

J. L. AUSTIN (1911–1960)

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J. L. (John Langshaw) Austin dominated philosophy in Oxford from the end of the Second World War until death ended his tenure as White's Professor of Moral Philosophy in 1960. His work on speech acts has had a significant and lasting impact on the wider philosophical world. Another key aspect of his work, his views about the assessment of utterances as true and false, has been less well received. Recently, however, this aspect has assumed a central role in debates over the role of truth, or truth-conditions, in accounts of linguistic meaning. As will become apparent, Austin provides the bases for objections to accounts that view linguistic meaning as, or as determining, truth-conditions, and so to a major strand of contemporary thought. (See e.g. the chapter on Davidson.)

As a matter of principle, Austin published little.¹ He held that philosophers should go slowly and take care. Or, as Austin might have put it, philosophers should bite off no more than they can chew and then chew thoroughly. Two of his major works—*Sense and Sensibilia* (1962a) and *How to Do Things With Words* (1962b)—are posthumous and were assembled by colleagues from his lectures and notes for lectures. The historical record reflects only a fraction of Austin's work, much of which took place through personal engagements with students and other philosophers. Nevertheless, what we have contains a vein of insight that has not yet been exhausted.

In this chapter, I'll survey Austin's views in three areas: his views of language and philosophy; language and truth; and language and speech acts. The theme linking these views is Austin's rejection of any simple account of the assessment of utterances as true or false. I'll conclude by mentioning critical responses by some figures discussed in this volume. Since the historical record is slight, and space is short, exposition will involve some curve fitting. This is especially risky when it comes to Austin, both because of the specificity of his claims and also his aversion to hasty generalisation.

1. Language and Philosophy

In this section, we'll look at Austin's views of the role of the study of language in philosophy more generally. Austin cared about language for two reasons. First, language use is a central part of human activity, so it's an important topic in its own right. Second, the study of language is an aide—indeed, for many topics, a necessary preliminary—to the pursuit of philosophical topics. Many of Austin's most distinctive reflections on the use of language arise in the course of discussion of other topics.

One route to understanding Austin's approach is provided by reflection on the following comment by Stuart Hampshire:

[Austin] was constitutionally unable to refrain from applying the same standards of truth and accuracy to a philosophical argument, sentence by sentence, as he would have applied to any other serious subject-matter. He could not have

adopted a special tone of voice, or attitude of mind, for philosophical questions. (Hampshire, 1960/1969: 34)

In short, it mattered to Austin that, in attempting to make out positions and arguments, philosophers should meet ordinary standards of truth, accuracy, etc. And ordinary standards of truth, accuracy, etc., for our utterances can be sensitive to delicate nuances of linguistic meaning and use.

Among the risks associated with insensitivity to the nuances, two stand out. First, we are liable to miss distinctions that are made in our ordinary use of language and that are relevant to our concerns and claims. For example, failure to keep track of quite subtle differences in the uses of the expressions ‘illusion’ and ‘delusion’ might lead us to hold (a) that all illusions are delusions and so to infer (b) that all illusions have a property, *F*, in fact possessed by only some illusions, but by all delusions. *F* might be the property: making subjects think that they are presented with a thing of some type when they are not presented with any such thing. That might trick us into saying: this is an illusion (say, a straight stick appears bent); hence it is a delusion (because all illusions are); hence it instances *F* (we don’t see a stick). Since we might at the same time see that it doesn’t instance *F* (we do see a stick), we might fall into characteristically philosophical perplexity. Once we’ve confused ourselves in this way, it might seem that the only solution is to posit special non-material things that we see in such cases— ‘sense data’. (See e.g. 1962a: 8, 20–32.)

Second, failure to exploit fully the resources of ordinary language might make us susceptible to forced choices between unacceptable alternatives. Here Austin warns:

It is worth bearing in mind ... the general rule that we must not expect to find simple labels for complicated cases ... however well-equipped our language, it can never be forearmed against all possible cases that may arise and call for description: fact is richer than diction. (1956a/1979: 195)

Language is likely to be well designed for the ends to which it is ordinarily put. But special, or especially complicated, cases may require special treatment. This is apt to be an especial liability when it comes to the question whether an expression applies, or fails to apply in a particular circumstance—that is, the question whether a sentence involving the expression can be used in that circumstance to state something true or false:

