

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 36: Austin on Speech Acts

1. J. L. Austin: *How to Do Things with Words* (a series of lectures from the 1950s). Considered *performative* uses of declarative sentences, as opposed to *constative* uses (his terms). Examples, typical uses of the following:
 - a. I promise that I will be there.
 - b. I name this ship the Enterprise.
 - c. I pronounce you husband and wife.
 - d. I give notice that the next meeting will be held on 1 August.
 - e. I sentence the prisoner to 14 years' hard labor.
 - f. I declare the festival open.
 - g. I apologize.
 - h. I vote nay.

(Note that these are of the grammatical form declarative (as opposed to interrogative, imperative).)

2. According to Austin, on these uses a speaker is not describing the world, not saying something that is true or false (as in constative uses). Rather, she is doing something, or getting something done: promising, naming, pronouncing, giving notice, sentencing, declaring, apologizing, voting. Others: admitting, advising, announcing, assuring, authorizing, censuring, committing, complimenting, conceding, confessing, congratulating, defining, denying, granting, hypothesizing, inquiring, insisting, judging, pardoning, pleading, pledging, predicting, proposing, reporting, reprehending, thanking, urging, vowing, warning.
3. Some things we can do without using words (making a cake). Some things we can do using words (promising). Are there things that we cannot do using words? Things that we can only do using words? Things that we can do with and without?
4. Notice that whether or not a sentence is used performatively or constatively seems not to depend on the form of the sentence. The examples in (1) could all be used constatively. And the same acts could be performed with the following sentences instead:
 - a. I will be there.
 - b. This ship is the Enterprise.
 - c. You are now husband and wife.
 - d. The next meeting will be held on 1 August.
 - e. The prisoner will serve 14 years' hard labor.
 - f. The festival is now open.
 - g. I am sorry.
 - h. Nay.

5. How do we tell one use from the other? One suggestion: a use of a sentence is performative iff the sentence can be put in the form of those in (1) (if it's not already); and 'hereby' can then be added.

Question: can use 'hereby' as a test directly?

6. A problem case: 'Today is Monday' → 'I assert that today is Monday' → 'I hereby assert that today is Monday'. So according to this test, ordinary constative uses are also performative.