Chapter 2: Austin’s account of ‘performative utterances’ ........................................2
  2.1 Introducing ‘performative’ and ‘constative’ utterances ......................................2
  2.1.1 The original issue: non-truth-evaluable sentences ........................................2
  2.1.2 The ‘performative utterance’: a kind of ‘masquerader’ ................................3
  2.1.3 Two features of ‘performative utterances’ ...................................................3
  2.1.4 ‘Constatve’ means ‘truth-evaluable’ ...........................................................4
  2.2 More details about ‘performative utterances’ ....................................................4
  2.2.1 Feature (A) of ‘performatives’: '(un)happy' rather than 'true/false' ...............4
  2.2.2 P-actions ....................................................................................................5
  2.3 What is a ‘conventional act’? ..............................................................................6
  2.3.1 “Conventional acts” are ‘felicitous’ or ‘infelicitous’ ......................................6
      [DIAGRAM: ‘infelicities’] ..................................................................................7
  2.3.2 “Conventional acts” are ‘institutional acts’ à la Anscombe..........................7
  2.3.3 P-actions as conventional acts, involving the securing of uptake ..................8
  2.4 Inexplicit performatives and the search for a grammatical criterion ..............9
  2.4.1 Inexplicit performatives .............................................................................9
      [DIAGRAM: performatives, ‘explicit’/’inexplicit’] ...........................................9
  2.4.2 Austin’s search for a grammatical criterion ..............................................9
  2.5 Performative utterances: utterata, rather than utterationes? .........................10
  2.6 Summary .......................................................................................................12
  2.7 Questions and problems .................................................................................12
  2.7.1 Some limitations of the performative/constative dichotomy ....................12
  2.7.2 Stating as a kind of illocutionary act .........................................................13
  2.7.3 Are ‘constatives’ never happy/unhappy? ....................................................13
  2.7.4 The identification of ‘saying’ and ‘stating’ ................................................13
  2.7.5 ‘Performative utterance’: a genuine type of expression? ...........................14
Chapter 2: Austin’s account of ‘performative utterances’

2.1 Introducing ‘performative’ and ‘constative’ utterances

2.1.1 The original issue: non-truth-evaluable sentences

Austin’s theory of speech acts traces back to his interest in the nature of sentence meaning. One of the leading issues he was pursuing during the final two decades of his life was his scepticism about the truth-conditional conception of sentence meaning (a conception which at that time was under attack from some other authors, too). Austin’s interest was aroused by certain varieties of sentences which, though evidently meaningful, do not seem to have truth-conditions. It was in pursuit of this investigation that he hit upon what he then called the “performative utterance”; and it was the attempt to analyse these ‘performative utterances’ more exactly which subsequently lead him to an investigation of speech acts—of the different kinds of actions, that means, which we perform in the utterance of words and sentences.

In the first half of the twentieth century, philosophers had become more and more aware of the fact that not all sentences are truth-evaluable. The old doctrine (which, in fact, was to become the new one again in the decades after Austin’s death)\(^1\) views all sentences as being either true or false and, accordingly, all sentence meaning as propositional. In the view of some contemporary philosophers, among them Austin, it thereby succumbs to a “constative fallacy”, or “descriptive fallacy”, as Austin (1975, 3) puts it.\(^2\)

The limits of the old doctrine can easily be apprehended by directing one’s attention to interrogative and directive sentences. Quite apparently, sentences of neither type can be either true or false (what could be the truth value of “Who are you?”, or of “Please, go!”?). But even restricting the view to declarative sentences, there are cases where the ascription of truth-conditions and truth-values may seem inappropriate. Thus, there are what Austin (1975, 2) calls “pseudo-statements”, of which he introduces two types: The first type comprises cases of sheer nonsense—a famous example suggested by Carnap (1959, 67) is “Caesar is a prime number”, which involves a crude categorical mistake.\(^3\) The members of the second group are less easy to detect—indeed, Austin refers to these as the “masqueraders”. Among them he counts “ethical propositions”: according to a non-cognitivist view of these (which Austin assumes) they are not used to make statements about facts, but rather to express one’s feelings and emotions, or to influence other peoples’ thoughts and attitudes\(^4\)—from which Austin concludes that they are not truth-evaluable.

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\(^1\) Perplexingly, in the second half of the century many turned back to views which resemble the error just surmounted quite much, persuaded by Davidson’s (1967, 310) suggestion that “to give truth conditions is a way to give the meaning of a sentence”.

\(^2\) Austin prefers “constative” to “descriptive”. His criticism of the constative fallacy follows suit to Carnap’s “Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language” (published in German 1932; in English 1959), a pamphlet directed against the ‘metaphysical’ theories of authors like Martin Heidegger and Henri Bergson.

\(^3\) Cf. Carnap 1959, 67.

\(^4\) Cf., e.g., Stevenson 1944, chap. 3.
2.1.2 The ‘performative utterance’: a kind of ‘masquerader’

It is in this connection that Austin turns to the main subject of this chapter, the ‘performative utterance’ (or, for short, the ‘performative’). Some of these utterances, he argues, are “masqueraders”, too: although they do look like statements, they really are not truth-evaluable, because they are not intended as assertions, but as something else. Here is how Austin himself introduces the ‘performative utterance’.

