

LECTURE VI

BECAUSE we suggested that the performative is not altogether so obviously distinct from the constative—the former happy or unhappy, the latter true or false—we were considering how to define the performative more clearly. The first suggestion was a criterion or criteria of grammar or of vocabulary or of both. We pointed out that there was certainly no one absolute criterion of this kind: and that very probably it is not possible to lay down even a list of all possible criteria; moreover, they certainly would not distinguish performatives from constatives, as very commonly the *same* sentence is used on different occasions of utterance in *both* ways, performative and constative. The thing seems hopeless from the start, if we are to leave utterances *as they stand* and seek for a criterion.

But nevertheless the type of performative upon which we drew for our first examples, which has a verb in the first person singular present indicative active, seems to deserve our favour: at least, if issuing the utterance is doing something, the 'I' and the 'active' and the 'present' seem appropriate. Though indeed performatives are not really like the remainder of the verbs in this 'tense' at all; there is an essential *asymmetry* with these verbs. This asymmetry is just the characteristic of a long list of

performative-looking verbs. The suggestion is, then, that we might

- (1) make a list of all verbs with this peculiarity;
- (2) suppose that all performative utterances which are not in fact in this preferred form—beginning 'I x that', 'I x to', or 'I x'—could be 'reduced' to this form and so rendered what we may call *explicit* performatives.

We are now asking: just how easy—even possible—is this going to be? It is fairly easy to make allowances for certain normal enough but different uses of the first person of the present indicative active even with these verbs, which may well be constative or descriptive, that is, the habitual present, the 'historic' (quasi-) present, and the continuous present. But then, as I was hastily mentioning, in conclusion, there are still further difficulties: we mentioned three as typical.

- (1) 'I class' or perhaps 'I hold' seems in a way one, in a way the other. Which is it, or is it both?
- (2) 'I state that' seems to conform to our grammatical or quasi-grammatical requirements: but do we want it in? Our criterion, such as it is, seems in danger of letting in non-performatives.
- (3) Sometimes saying something seems to be characteristically doing something—for example insulting somebody, like reprimanding somebody: yet there is no performative 'I insult you'. Our criterion will not get in all cases of the issuing of an utterance being the

doing of something, because the 'reduction' to an explicit performative does not seem always possible.

Let us pause then to dwell a little more on the expression 'explicit performative', which we have introduced rather surreptitiously. I shall oppose it to 'primary performative' (rather than to inexplicit or implicit performative). We gave as an example:

- (1) primary utterance: 'I shall be there',
- (2) explicit performative: 'I promise that I shall be there', and we said that the latter formula made explicit what action it is that is being performed in issuing the utterance: i.e. 'I shall be there'. If someone says 'I shall be there', we might ask: 'Is that a promise?' We may receive the answer 'Yes', or 'Yes, I promise it' (or 'that ...' or 'to ...'), whereas the answer might have been only: 'No, but I do intend to be' (expressing or announcing an intention), or 'No, but I can foresee that, knowing my weaknesses, I (probably) shall be there'.

Now we must enter two caveats: 'making explicit' is not the same as describing or stating (at least in philosophers' preferred senses of these words) what I am doing. If 'making explicit' conveys this, then *pro tanto* it is a bad term. The situation in the case of actions which are non-linguistic but similar to performative utterances in that they are the performance of a conventional action (here ritual or ceremonial) is rather like this: suppose I am doing obeisance to you; it might not be clear whether I am doing obeisance to you or, say, stooping to observe the flora or to ease my indigestion. Generally speaking,

then, to make clear both *that* it is a conventional ceremonial act, and *which* act it is, the act (for example of doing obeisance) will as a rule include some special further feature, for example raising my hat, tapping my head on the ground, sweeping my other hand to my heart, or even very likely uttering some noise or word, for example 'Salaam'. Now uttering 'Salaam' is no more describing my performance, stating that I am performing an act of obeisance, than is taking off my hat: and by the same token (though we shall come back to this) saying 'I salute you' is no more describing my performance than is saying 'Salaam'. To do or to say these things is to make plain how the action is to be taken or understood, what action it is. And so it is with putting in the expression 'I promise that'. It is not a description, because (1) it could not be false, nor, therefore, true; (2) saying 'I promise that' (if happy, of course) *makes it* a promise, and *makes it* unambiguously a promise. Now we can say that such a performative formula as 'I promise' makes it clear how what is said is to be understood and even conceivably that the formula 'states that' a promise has been made; but we cannot say that such utterances are true or false, nor that they are descriptions or reports.