We say, for example, that a certain statement is exaggerated or vague or bold, a description somewhat rough or misleading or not very good, an account rather general or too concise. In cases like these it is pointless to insist on deciding in simple terms whether the statement is ‘true or false’. Is it true or false that Belfast is north of London? That the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg? That Beethoven was a drunkard? That Wellington won the battle of Waterloo? There are various *degrees and dimensions* of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes. (1950/1979: 129–130)

Austin makes two points here. First, when faced with a putative choice of this sort, we should not insist on deciding *in simple terms* whether a statement is true or false (or

whether an expression applies or fails to apply to something). Some cases are complicated, and, in some of those cases, we are capable of meeting some of the complications by saying more: ‘Well, it is true that Belfast is north of London if you understand that claim in the following way....’ Second, the complications can take different forms, and can matter in different ways, on different occasions. Given the prior course of our conversation, and our specific intents and purposes in discussing the issue, it might be manifest that, on that particular occasion, we will *understand* the complications, without a need for their articulation, so that the following is fine as it stands: ‘Yes, it is true that Belfast is north of London.’

It’s important to see that Austin’s view here is based on what he takes to be our *ordinary* ways of assessing utterances, before we adopt the ‘special tone of voice’ philosophers are prone to use in talking of what is *strictly speaking* said by uses of ‘Belfast is north of London’. Perhaps such special ways of talking also have their use, but that will only be apparent once we have a clear view of how we would ordinarily treat such claims.²

Austin’s summarised his view thus:

First, words are our tools, and, as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us. Secondly, words are not (except in their own little corner) facts or things: we need therefore to prise them off the world, to hold them apart from and against it, so that we can realize their inadequacies and arbitrariness, and can re-look at the world without blinkers. Thirdly, and more hopefully, our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method. (1956a/1979: 181–182)

Austin holds, then, that a crucial preliminary to philosophising on a topic—at least where the topic is ‘ordinary and reasonably practical’—would be the detailed study of the language we use to speak on that topic, and of the way that we use it.

Austin met Noam Chomsky on a visit to Harvard in 1955, during which he gave the William James lectures (which were later to become his (1962b)).³ The meeting had a positive impact on both thinkers. Chomsky was immediately sympathetic to central aspects of Austin’s thinking about language use and truth. In particular, he found common cause with the view that ordinary assessment as to truth depends on specific features of the occasions on which we speak—for instance, our intents and purposes in speaking as we do.⁴ Austin had long hoped (or, at least, wished) that the labour of philosophy would become more co-operative and (so) better distributed. But it may be that it was his meeting with Chomsky that induced him to consider whether the study of language that he envisaged might ultimately fall within the purview of science, rather than philosophy:

In the history of human inquiry, philosophy has the place of the initial central sun, seminal and tumultuous: from time to time it throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science, a planet, cool and well regulated, progressing steadily towards a distant final state. This happened long ago with at the birth of mathematics, and again at the birth of physics ... Is it not possible that the next century may see the birth, through the joint labours of philosophers, grammarians, and numerous other students of language, of a true and comprehensive *science of language*? Then we shall have rid ourselves of one more part of philosophy (there will still be plenty left) in the only way we ever can get rid of philosophy, by kicking it upstairs. (1956b/1979: 232)

It's important to see that Austin didn't think that the investigation of language was more than a preliminary to theorising, either in philosophy or science. He wasn't averse to theory construction, even if its outcome was revisionary. His concern was only that such theorising should be properly grounded, and not driven, for example, by any initial failure to keep track of distinctions marked in our ordinary use of language. As Hampshire alleged, Austin sought to use the same 'tone of voice' in doing philosophy that he would have used in discussing any serious subject-matter.

2. *Language and Truth*

I've already mentioned a central component of Austin's view about the relation between language and truth. This is his view that whether an utterance of ours is true or false, or involves the production of something that is true or false, is not decided solely by the linguistic expressions that we use in producing the utterance and the facts we speak about. In this section, we'll see how Austin argued for this view.

