

## Questioning Performatives

Dietmar Zaefferer

*Theoretical Linguistics and MCMP*  
*Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich*  
zaefferer@lmu.de

The history of modern Speech Act theory began with a remarkable case of error culture: J.L. Austin abandoned (a 'sea-change' in his own words) his old performative/constative distinction in favor of "a whole group of senses [...] in which to say anything must always be to do something" (Austin 1962:92), prime among them the locutionary and the illocutionary act, while keeping the distinction between primary and explicit performatives.

This paper aims to contribute to a reconceptualization of explicit performatives that seems underway (perhaps a further sea-change; cf. e.g. Eckardt 2012, Condoravdi 2013, Hofmann 2015) in claiming that subsequent discussions, instead of looking for a more fruitful general concept, have stuck too narrowly to the few examples provided by Austin and Searle, disregarding thus Wittgenstein's (1953) warning: "A main cause of philosophical disease – a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking only with one kind of example." (PI §593)

This one-sided diet is reflected in the usual assumptions made in large parts of the literature (cf. e.g. Condoravdi&Lauer 2011: 1; referring to Searle 1989):

- (a) Performative utterances are performances of the act named by the performative verb;
- (b) performative utterances are self-referential and self-verifying;
- (c) performative utterances achieve (a) and (b) in virtue of their literal meaning.

Here two non-trivial assumptions are presupposed:

- (d) Performatives contain a performative verb, and
- (e) performatives have the form of a declarative sentence (else they could not be self-verifying given that sentences of other types lack truth conditions).

This paper argues that a more diversified diet leads to a more comprehensive notion of performatives that may be able to provide solutions for currently open debates. It also outlines a formal account for it. It rejects (a), part of (b) as well as (d) and (e) above, and it accepts (c) only after replacement of (a) and (b) by less restrictive and thus more fruitful assumptions.

I agree with Eckardt (2012:24-26) that the diversity of linguistic expressions that can be used performatively is larger than commonly assumed. I substantiate this by introducing two categories not mentioned there and in almost the complete literature: (i) Performatives without a performative verb, a category of third-person performatives that should be added to the ones Eckardt discusses, and (ii) non-declarative (most prominently interrogative) performatives.

Ad (d). The disregard of performatives without a performative verb seems to be a minor oversight since it is easy to replace 'performative verb' by 'performative predicate,' covering thus both verbal and nominal predicates. However, the structures of these two kinds of performative sentences differ in interesting respects, cf. (1) a. taken from the internet, and (1) b.:

- (1) a. *This is an announcement that parking permits are available in the office.*
- b. *I hereby announce that parking permits are available in the office.*

Whereas (1) a. refers only to the relevant action, (1) b. in addition refers to the speaker; whereas (1) a. assigns its referent a one-place predicate that specifies the illocution type 'announcement' and its content, (1) b. assigns its referents a relation between an agent and the

means she uses to the end of bringing about a token of the illocution type 'announcement' and its content. The synonymy of *hereby* with *by this* is supported by corpus data such as (2):

(2) *By this, we announce that JDF Regular Practice will be conducted tomorrow.*

This means-and-end analysis also suggests that performatives are not strictly self-referential, because the deictic argument of the *by*-relation is the means-argument and the other argument is the end-argument, and assuming that they coincide, i.e. that performatives are autotelic, is not an inviting idea. In order to be self-verifying they don't have to be strictly self-referential.

Ad (b). It is a widely assumed dogma that performatives are self-verifying by definition and not only in fully felicitous cases. Here are some corpus data that undermine this dogma:

(3) *We hereby inform you that our online store requires the use of cookies.*

(4) *We hereby inform you once more that we have a payment instrument issued in your favor awaiting processing.*

(5) *We hereby repeat our protest mailed to you in September 2010, against the scandalous behavior of the Turkish judiciary.*

Whereas (3) is a flawless case of self-verification (with the obvious exception of mentioning and other non-standard uses), (4) suffers from a presupposition failure if there was no earlier information with that content, and (5) is simply false if this is the first time the protest is mailed to the pertinent addressee. Keeping self-verification as a definitional property of performatives means that (1) is a good case, (2) a doubtful one, and (3) not a performative at all. This a possible option, however, it seems to be more attractive to call all three of them performatives, with (3) being completely and (4) and (5) only partially successful.

Down-grading self-verification from a definitional to an intended property of performatives means increasing the definitional weight of (strict or loose) self-referentiality and raises the question of how to distinguish performatives from other self-referential utterances. I propose to assume with Austin (1962) and Goldman (2007) and against Davidson (1989) a fine-grained notion of speech act components: Locutionary and illocutionary acts are different, so if a locutionary act refers to an illocution, there is no strict self-reference, but what Zaefferer (2006) calls holophoricity, a part-to-whole reference. And if a locutionary act refers to something else than an illocution, it cannot be a performative. Here are some non-performatives:

Locutionary act *L* refers to (traces of a) graphic act *G*:

- |        |   |                                |
|--------|---|--------------------------------|
| (6) a. | <i>This is a sequence of black marks.</i>       | <i>L</i> verified by <i>G</i>  |
| b.     | <i>This is a sequence of green marks.</i>       | <i>L</i> falsified by <i>G</i> |
| c.     | <i>This is a sequence of marks you dislike.</i> | <i>L</i> undecided by <i>G</i> |

Ad (d). Assuming that the main purpose of illocutions is to propose a Common Ground update and that declarative, interrogative and imperative clauses are standard means for updates to the Epistemic, Inquisitive and Agentive Common Ground, respectively, it makes sense to look for performatives in the guise of non-declaratives, if self-verification is not required:

(7) a. *Do I hereby ask you a question?*

    b. *Is this a question?*

(8) *Is this a statement?*

(9) *Is this the most unusual question you've ever been asked?*

Since a truthful answer to (7) a.-b. can only be positive and to (8) only negative, they can be called self-veri-priming and self-falsi-priming, i.e. prompting by their very content such an answer. The content of (9) does not suffice to prompt an answer, so it is non-self-priming.

In view of these data I suggest to define performatives in terms of their intended illocution:

An agent *A* performs an explicit performative illocutionary act *I* of type *T* iff  
A performs a locutionary act *L* such that in doing so (a) *A* intends to perform *I* as token of *T*  
(b) *A* primarily refers to *I*, and  
(c) *A* tentatively assigns *I* the type *T*.

This leaves space for self-verifying, self-falsifying and non-self-deciding performatives as well as for their self-veri-priming, self-falsi-priming and non-self-priming variants.

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