Secondly, a minor caution: notice that, although we have in this type of utterance a 'that'-clause following a verb, for example 'promise', or 'find', or 'pronounce' (or perhaps such verbs as 'estimate'), we must not allude to this as 'indirect speech'. 'That'-clauses in indirect speech or *oratio obliqua* are of course cases where I report what

someone else or myself elsewhere or elsewhere did say: for example, typically, 'he said that . . .', but also possibly 'he promised that . . .' (or is this a double use of 'that'?), or 'on page 456 I declared that . . .'. If this is a clear notion¹ we see that the 'that' of *oratio obliqua* is not in all ways similar to the 'that' in our explicit performative formulas: here I am not reporting my own speech in the first person singular present indicative active. Incidentally, of course, it is not in the least necessary that an explicit performative verb should be followed by 'that': in important classes of cases it is followed by 'to . . .' or nothing, for example, 'I apologize (for . . .)'; 'I salute you'.

Now, one thing that seems at least a fair guess, even from the elaboration of the linguistic construction, as also from its nature in the explicit performative is this: that historically, from the point of view of the evolution of language, the explicit performative must be a later development than certain more primary utterances, many of which at least are already implicit performatives, which are included in most or many explicit performatives as parts of a whole. For example, 'I will . . .' is earlier than 'I promise that I will . . .'. The plausible view (I do not know exactly how it would be established) would be that in primitive languages it would not yet be clear, it would not yet be possible to distinguish, which of various things that (using later distinctions) we might be doing

¹ My explanation is very obscure, like those of all grammar books on 'that' clauses: compare their even worse explanation of 'what' clauses.

we were in fact doing. For example 'Bull' or 'Thunder' in a primitive language of one-word utterances¹ could be a warning, information, a prediction, &c. It is also a plausible view that explicitly distinguishing the different *forces* that this utterance might have is a later achievement of language, and a considerable one; primitive or primary forms of utterance will preserve the 'ambiguity' or 'equivocation' or 'vagueness' of primitive language in this respect; they will not make explicit the precise force of the utterance. This may have its uses: but sophistication and development of social forms and procedures will necessitate clarification. But note that this clarification is as much a creative act as a discovery or description! It is as much a matter of making clear distinctions as of making already existent distinctions clear.

One thing, however, that it will be most dangerous to do, and that we are very prone to do, is to take it that we somehow *know* that the primary or primitive use of sentences must be, because it ought to be, statemental or constative, in the philosophers' preferred sense of simply uttering something whose sole pretension is to be true or false and which is not liable to criticism in any other dimension. We certainly do not know that this is so, any more, for example, than that all utterances must have first begun as imperatives (as some argue) or as swear-words—and it seems much more likely that the 'pure' statement is a goal, an ideal, towards which the gradual development of science has given the impetus, as it has

¹ As in fact primitive languages probably were, cf. Jespersen.

likewise also towards the goal of precision. Language as such and in its primitive stages is not precise, and it is also not, in our sense, explicit: precision in language makes it clearer what is being said—its *meaning*: explicitness, in our sense, makes clearer the *force* of the utterances, or 'how (in one sense; see below) it is to be taken'.

The explicit performative formula, moreover, is only the last and 'most successful' of numerous speech-devices which have always been used with greater or less success to perform the same function (just as measurement or standardization was the most successful device ever invented for developing *precision* of speech).

Consider for a moment *some* of these other more primitive devices in speech, some of the roles which can (though, of course, not without change or loss, as we shall see) be taken over by the device of the explicit performative.

1. *Mood*

We have already mentioned the exceedingly common device of using the imperative mood. This makes the utterance a 'command' (or an exhortation or permission or concession or what not!) Thus I may say 'shut it' in many contexts:

- 'Shut it, do' resembles 'I order you to shut it'.
- 'Shut it—I should' resembles 'I advise you to shut it'.
- 'Shut it, if you like' resembles 'I permit you to shut it'.
- 'Very well then, shut it' resembles 'I consent to your shutting it'.
- 'Shut it if you dare' resembles 'I dare you to shut it'.

Or again we may use auxiliaries:

'You may shut it' resembles 'I give permission, I consent, to your shutting it'.

'You must shut it' resembles 'I order you, I advise you, to shut it'.

'You ought to shut it' resembles 'I advise you to shut it'.

2. *Tone of voice, cadence, emphasis*

(Similar to this is the sophisticated device of using stage directions; for example, 'threateningly', &c.) Examples of this are:

It's going to charge! (a warning);

It's going to charge? (a question);

It's going to charge! (a protest).