Austin viewed language as a sort of abstraction from the entire history of actions that involve speaking.⁵ That is, linguistic expressions and their properties are aspects of repeatable patterns in some of the activities of speakers. In abstracting, we treat bits of language—including both words and the structures through which they combine into sentences—as repeatable types. We thereby allow that the same expressions can be used on a variety of different occasions—in and with respect to different circumstances and for various intents and purposes. On at least some of those occasions, we may use a bit of language to state something that is true or false. And a question then arises as to the role of the repeatable bit of language we use in facilitating our stating truth or falsehood: do the bits of language that we use bear properties that can determine which *statement* we make on an occasion of speaking and (so) determine, in conjunction with the facts, whether or not what we state is true? Austin gives a negative answer to this question, for two reasons. I'll deal with the first here and the second in the next section.

The first reason is that a sentence can be used to make different statements on different occasions. The way those statements depend for their truth or falsehood on the facts can vary with variation in specific features of the occasion, in particular with variation in our intents and purposes. As Austin puts it,

It seems to be fairly generally realized nowadays that, if you just take a bunch of sentences ... impeccably formulated in some language or other, there can be

no question of sorting them out into those that are true and those that are false; for (leaving out of account so-called ‘analytic’ sentences) the question of truth and falsehood does not turn only on what a sentence *is*, nor yet on what it *means*, but on, speaking very broadly, the circumstances in which it is uttered. Sentences *as such* are not either true or false. (1962a: 110–111)

We’ve already come across one ground that Austin offers for this striking claim. The assessment of a type of utterance as true or false can be bound up with the complications involved in particular cases in a way that may be understood, rather than articulated. And what is understood on one occasion may not be understood on another, so that it is right on one occasion, and not the other, to claim simply that an utterance of some type is true. A related ground is presented in the following passage:

... in the case of stating truly or falsely, just as in the case of advising well or badly, the intents and purposes of the utterance and its context are important; what is judged true in a school book may not be so judged in a work of historical research. Consider ... ‘Lord Raglan won the battle of Alma’, remembering that Alma was a soldier’s battle if ever there was one and that Lord Raglan’s orders were never transmitted to some of his subordinates. Did Lord Raglan then win the battle of Alma or did he not? Of course in some contexts, perhaps in a school book, it is perfectly justifiable to say so—it is something of an exaggeration, maybe, and there would be no question of giving Raglan a medal for it ... ‘Lord Raglan won the battle of Alma’ is exaggerated and suitable to some contexts and not to others; it would be pointless to insist on *its* [i.e. the *sentence’s*] truth or falsehood. (1962b: 143–144, my emphasis and interpolation)

It’s important here to separate two questions. First, is the *sentence* ‘Lord Raglan won the battle of Alma’ true? Second, is any particular *statement*, made in using that sentence on a particular occasion, true? In order for the first question to get an affirmative answer, *every* use of the sentence would have to be—or issue in a statement that is—true.⁶ But although the sentence can be used in a schoolbook to make a statement that is true, it might also be used in a work of historical research, or in support of Ragan’s decoration, in making a false statement. Hence, the sentence doesn’t take the same truth-value on *every* occasion: the sentence *per se* is neither true nor false. By contrast, there is no reason to deny that particular statements made on occasion in using the sentence are true: in particular, there is no reason to deny that the statement made by the schoolbook occurrence of the sentence is true. So, the second question can be given an affirmative answer, as long as we are willing to allow that a sentence can be used to make different statements on different occasions.⁷

We should avoid two possible misunderstandings of Austin here. First, his argument shows, at most, that whatever conspires with the facts to determine a particular truth-value varies from occasion to occasion. That does nothing to dislodge the natural view that a sentence can carry its meaning with it from occasion to occasion, and thus possess a literal meaning. However, if we wish to retain that idea, we must give up on the idea that sentence meaning simply conspires with the facts that are being spoken about to determine truth-value: we must reject the idea that sentence meanings determine truth-conditions. In taking this line, we would reject views of meaning according to which they are given by appeal to truth-conditions, as proposed for

example by Donald Davidson (1967/2001; see the chapter on Davidson for further details). Second, the argument does not rule out that sentences can be used to state truths or falsehoods, as might be suggested by one reading of the following passage:

Suppose that we confront 'France is hexagonal' with the facts, in this case, I suppose, with France, is it true or false? Well, if you like, up to a point; of course I can see what you mean by saying that it is true for certain intents and purposes. It is good enough for a top-ranking general, perhaps, but not for a geographer ... How can one answer this question, whether it is true or false that France is hexagonal? It is just rough, and that is the right and final answer to the question of the relation of 'France is hexagonal' to France. It is a rough description; it is not a true or a false one. (1962a: 143)

What Austin characterises in his final denial is the *sentence* 'France is hexagonal', in relation to France. He needn't, and doesn't, deny that on occasion, for particular intents and purposes, one might use it to *state* a truth.

