A Critique of John L. Austin on Speech Acts Theory

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Abstract
There is no doubt that whatever we observe as reality is a function of the language we speak in relation to the response or reaction it evokes in the attitudes of the listeners. This paper explores the theory of speech acts which is central to the enterprise of Austin's ordinary language philosophy. It attempts a philosophical appraisal of his speech acts theory as a psycholinguistic phenomenon. It utilizes the method of hermeneutics or verisimilitude. It also employs textual analysis of both primary and secondary texts. It is essentially a resource material for a robust understanding of contemporary issues in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, analytic philosophy, etc. In conclusion, a case is made that Austin's idea of speech acts is an important or seminal contribution to the study of language, as a linguistics phenomenon, and its usage in human communication. It recommends a faithful application of Austin's lofty ideals regarding the use of language.

Introduction

The crux or main thrust of this paper is to critically assess the credibility of Austin's speech acts theory as a linguistic school of thought-a current or trend that pervades the 'Ordinary Language' orientation or persuasion in contemporary philosophy. At any rate, philosophy prides itself conceptual analysis. The possession of verbal categories helps us to structure our experiences, express our inner moods and it is our conceptual framework that enables us to divide the world and be able to identify the various elements that make up the world (Nwigwe 2). Language serves as a means by which one can express one's emotions, feelings, or attitude towards one's fellow being or a state of affairs. This paper, therefore, is a philosophical inquiry into the seminal intellect of Austin with particular attention to his notion of speech acts, showing how it impacts on our behavioural dispositions in interpersonal relationship.

Speech Acts Theory

This linguistic theory, according to Ejele, is utterance-meaning oriented (24). It is diametrically opposed to the sentence-meaning approach. It concerns itself with the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour of the speaker and the listener(s) in course of interpersonal communication. In any case, language is used to bring about a sudden change in the state of affairs in the real world as soon as the utterance is made. For instance, when a priest or pastor, in the Christian congregation, pronounces two persons *man* and *woman* as *husband* and *wife* during a wedding ceremony or, better still, when a court of law sentences a man to two (2) years imprisonment (jail term) with hard labour in court. Thus, language evokes or elicits some

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kind of action in the mental construct or behavioural disposition of the listener or audience in actual state of affairs. This, in the main, underscores the indispensability or necessity of psycholinguistics – a strand or spectrum of mainstream linguistics.

It is important to stress that Austin is unarguably a key exponent of the speech acts theory. The speech acts theory, as a dimension of ordinary language philosophy, is Austin's landmark contribution to the domain of analytic philosophy whose major task is the conceptual or logical clarification of language. In attempting to properly situate Austin's conceptualization of speech acts in its right perspective, the following mind-boggling or striking questions become pertinent: What is Austin's philosophical method? What is the distinction Austin makes between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts? How does his account of language differ from the view that the purpose of language is simply to refer to a fact in the world? These and many other perplexing questions constitute the puzzles lurking behind Austin's general understanding of speech acts theory of meaning.

All the same, fundamental questions such as the ones below provide a better clue on speech acts theory of language. They are: What sort of behaviour is linguistic behaviour? What do we get from the noise that come out of our mouths, or marks we make on papers to all those semantic properties we attribute to them?

In point of fact, sentences do not exist on their own; they are always generated by human beings and always in actual situations and always for a purpose, in which case, their meanings are tied to the intention of the speaker of the language i.e. the person who utter them. It is the speaker's intentions, his rule-governed intentional behaviour that relate language to the world. When people communicate with each other, whether in speaking or writing, they perform such acts as, for instance, making statements, asking questions, giving orders, apologies, thanks, congratulations and explanations. Austin simply tags this "speech acts", and claims that there are a number of verbs and verb-phrases in English language that belong to this category.

Austin lists several reasons why the analysis of ordinary language is important to philosophy. 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". Second, since our ways of speaking (like biological species) have evolved over a long period of time, those that have endured are likely to be the most effective ones. As Austin expresses it:

> Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worthy drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, 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 / are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon – the most favoured alternative method. (*Plea for Excuses* 383 – 384)

Finally, linguistic analysis is not simply words about words, even though words and things must not be confused. Careful attention to words can give us insight into the world of experience:

> When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or "meaning", whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of the phenomena (*Plea for Excuses* 834).

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As an ordinary language philosopher, Austin thinks, and rightly so, that the task of philosophy is conceptual analysis of language with a view to enhancing clarity and coherence in our use of language. By so doing, eliminating vagueness and ambiguity in human communication. Hence, his idea of *explicit performatives.*

Writing on how to do things with words, Austin's uses the narrative of a wedding ceremony, wherein the officiating minister says: "Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife? And the bridegroom responds – I do", he is not describing a marriage, he is rather indulging in one. Thus, his utterance is not, by any means, meant to be a description, true or false; in making his utterance (Nwigwe 48). He is performing an action. In this case, part of the total action of getting married.

For Austin, there are a whole class of utterances that are not so much saying as doings. For example, when I say 'I promise', or 'I bet', or 'I apologize', or 'I think', or 'I congratulate you', in each case it is the action that is named by the verb in my utterance.

How to do things with Words
Wittgenstein employed the notion of "language-games" to indicate that speaking is not simply making sounds but is a type of activity. Similarly, in his seminal work, *How to do things with Words,* Austin introduces the notion of "speech acts". Whenever someone says something, a number of distinguishable acts are performed. First, the *locutionary act* is simply the act of uttering (or writing) a set of words with a certain meaning. Second, the *illocutionary act* is what a person intentionally does in performing the locutionary act (such as reporting, warning, confessing, suggesting, ordering). Third, the *perlocutionary act* consists of the actual response on the part of the listener the speaker hopes to bring about by performing the illocutionary act (for example, persuade, deceive, frighten, inspire, and so on).

To illustrate Austin's analysis, I can say, "it is raining outside" (locutionary act). In saying this, there are several possibilities as to what action I am actually performing (illocutionary act): reporting a fact, expressing dismay at the weather, suggesting that you stay, telling a lie, and so on. Let us suppose I am simply reporting a fact. Then, by means of this act, there is some effect on the listener I am intending to bring about (perlocutionary act). For example, I could be trying to get the listener to believe correctly it is raining, *distract* the listener from her self-pity, *cause* the listener to realize that the driving will be dangerous, and so on. As a result of Austin's investigations, speech act theory has blossomed into a very complex but fruitful approach to understanding language.

Critical Evaluation
Austin provides a clear basis for understanding the linguistic meaning of an expression or sentence using his schema commonly known as *speech acts* theory of language. It is, in other words, called the *performative* theory of language. He was, however, not very clear in his distinction between the different shades of illocutionary acts. A more clearer picture is depicted by John Searle and other subsequent linguistic theorists. His idea of speech acts, in principle, limits or narrows human communication to the use of verbs only without given consideration to other parts of speech. Nevertheless, he is adjudged one of the prominent scholars in linguistic philosophy.

Conclusion
In this paper, we have examined Austin's central notion of speech acts which features prominently in the ordinary language persuasion in contemporary analytic philosophy. His conception of the meaning of a sentence is derived from the action it stirs in the behavioural dispositions of both the speaker and the listeners.

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We, therefore, conclude that his theory of linguistic meaning of an utterance is indeed an adequate psycholinguistic theory.

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