These features of spoken language are not reproducible readily in written language. For example we have tried to convey the tone of voice, cadence and emphasis of a protest by the use of an exclamation mark and a question mark (but this is very jejune). Punctuation, italics, and word order may help, but they are rather crude.

3. *Adverbs and adverbial phrases*

But in written language—and even, to some extent, in spoken language, though there they are not so necessary—we rely on adverbs, adverbial phrases, or turns of

phrase. Thus we can qualify the force of 'I shall' by adding 'probably' or—in an opposite sense—by adding 'without fail'; we can give emphasis (to a reminder or whatever it may be) by writing 'You would do well never to forget that . . .'. Much could be said about the con-nexions here with the phenomena of evincing, intimating, insinuation, innuendo, giving to understand, enabling to infer, conveying, 'expressing' (odious word) all of which are, however, essentially different, though they involve the employment of very often the same or similar verbal devices and circumlocutions. In the latter half of our lectures we shall revert to the important and difficult distinction which needs to be drawn here.

4. *Connecting particles*

At a more sophisticated level, perhaps, comes the use of the special verbal device of the connecting particle; thus we may use the particle 'still' with the force of 'I insist that'; we use 'therefore' with the force of 'I conclude that'; we use 'although' with the force of 'I concede that'. Note also the uses of 'whereas' and 'hereby' and 'moreover'.¹ A very similar purpose is served by the use of titles such as Manifesto, Act, Proclamation, or the sub-heading 'A Novel . . .'.

Moreover, even apart from and turning from what we say and the manner of speaking it, there are other

¹ But some of these examples raise the old question whether 'I concede that' and 'I conclude that' are performatives or not.

essential devices by which the force of the utterance is to some extent got across:

5. *Accompaniments of the utterance*

We may accompany the utterance of the words by gestures (winks, pointings, shruggings, frowns, &c.) or by ceremonial non-verbal actions. These may sometimes serve without the utterance of any words, and their importance is very obvious.

6. *The circumstances of the utterance*

An exceedingly important aid is the circumstances of the utterance. Thus we may say 'coming from *him*, I took it as an order, not as a request'; similarly the context of the words 'I shall die some day', 'I shall leave you my watch', in particular the health of the speaker, make a difference how we shall understand them.

But in a way these resources are over-rich: they lend themselves to equivocation and inadequate discrimination; and moreover, we use them for other purposes, e.g. insinuation. The explicit performative rules out equivocation and keeps the performance fixed, relatively.

The trouble about all these devices has been principally their vagueness of meaning and uncertainty of sure reception, but there is also probably some positive inadequacy in them for dealing with anything like the complexity of the field of actions which we perform with words. An 'imperative' may be an order, a permission, a demand, a request, an entreaty, a suggestion, a recom-

mendation, a warning ('go and you will see'), or may express a condition or concession or a definition ('Let it...'), &c. To hand something over to someone may be, when we say 'Take it', the giving it or lending it or leasing it or entrusting it. To say 'I shall' may be to promise, or to express an intention, or to forecast my future. And so on. No doubt a combination of some or all the devices mentioned above (and very likely there are others) will usually, if not in the end, suffice. Thus when we say 'I shall' we can make it clear that we are forecasting by adding the adverbs 'undoubtedly' or 'probably', that we are expressing an intention by adding the adverbs 'certainly' or 'definitely', or that we are promising by adding the adverbial phrase 'without fail', or saying 'I shall do my best to'.

It should be noted that when performative verbs exist we can use them not only in 'that...' or 'to...' formulas, but also in stage directions ('welcomes'), titles ('warning!'), and parentheses (this is almost as good a test of a performative as our normal forms); and we must not forget the use of special words such as 'Our', &c., which have no normal form.

However, the existence and even the use of explicit performatives does not remove all our troubles.

(1) In philosophy, we can even raise the trouble of the liability of performatives to be mistaken for descriptives or constatives.

(1*a*) Nor, of course, is it merely that the performative does not preserve the often congenial equivocation of

primary utterances; we must also in passing consider cases where it is doubtful whether the expression is an explicit performative or not and cases very similar to performatives but not performatives.

(2) There seem to be clear cases where the very same formula seems sometimes to be an explicit performative and sometimes to be a descriptive, and may even trade on this ambivalence: for example, 'I approve' and 'I agree'. Thus 'I approve' may have the performative force of giving approval or it may have a descriptive meaning: 'I favour this'.

We shall consider two classic sorts of case in which this will arise. They exhibit some of the phenomena incidental to the development of explicit performative formulas.