Now suppose that someone uttered 'France is hexagonal' out of the blue, without making manifest any intents and purposes. In that case, there would be nothing to go on, in seeking to establish whether the utterance was true or false, other than the words used, given their meanings. But those words might have been used to make a variety of statements, statements whose truth or falsehood depends on the facts in a variety of ways. Hence, unless we are willing to allow that the utterance is both true and false, we should withhold that mode of assessment: although such an utterance would involve a perfectly *meaningful* sentence, it would fail to be either true or false. Austin thought that our uses of words are always liable to that sort of failure, especially when we are doing philosophy. When used in cases that are out of the ordinary, or in the absence of the background required to sustain the statement of truths or falsehoods, words might literally fail us.

3. *Language and Speech Acts*

In this section, we'll consider the second reason that sentences, given their meanings, do not conspire with the facts to determine truth-values. The second reason is based on the fact that any sentence can be used in performing a variety of linguistic acts. Although in stating, we typically produce statements that are assessable as true or false, in performing other linguistic acts, we need not produce things that are assessable in that way. The second reason depends, then, on two sub-claims: first, that whether a sentence is used on an occasion to make a *statement* is dependent on more than just what it means; second, that some uses of sentences to perform linguistic acts other than the making of statements are not properly assessable as true or false.

Austin presents the second reason in considering whether there is a useful distinction to be drawn between (indicative) sentences that are used to make statements—which Austin labels *constatives*—and sentences that are useable in the performance of some act—which Austin labels *performatives* (or sometimes *performatory*).⁸ Austin's opening list of examples of putative performatives includes: 'I take ... to be my lawfully wedded ...'—as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony; 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*'—as uttered when smashing a bottle against the stern; 'I

give and bequeath my watch to my brother’—as occurring in a will; ‘I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow’ (1962b: 5). About these examples, Austin writes:

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing ... [fn. Still less anything that I have already done or have yet to do.] ... or to state that I am doing it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it. (1962b: 6)

Austin is sometimes read as seeking to defend this view of performatives. However, four features of his presentation suggest that his view is not so straightforward. First, Austin presents the issue as concerning the classification by use of utterances of *types of sentence*, and we have already seen that he is in general sceptical about alleged associations between sentences and their occasional uses. Second, Austin fails here, and elsewhere, to offer serious arguments for his assertion that none of the cited utterances is either true or false. Third, Austin’s assertion is made using the apparently performative form, ‘I assert ... ’—a form that appears, moreover, to falsify the generalisation that performatives lack truth-values. Finally, Austin issues the following warning in a footnote, two pages earlier: ‘Everything said in these sections is provisional, and subject to revision in the light of later sections’ (1962b: 4 fn.1).

Austin goes on to discuss two apparently quite different modes of assessment for utterances of the two apparently different types. Constatives, as already noted, are assessed along the dimension of truth and falsehood. By contrast, performatives are assessed along dimensions of *happiness* and *unhappiness*, or *felicity* and *infelicity*. Taking the example of an utterance of ‘I take ... to be my lawfully wedded ... ’, and simplifying Austin’s discussion, there are two main sorts of unhappiness, or infelicity, to which this performative is liable. First, there are *misfires*:

... if we ... utter the formula incorrectly, or if ... we are not in a position to do the act because we are ... married already, or it is the purser and not the captain who is conducting the ceremony, then the act in question, ... marrying, is not successfully performed at all, ... [it] is not achieved. (1962b: 15–16)

Second, there are *abuses*: in these cases, the act is performed, but insincerely, perhaps for example in instituting a marriage of convenience.

It’s important to see that, even if it were true, in general, that some things done using performatives—e.g. marrying, naming, bequeathing, and betting—are neither true nor false, but rather are subject to assessment as happy or unhappy, it would not follow that truth is out of the picture. That would depend, not only on the basic claim that actions of those types *per se* are not true or false, but also on the claim that particular actions of those types are not also of other types that *are* assessable as true or false. And Austin recognised that actions can be of more than one type:

To say that I believe you ‘is’ on occasion to accept your statement; but it is also to make an assertion, which is not made by the strictly performatory utterance ‘I accept your statement’. (1950/1979: 133)

In the examples that Austin cites, things are done that are not assessable as true or false—marrying, naming, betting, etc. But as Austin points out, those examples might also involve other things being done—e.g. the making of statements—that are, or involve things that are, assessable as true or false. However, even though this undermines Austin’s provisional characterisation of performatives, the possibility that we might sometimes do more than one thing in using a performative puts pressure on the idea that there is a simple connection between sentences and the various things we do in using them.

