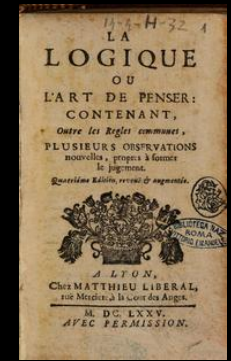# Philosophy of Language
Lecture 7: Speech acts

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1. Expressing judgments
1. The classical view

"After conceiving things by our ideas, we compare those ideas and, finding that some belong together and others do not, we unite and separate them. This is called affirming or denying, and in general judging."

Arnauld and Nicole, *The Port Royal Logic*

Judgments, thus conceived, simultaneously perform two tasks: they relate two ideas (usually those of the subject and the predicate) and they assess their relation, either assenting or dissenting.
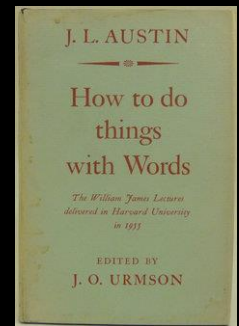
1. Expressing judgments
2. The critique

⊢ 5+7 = 12

Judging that 5+7 = 12 involves first apprehending the thought that 5+7 = 12, and second affirming the truth of this thought. These two mental acts correspond to the two parts of the Fregean symbol ⊢: the horizontal – represents the first, the vertical | the second. Assertion is the outer manifestation of affirmation.

?– 5+7 = 12

When we ask a yes/no question, it involves the same apprehension, but instead of affirmation a different mental act, we can call query. Inquiry is the outer manifestation of query.

2. Expressing judgments
3. Three acts

Uttering 6343 is a prime
Convincing someone that 6343 is a prime
Asserting that 6343 is a prime

The first is a possible means, the second is a possible goal of the third.

One can perform the first act without the third, e.g. when one utters I don't think 6343 is a prime. Performing the second requires more than the third, e.g. because the speaker is not trusted.

The locutionary act is a public presentation of a content by means of an utterance; the perlocutionary act requires that the audience should react to the presentation of the content in a specific way. The illocutionary act is something in between. Its success may require uptake but nothing beyond uptake.

2. Speech acts

1. Illocutionary acts

Some examples:

asserting, betting, commanding, demanding, excusing, forbidding, greeting, hushing, implying, justifying, kidding, leading, marrying, noting, offering, promising, quitting, requesting, suggesting, threatening, urging, verifying, warning, yielding, x-ing, zinging

2. Speech acts

2. Illocutionary acts and language

It is often assumed that one can only preform illocutionary acts by means of using language. This seems false.

A child can ask for a cereal by running down the aisle of the supermarket, stopping in front of the boxes and looking back at his father.

Normally we expect illocutionary acts to involve locutions because context is rarely rich enough to present us with a precise content. But sometimes it does.

2. Speech acts

3. Illocutionary acts and propositional content

It is often assumed that illocutionary acts have propositional content. Depending on your semantics, asking a question might be an immediate counterexample to this claim.

More interesting counterexamples are acts of referring.

Uttering 6343 is a prime
Convincing someone that 6343 is a prime
Asserting that 6343 is a prime

Uttering 6343
Calling attention to 6343
Referring to 6343

2. Speech acts

4. Performatives

"if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is doing something rather than merely saying something"

J. L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances'

I do.	(marrying)
I apologize.	(apologizing)
I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth.	(naming)
I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.	(betting)
I promise to be there tomorrow.	(promising)
Welcome!	(greeting)
Shut the door!	(ordering)
Bull!	(warning)

2. Speech acts

5. Performatives and constatives

I order the halibut.

Case 1: Hannah is in a restaurant and utters this sentence addressing the waiter.
Case 2: Hannah is narrating a video of herself and utters this sentence.

In Case 1, Hannah orders the halibut; in Case 2, she describes her ordering of the halibut. The first speech act is a performative, the second a constative.

Sentences normally used in performative utterances also have constative uses, except when they contain a special adverb or prepositional phrase, such as hereby, herewith, or with these words.