There are numerous cases in human life where the feeling of a certain 'emotion' (save the word!) or 'wish' or the adoption of an attitude is conventionally considered an appropriate or fitting response or reaction to a certain state of affairs, including the performance by someone of a certain act, cases where such a response is natural (or we should like to think so!) In such cases it is, of course, possible and usual actually to feel the emotion or wish in question; and since our emotions or wishes are not readily detectable by others, it is common to wish to inform others that we have them. Understandably, though for slightly different and perhaps less estimable reasons in different cases, it becomes *de rigueur* to 'express' these feelings if we have them, and further even to

express them when they are felt fitting, regardless of whether we really feel anything at all which we are reporting. Examples of expressions so used are:

I thank	I am grateful	I feel grateful
I apologize	I am sorry	I repent
I criticize	I blame	{ I am shocked by I am revolted by
I censure		
I approve	I approve of	I feel approval
I bid you welcome	I welcome	
I congratulate	I am glad about	

In these lists, the first column contains performative utterances; those in the second are not pure but half descriptive, and in the third are merely reports. There are then here numerous expressions, among them many important ones, which suffer from or profit by a sort of deliberate ambivalence, and this is fought by the constant introduction of deliberately pure performative phrases. Can we suggest any tests for deciding whether 'I approve of' or 'I am sorry' is being used (or even is always used) in the one way or the other?

One test would be whether it makes sense to say 'Does he *really*?' For example, when someone says 'I welcome you' or 'I bid you welcome', we may say 'I wonder if he really did welcome him?' though we could not say in the same way 'I wonder whether he really does bid him welcome?' Another test would be whether one could really be doing it without actually saying anything, for example in the case of being sorry as distinct from apologizing, in

being grateful as distinct from thanking, in blaming as distinct from censuring.¹ Yet a third test would be, at least in some cases, to ask whether we could insert before the supposed performative verb some such adverb as 'deliberately' or such an expression as 'I am willing to': because (possibly) if the utterance is the doing of an action, then it is surely something we ought to be able (on occasion) to do deliberately or to be willing to do. Thus we may say: 'I deliberately bade him welcome', 'I deliberately approved his action', 'I deliberately apologized', and we can say 'I am willing to apologize'. But we cannot say 'I deliberately approved of his action' or 'I am willing to be sorry' (as distinct from 'I am willing to say I am sorry').

A fourth test would be to ask whether what one says could be literally false, as sometimes when I say 'I am sorry', or could only involve insincerity (unhappiness) as sometimes when I say 'I apologize': these phrases blur the distinction between insincerity and falsehood.²

But there is here a certain distinction to be drawn in passing of the exact nature of which I am uncertain: we have related 'I apologize' to 'I am sorry' as above; but now there are also very numerous conventional expressions of feeling, very similar in some ways, which are

¹ There are classic doubts about the possibility of tacit consent; here non-verbal performance occurs in an alternative form of performative act: this casts doubt on this second test!

² There are parallel phenomena to these in other cases: for example a specially confusing one arises over what we may call dictional or expressive performatives.

certainly nothing to do with performatives: for example:

'I have pleasure in calling upon the next speaker.'

'I am sorry to have to say . . .'

'I am gratified to be in a position to announce . . .'

We may call these *polite* phrases, like 'I have the honour to . . .'. It is conventional enough to formulate them in this way: but it is *not* the case that to say you have pleasure in *is* to have pleasure in doing something. Unfortunately. To be a performative utterance, even in these cases connected with feelings and attitudes which I christen 'BEHAVIIVES', is not *merely* to be a conventional expression of feeling or attitude.

Also to be distinguished are cases of *suiting the action to the word*—a special type of case which may generate performatives but which is not in itself a case of the performative utterance. A typical case is: 'I slam the door thus' (he slams the door). But this sort of case leads to 'I salute you' (he salutes); here 'I salute you' may become a substitute for the salute and thus a pure performative utterance. To say 'I salute you' now *is* to salute you. Compare the expression 'I salute the memory . . .'

But there are many transitional stages between *suiting the action to the word* and the pure performative:

'Snap.' To say this is to snap (in appropriate circumstances); but it is not a snap if 'snap' is not said.

¹ [Marginal note in manuscript: 'Further classification needed here: just note it in passing.']

'Check' To say it is to check in appropriate circumstances. But would it not still be a check if 'check' were not said?

'Yadoubé.' Is this suiting the action to the word or is it part of the act of straightening the piece as opposed to moving it?

Perhaps these distinctions are not important: but there are similar transitions in the case of performatives, as for example:

'I quote': he quotes.

'I define': he defines (e.g. x is y).

'I define x as y '.

In these cases the utterance operates like a title: is it a variety of performative? It essentially operates where the action suited to the word is itself a verbal performance.