I’ve suggested that Austin’s view of the putative distinction between performatives and constatives is less straightforward than it might at first seem. And the structure of Austin (1962b) bears out that assessment. Although much of the book seems to be devoted to pursuit of a distinction between performatives and constatives, none of the attempts succeeds. It is possible, but implausible, that in the course of the lectures Austin found that he was unable to draw a distinction that he thought should be drawn. A more plausible interpretation is that Austin’s purpose is not to draw such a distinction. Rather it is to argue—through the failures of various attempts to draw the distinction—that there is no such simple distinction—no sorting of sentences into those apt for performative, and those apt for constative, use.

Austin argues against the distinction by appeal to the fact that the same forms of assessment are applicable to utterances apparently of both sorts:

... unhappiness ... seems to characterize both kinds of utterance, not merely the performative; and ... the requirement of conforming or bearing some relation to the facts, different in different cases, seems to characterize performatives ... (1962b: 91)

Attempts to make a statement are liable both to misfires and abuses. For example, an attempt to make a statement using ‘France is hexagonal’ might misfire if there were no such country as France, or (as discussed above) if no suitable intents and purposes were manifest (1962b: 47–52). And an attempt might be an abuse if the speaker failed to believe that France was hexagonal. Attempts at performative utterance are liable to assessment either in terms of truth or falsehood, or in terms similarly dependent on conformity with the facts: my utterance of ‘I warn you that the bull is about to charge’ may be liable to criticism as *mistaken* rather than unhappy if the bull is not about to charge (1962b: 55). More generally, it is often impossible to decide, just from the words a speaker uses, whether their utterance is susceptible to one or another form of assessment. And there are cases like ‘I state that ...’ which seem to satisfy all formal and lexical requirements for being performative, and yet are used in utterances ‘... which surely are the making of statements, and surely are essentially true or false.’ (1962b: 91)

From the wreckage of the initial distinction, Austin assembles a new model. The new model is founded on distinctions among various kinds of thing speakers do—various *acts* they perform—when they produce an utterance.

The locutionary act: the production of an utterance that can be classified by its phonetic, grammatical, and lexical characteristics, up to sentence meaning (the *phatic act*). It is also the performance of an act that can be classified by its

content (the *rhetic* act)—a feature distinctively of acts of speech. If I promise *that I'll be home for dinner* and then promise *that I'll work late*, my actions are instances of two different locutionary acts: one with the content that I'll be home for dinner, and one with the content that I'll work late (1962b: 94–98).

The illocutionary act: an act classifiable not only by its content—as with the locutionary act—but also by its *force* (stating, warning, promising, etc.). If I *promise* that I'll be home for dinner and later *state* that I'll be home for dinner, my actions are instances of the same locutionary act: both actions involve the content that I'll be home for dinner. However, my actions are instances of different illocutionary acts: one has the force of a promise, while the other has the force of a statement (1962b: 98–101).

The perlocutionary act: an act classifiable by its '... consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons ...'. If I warn that the ice is thin, and so perform one illocutionary act, I may thereby perform a variety of perlocutionary acts: I may *persuade* someone to avoid it, or *encourage* someone to take a risk, and so forth (1962b: 101).

Austin's interest in the types of act so distinguished was '... essentially to fasten on the second, illocutionary act and contrast it with the other two ...' (1962b: 103). What did Austin think was important about the illocutionary act? And what did he think were the dangers inherent in failing to mark it off from the other types?

Austin appears to have thought that the various modes of assessment that he discusses—e.g. true/false, happy/unhappy—properly apply to the *illocutionary* act, rather than the locutionary or the perlocutionary act. One point is that Austin thought that philosophers have had a tendency to view some assessments as to happiness (or felicity) as really applying to perlocutionary acts, so as not bearing on the specifically linguistic things that speakers are up to. Another point—and perhaps the point of primary importance—is that Austin thought that philosophers have had a tendency to view assessments as to truth as really applying to locutionary acts. Moreover, he thought that philosophers had conceived locutionary acts, not as abstractions from illocutionary acts, but rather as things that might be done without any illocutionary purpose, just by virtue of the linguistic expressions employed or their meanings. By contrast, Austin held that locutionary acts are abstracted from instances of illocutionary acts, and that assessment as to truth is directed most fundamentally to the illocutionary act.

