**Austin's account of locutionary, illocutionary and perloctionary acts**

Austin distinguishes between three kinds of speech acts, i.e., three ways of *doing* things with words:

**I.** **Locutionary act:** “saying something”, by uttering a (semantically) meaningful sentence, i.e., a **locution** (= a full unit of speech).

**II.** **Illocutionary act**: an act that one performs *in* performing a locutionary act.

Whereas a locutionary act has a (semantic) *meaning*, an illocutionary act has a (pragmatic) *force*.

There are two basic and mutually-exclusive types of illocutionary acts:

**A.** **Constative**: an utterance of a sentence that makes a statement (true or false), i.e., that claims to record or impart straightforward information about the facts.

**B.** **Performative**:[[1]](#footnote-1) an utterance of a sentence that is:

1. not a constative (and therefore does not make a [true nor false] statement) and
2. is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which would *not* normally be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something.

Illocutionary acts are *conventional*, i.e., acts done as conforming to conventions (p. 105). That is, there are conventions that determine that to say certain words in certain circumstances *is* to perform a certain action (such as stating that something is the case, making a bet, making a will, marrying someone, christening a ship, etc.).

Since illocutionary acts are conventional in this way, they can be made explicit by being rephrased using (something like) the following formula:

“I hereby (verb) you that/to (proposition) .”

Generally, a locutionary act becomes a perlocutionary act only if “the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*” (p. 8), and “the words must be spoken ‘seriously’ and so as to be taken ‘seriously’” (p. 9).

Although illocutionary acts must be spoken seriously and so as to be taken seriously, they do not describe a private mental act (of “intending”). Rather, for an utterance to be spoken seriously is just for the speaker not to be joking, writing poetry, acting, etc. For Austin, one source of nonsensical philosophical problems is the “descriptive”, or “constative fallacy”, i.e., the implicit assumption that all utterances are constatives, and thus a purported description of a fact.

**III.** **Perlocutionary act**: the production, *by* performing an illocutionary act (and thus also a locutionary act), of certain consequential *effects* on the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons (perhaps with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them).

Unlike illocutionary acts, perlocutionary acts are not (entirely) conventional. That is, the act performed (on the audience or the speaker) is not determined just by circumstances, speaker, and the words uttered.

For example, my performance of the illocutionary act of stating that America is bombing Afghanistan might *make one person elated*, but another *depressed*. Or George Bush’s speech might *convince one person that he was right*, but *convince another person that he is a fool*.

Since perlocutionary acts are not conventional in the way that illocutionary acts are, they cannot generally be made explicit in the way that illocutionary acts can.

For example, I cannot perform the perlocutionary act of saying something that makes someone feel better by saying “I hereby make you feel better by saying that…”

1. Note that although performatives are just one kind of illocutionary act, Austin often wrongly claims that what is actually true of all illocutionary acts is true only of performatives. One example of this confusion is his claim that performatives, but not constatives, can be replaced by the explicit formula “I hereby (verb) you that (proposition).” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)