2. Speech acts

5. Performatives and constatives

The line between performatives and constatives is blurry:

I apologize   clear performative
I am sorry   somewhere in the middle
I feel bad about this   clear constative

Feeling bad is implied but not said when one sincerely apologizes. All three forms can be used to make an apology and also to convey that one is feeling bad about what happened.

2. Speech acts
6. Direction of fit

Consider a shopper in a store who is buying the items on his list. He is being followed by a detective who writes the items the shopper puts in his cart on a list.

The two lists might be indistinguishable in appearance but they guide the behavior of their users in different ways. If there is a mismatch between the contents of the list and the content of the shopping cart, the shopper is supposed to change the latter, the detective is supposed to change the former.

The shopper's list has a world-to-word direction of fit, the detective's list has a word-to-world direction of fit.

The distinction lines up with the traditional one between conative and cognitive attitudes.

2. Speech acts
7.   Direction of fit
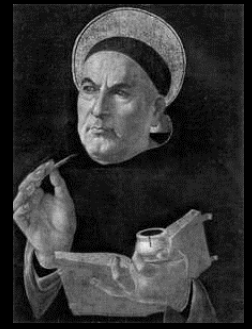
The distinction goes back to Aquinas who distinguished between two kinds of truth:

"When therefore things are the measure and rule of the mind, truth consists in the equation of the mind to the thing, as happens in ourselves. For according as a thing is, or is not, our thoughts or our words about it are true or false. But when the mind is the rule or measure of things, truth consists in the equation of the thing to the mind; just as the work of an artist is said to be true, when it is in accordance with his art."

Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* 1.21.2

So, desires are true or false just as beliefs but the direction of correspondence is reversed.

2. Speech acts

6. Four types of illocutionary act
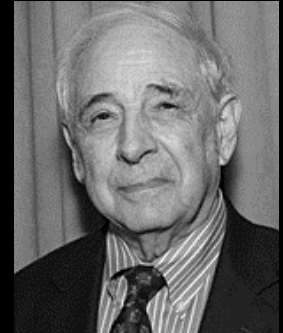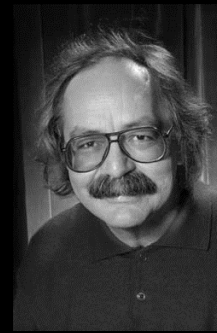
i. **Word-to-world direction of fit**: success of speech act requires that the content of the utterance match a preexisting fact (e.g. This ship is named The Donald.)

ii. **World-to-word direction of fit**: success of speech act requires that a fact be brought about to match the content of the utterance (e.g. Name this ship The Donald!)

iii. **Double direction of fit**: success of speech act requires that a fact be brought about to match the content of the utterance by virtue of the fact that the content is taken to match a fact (e.g. I hereby name the ship The Donald.)

iv. **Empty direction of fit**: success of speech act requires no fit between the content of the utterance and a fact (e.g. Hail to The Donald!).

Constatives belong to i; performatives to iii.

3. Assertion

1. What is special about assertion?

Not all constative speech acts are assertions. Instead of asserting that something is the case one might, for example, suppose, conjecture, or imply that it is.

A supposition lacks the "all things considered" character of assertion—it is made for the sake of some limited purpose.

A conjecture lacks the evidential basis of assertion—it is made on less then conclusive grounds.

An implication lacks the explicitness of assertion—it relies on the addressee's reasoning.

3. Assertion

2. Transmitting knowledge

While it seems clear that knowledge can be transmitted through assertion, how this happens is puzzling.

For the hearer to know that p she must have some reason for her belief. She may not be able to articulate her reason, but if she is she might say something like this: Given that the speaker asserted that so-and-so he presumably knows that so-and-so, and that is good enough for me. But why is the hearer entitled to think that the speaker knows that so-and-so, given that he asserted that so-and-so?

The question is not whether we should all things considered trust speakers. Sometimes we should sometimes we shouldn't – it depends on the details. The question is why there is even a pro tanto obligation to trust.

3. Assertion

3. Moore's paradox

It's raining but I don't know it.