For Austin, then, assessment as to truth is of a piece with various forms of assessment as to happiness, etc., and like those forms it is the assessment of an act with respect to its goodness or badness. Thus Austin's discussion of illocutionary acts is bound up with his other discussions of the ways in which assessment of utterances as to truth is dependent upon specific features of the circumstances of utterance. He writes:

The truth or falsity of statements is affected by what they leave out or put in and by their being misleading, and so on. Thus, for example, descriptions, which are said to be true or false or, if you like, are 'statements', are surely liable to these criticisms, since they are selective and uttered for a purpose. *It is essential to realize that 'true' and 'false', like 'free' and 'unfree', do not stand for anything*

simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right and proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions. (1962b: 144–145, emphasis added)

According to Austin, there is more involved in any such assessment than a simple comparison of requirements imposed by linguistic meaning with the facts.

3. Responses to Austin

The reception of Austin's work has been mixed. On the one hand, distinctions between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts have assumed something like canonical status in philosophy and linguistics—though largely detached from the argumentative purposes to which Austin had put them. On the other, Austin's purpose in drawing the distinctions in the way that he did, and his specific views on the role of occasion-specific intents and purposes in shaping the assessment of utterances as to truth, have not won widespread acceptance. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine fully the reasons for this pattern, but I shall briefly examine a partial explanation.

The two major critical responses to Austin's work in the philosophy of language pull in different directions. The first, and most important, is that it is—perhaps by nature of its target—insufficiently systematic. The second is that it aims for more discipline than the phenomena warrant. In part, the first response is bolstered and maintained by fear that there is something to the second.

In an early critical response, W. V. Quine raised two main concerns from the perspective of the systematiser. His first concern was broadly methodological:

I suppose that before Einstein some astronomers pondered [the perturbations of Mercury] with an eager curiosity, hoping that they might be a key to important traits of nature hitherto undetected, while other astronomers saw in them a vexatious anomaly and longed to see how to explain them away in terms of instrumental error. Attitudes towards philosophical problems vary similarly, and Austin's was of the negative kind. (1965/1969: 89)⁹

A related complaint would be that Austin's eye for detail blinded him to systematic patterns that are only accessible through idealisation. Quine's second concern can be seen as a particular application of that complaint:

Tarski's paradigm ... works for evaluations ... as well as for statements of fact ... And it works equally well for performatives. ... 'I bid you good morning' is true of us on a given occasion if and only if, on that occasion, I bid you good morning. (1965/1969: 90)

'Tarski's paradigm' is that every instance of (T) is true, where 'S' is a sentence of English:

(T) 'S' is true if and only if S¹⁰

So, for example, we have the instance in (1):

- (1) 'France is hexagonal' is true if and only if France is hexagonal

Quine's claim was that the paradigm supplies a simple model for the assessment of sentences as to truth. He thought that the simple model avoided the need to take into account the illocutionary forces with which sentences are uttered, or other features of the specific occasion of their utterance.

Well, we've seen that Austin's view of performatives is less clear-cut than Quine suggests. But Austin also provides grounds for a different response. Sentences can be used on different occasions with a variety of intents and purposes. Austin makes it plausible that, because of this, ordinary assessment as to truth of the illocutionary act performed through use of a sentence can vary from occasion to occasion. Consider an occasion, say a school lesson, on which 'France is hexagonal' is used to state something true. Now if we view that assessment as applying to the *sentence*, we will have that the sentence 'France is hexagonal' is true. And then, from (T), we will have that France *is* hexagonal. And now a geographer who denies that France is hexagonal will thereby be found, implausibly, to be in error. Except as an idealisation—which may be useful or important for particular purposes—Austin provides reasons for rejecting instances of (T). Insofar as such idealisation is inappropriate when it comes to accounting for the details of our linguistic activities and abilities, Austin would have rejected such accounts in which (T)—or principles like it in forging close connections between meaning and truth-conditions—play a central role. (See the chapter on Davidson for discussion of one such account.)

