, speaker's intentions.*

Although, Prof. R.Prasad, in his article, *A functional Analysis of Language*, used context in very board sense, which underlies all these things. As he wrote, "A context of use is a very complex thing, which contains human as well as non-human factors. In brief, it consists of the intentions, attitudes, etc., of the speaker, the intonation of the utterance, its effects (intended, expected, or actual) on the hearer, the psychological state of the hearer, the relation of the speaker to the hearer, the occasion of use, the physical conditions prevailing at the time, etc."¹⁰ However, Prasad's view was not accepted by most of the philosophers. Even, Wittgenstein used this word only in the objective sense, not in the subjective sense. If we subtly consider this problem, we will have to disinguish these things.

In this regard, we can plainly distinguish the differences between the constative and the performative utterances. A speaker does not always use a word for doing something Sometimes a speaker simply wants to inform the hearer, viz., he would like to give some information. For example, a father tells his son that Atal Bihari Bajpayee is the Prime Minister of INDIA. Obviously, this utterance may be stimulation, or an instruction or simply information. The question is, what is the real intention of the speaker? If the father simply gives an information to his son then it will be constative otherwise it will be performative, because it is also possible that father would like to stimulate his son that your character and your works should be like P.M. if we ignore speaker's intentions, we will not be able to judge the actual meaning of this utterance. Thus, the intention of the speaker is critically important in understanding the meaning of utterances. Merely knowledge of context in which an utterance takes place may not be adequate in understanding the meaning assigned by the speaker. The hearer also attempts to make inference regarding intention of the speaker.

In this regard, we may consider Forguson's example; *there is a vicious bull in the field.* Indeed, this utterance can be an information, an order, an anger, or surprise, terror, etc., however, all the possible senses are not appropriate at a time and at a place. It may vary due to variation of time and place and it's meaning not

only rested upon *context* but also on the *speaker's intentions*. Thus, in the virtue of the *primary of the purposes* or *purposes of use*, it can be plainly shown that the distinction between the constative and the performative is justifiable. If we avoid this, it would raise *controversy of unavoidable nature*.

NOTES

- 1 Austin, J.L. (1980): *How to Do Things with Words* J.O.Urmson and M.Sbisa (Ed) p.3
- 2 Lemmon, E.J. (1962): On Sentences Verifiable by their Use *Analysis*, Vol 22, No.4. pp. 86-89
- 3 Black, M (1969): Austin On Performatives, In K.T.Fann (Ed) *Symposium On J.L.Austin* PP. 403-404
- 4 *Ibid*-p.405
- 5 *Ibid*-p.406
- 6 Chisholm,R.M.(1969)" Austin's Philosophical Papers. In K.T.Fann (Ed) *Symposium on J.L.Austin* pp. 109-10
- 7 *Ibid* -p.110
- 8 Forguson,L.W(1969): In Pursuit of Performative.In K.T.Fann (Fd) *Symposium on J.L.Austin* p. 416
- 9 *Ibid* -P. 419
- 10 Prasad,R(1989): *Regularity, Normativity And Rules Of language And Other Essays In Philosophical Analysis*, p.3