Assertion contrasts with supposition and conjecture in this regard:

Suppose it's raining but I don't know it.

A: What's you best guess about the weather in Dublin?
B: Oh, it's raining. But, of course, I don't know this.

If we understand the source of the peculiar sort of infelicity associated with It's raining but I don't know it we may gain insight into why assertion enables us to transfer knowledge.

3. Assertion

3. What explains Moore's paradox?

Moore thinks that in asserting that it is raining the speaker implies that he knows it is raining.
But … the implication is neither conventional not conversational.

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But … a bald-face lie does not purport to express knowledge.

Williamson thinks that in asserting that it is raining the speaker is subject to a norm to know that it is raining.
But … if there is such a norm it is puzzling why it is routinely violated.

3. Assertion

4. Norms of assertion

It is uncontroversial that assertion is governed by norms: one should answer questions, one should make oneself understood, one should say something relevant, etc. The question is only whether these norms could be used to define what assertion is.

Constitutive norms make a practice what it is. For example, in a chess game, the rook must move on a straight line.

Regulative norms constrain engagement within a practice. For example, in a chess game, players cannot consult with their coaches.

If the knowledge norm is constitutive of assertion, we can explain why Moore sentences are paradoxical and how assertion transmits knowledge.

4. Expressivism

1. Ayer's view

"… if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not saying anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money,' in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks"

A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic,* Chapter 6

If Ayer is correct, right and wrong work very much like true does according to Frege – predicating it of a proposition gives the same proposition back.

(T)   It is true that σ expresses the same proposition as σ
(W)   It is wrong that σ expresses the same proposition as σ
(R)   It is right that σ expresses the same proposition as σ

4. Expressivism

1. Ayer's view

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A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Chapter 6

This yields the following equivalences: John stole a car iff it is wrong that John stole a car iff it is right that John stole a car. Of course, these three sentences have different meanings due to differences in mood – the first is used to make an assertion, the second is used to make the same assertion and express disapproval, and the third is used to make the same assertion and express approval.
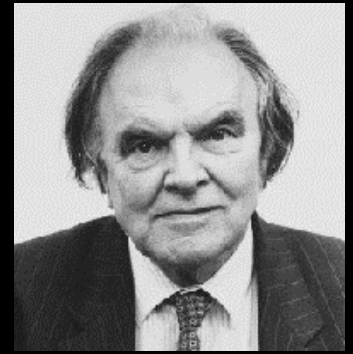
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Stealing money is widespread.
Stealing money is wrong.

When the ethical, aesthetic, or religious term is predicated of something other than a proposition we don't get a truth-evaluable content – we get the content of the subject term back. In uttering such a sentence we express a certain emotion regarding that content.

4. Expressivism

2. Geach's objection

If the first premise is neither true nor false, how can we account for the intuitive validity of this inferences?

Stealing is wrong
If stealing is wrong then so is robbery
So, robbery is wrong

The natural thing to say is that any instance of modus ponens is valid, even if it contains sentences that are neither true nor false. But what counts as an instance of modus ponens?

There are cookies in the drawer
If there are cookies in the drawer then take some!
So, take some!

4. Expressivism

3. Pragmatic expressivism

Pragmatic expressivists accept that ethical sentences are truth-apt but reject that we use them to make assertions. When we utter Stealing money is wrong we express disapproval of stealing but we do not express the belief that stealing is wrong.

But then why is the first sentence clearly anomalous and while the second is not?

Stealing is wrong but I don't know that it is.
Stealing is wrong but I don't disapprove of it.

5. Summary

- The first step in the development of speech-act theory was Frege's recognition that traditional notion of judgment comprises two distinct mental acts.

- The second step was Austin's recognition that we must distinguish between performatives and constatives. The distinction can be elucidated with Anscombe's notion of direction of fit.

- What distinguishes assertion among other constative speech acts is its capacity to transmit knowledge. This can be elucidated through Moore's Paradox.

- Traditional expressivists think ethical sentences are not truth-apt. Pragmatic expressivists deny only that they are used to make assertions.

the end (for now)