Austin's student, Paul Grice, offered a related, and much more developed, response to Austin. (Grice, 1989, from lectures given in 1967.) Grice attempted to mark off a notion of what is said in utterances that is both assessable as to truth and also determined, more or less, by the sentence used in the utterance. Most importantly, he sought to explain apparent variation in assessment as to truth as due, not to variation in what is 'strictly and literally' *said* or *stated*, but rather to variation in what is *implicated* by its being said, what he called the utterance's *implicature*. Roughly, where Austin views speakers' intents and purposes as mediating a transition from the stable linguistic meanings of their words to (e.g.) what they state, Grice views their intents and purposes as mediating a transition from (e.g.) what they state to what they implicate. It has seemed to many philosophers that Grice's account provides a means of protecting views on which meaning is closely associated with truth and truth-conditions from the threat to those views implicit in Austin's account. Grice's work has played a central role in the negative reception of the core of Austin's work, and coming to grips with it is essential to a proper assessment of Austin's views. (See the chapter on Grice for further details and discussion.)

The second, opposing type of critical response is that Austin's account is *too* systematic. Jacques Derrida argued that Austin's account is skewed by his failure to take into account (what Austin refers to as) *non-serious* uses of language—e.g. uses of language in making jokes, on the stage, speaking nonsense. Derrida suggests that, if we take all these uses of language into account, then it will be impossible to separate out the literal meanings of words and sentences from the clouds of associations that they carry. And those clouds will change shape with each new use of

a word (Derrida, 1977/1982). Fear that an account more like Grice's than Austin's is required to preserve theoretical order in the face of the sort of chaos that Derrida depicts may have played a role in the comparative assessment of those accounts. (See the chapter on Derrida for further discussion.)

Derrida's suggestion points to a way in which the order contained in Austin's account may be *imposed* as much as it is discerned. If that is right, then a central question is whether—or rather, for what purposes—we should seek to simplify, or to make more complex, the sketch that Austin provides.

Further reading

Aside from Austin (1961/1979), (1962a), and (1962b), the reminiscences contained in Fann (1969) and Berlin et. al. (1973) are worthwhile. Warnock (1991) is an excellent book length treatment of Austin's work. Hornsby (2006) provides a useful discussion of Austin's and others' work on speech acts and performatives. Charles Travis' (2008) is an important defence of Austin's views about the relations between meaning and truth. There's a recording of Austin's voice at:

<<http://olponline.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/audio-j-l-austins-voice/>>.

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¹ Austin on 'principle': 'How would one respond, say as an examiner, to the offer of a bribe? Hare (if memory serves) said that he would say 'I don't take bribes, on principle.' Austin said: 'Would you, Hare? I think I'd say "No, thanks".' (Warnock, 1973: 40, fn.6.)

² Consider again Austin's reply to Hare (note 1, above). Austin would have viewed claims to the effect that 'Belfast is north of London' *strictly speaking* is always used to state the same thing about the cities' relation, and so to state something true on every use, or something false on every use, as out of the ordinary in the same way that as Hare's suggested reply. That doesn't show that such claims aren't true, but only that they should be seen as special and in need of special motivation.

³ Chomsky 1957 was discussed at Austin's 'Saturday mornings' discussion group in the term before Austin's death. (Warnock, 1963/1969: 15)

⁴ Chomsky, 2000: 132 mentions Austin as an influence on Chomsky, 1957.

⁵ See Austin, 1962b: 1 fn.1, 20, 147, 148.

⁶ The requirement here would have to be made more complicated in order to cope with the different way that truth can vary across contexts due to indexicals (e.g. 'here', 'now) or demonstratives (e.g. 'this'). However, since the sentences we are considering do not (explicitly) involve indexicals or demonstratives, we can ignore that complication for present purposes.

⁷ The bases for an array of such examples can be found in Austin, 1962a: 62–77.

⁸ 1962b. Austin first appeals to something like the distinction in 1946/1979: 97–103, in discussing the function of claims to know.

⁹ Recall Austin's comment that one reason for taking care in our use of language is that we should ensure that our tools are clean.

¹⁰ Note that Tarski thought that analogues of (T) applied only to regimented formal languages and not to natural languages. See Tarski, 1933/1983. So it's not clear that Tarski's view of (T) is in conflict with Austin's.