The type of utterance we are to consider here is not, of course, in general a type of nonsense […]. Rather, it is one of our second class—the masqueraders. But it does not by any means necessarily masquerade as a statement of fact, descriptive or constative. Yet it does quite commonly do so, and that, oddly enough, when it assumes its most explicit form. Grammarians have not, I believe, seen through this ‘disguise’, and philosophers only at best incidentally. It will be convenient, therefore, to study it first in this misleading form, in order to bring out its characteristics by contrasting them with those of the statement of fact which it apes. (Austin 1975, 4)

Although Austin introduces ‘performative utterances’ in connection with those ‘masquerading’ declarative sentences, he unambiguously points out from the start that not all performative utterances are masqueraders; it is only in cases where “it assumes its most explicit form” that the performative utterance masquerades as a statement, while in other cases it does not.

2.1.3 Two features of ‘performative utterances’

Restricting, however, his view for the time being to those explicit cases, all of which have, as he (1975, 5) puts it, “humdrum verbs in the first person singular present indicative active”, Austin undertakes a “preliminary isolation of the performative” (1975, 4), which consists in the statement of the following two conditions:

A. [Performative utterances] do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and
B. [T]he uttering of the sentence [sc., of the performative utterance] is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something. (Austin 1975, 5)

Among the first examples which Austin gives, of (explicit) performative utterances, are these.

(E.a) ‘I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)—as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony.
(E.b) ‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’—as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.
(E.c) ‘I give and bequeath my watch to my brother”—as occurring in a will.
(E.d) ‘I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.’ (Austin 1975, 5)

“I apologise” (Austin 1956, 235)

“I welcome you” [and] “I advise you to do it” (Austin 1958, 13)
When I christen a ship by uttering “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth”, then I am not ‘just’ saying that I name the ship, but I am thereby performing the act; nor will, to Austin’s mind, the utterance be either true or false, because it is not intended to be so. Likewise, when I welcome you by saying “I welcome you”, then I am not ‘just saying’ that I welcome you, but I do welcome you; and again, to Austin’s mind the sentence will not be truth-evaluable, because it is not uttered descriptively. Or, to take non-explicit performatives (we shall turn to these in detail immediately, in section 2), if I order you to go by saying “Go!”, then I do not just say something, but I perform the act of ordering; and the sentence is not truth-evaluable, if only because, in uttering it, I order you to go, rather than describing my so ordering you.

2.1.4 “Constative” means ‘truth-evaluable’

As we saw, Austin is convinced that performative utterances, even though some of them take the form of a declarative sentence, are never truth-evaluable. To be sure, although Austin argues that some kinds of declarative sentences are not truth-evaluable, he (initially, at least) does not deny that some are. Those declarative sentences which are truth-evaluable he calls “constative utterances” (for short, “constatives”): thus, an utterance is ‘constative’ just in case it is truth-evaluable. On Austin’s account of ‘truth-evaluability’, an utterance is true or false only if it is uttered with the intention to make a statement—this is why, on his account, performative utterances never are truth-evaluable.

At the beginning, Austin takes the relation between performative and constative utterances to be an antagonistic dichotomy. Later, however, he detects several commonalities and he finally arrives at the conclusion that the difference between performatives and constatives is less catholic than he had originally supposed.5

2.2 More details about ‘performative utterances’

2.2.1 Feature (A) of ‘performatives’: ‘(un)happy’ rather than ‘true/false’

Let us turn back to Austin’s “preliminary isolation” of the performative, and in particular to the statement of the (A) condition, according to which (explicit) performatives are not subject to either truth or falsity. Although the performative lacks truth-evaluability, it “is not exempt from all criticism”, Austin says: “it may very well be criticized, but in a quite different dimension” (1958, 14). Thus, when I say “I do” (sc., take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife) in the course of a marriage ceremony, but I am already married, then the utterance is (not false, but still) “a failure”, in a sense. Austin (1975, 14, 25) introduces a new pair of words for this dimension of assessment. In such a case, “the utterance is […] not indeed false”, but “unhappy”. In general, while constative utterances are to be assessed

5 Cf., e.g., Austin (1975, Lec. XI).
as either true or false, performatives are instead to be assessed as either happy or unhappy. Taking this into consideration, condition (A) can be supplemented as follows:\footnote{We can omit the reference to the utterance’s describing or constating something, because apparently this is just meant to record Austin’s reason to deny truth-evaluability.}

\[(A')\] Performative utterances are not true or false, but instead happy or unhappy.

### 2.2.2 P-actions

Of course, the words “happy” and “unhappy”, in the sense just introduced, are technical terms – when we call an expression “happy”, in the present sense, we are obviously not dealing with its temper. What does Austin mean with these words? For a start, this question leads us to condition (B) of the ‘preliminary isolation’. To utter a performative utterance is not just to say something, but rather to do something, it says. Actually—as Austin later (1975, 94) notes himself—to say something really is to do something, while the condition contrasts “saying” with “doing”: this indicates that with “the doing of an action” Austin refers to a particular kind of action. Let us call acts of this type “P-actions” (the “P” takes up the term “performative”).

One important connection between performatives and P-actions is that a performative is ‘unhappy’ when the P-action its utterance aims at is, as Austin calls it, “infelicitous”, and the performative is ‘happy’ just in case the relevant P-action is performed felicitously (we shall at once turn back to these notions in more detail). What else can we say about those ‘P-actions’? According to Austin’s exposition, these acts have two peculiar features. First of all, they belong to a variety of acts which Austin calls “conventional acts”: We can infer this, among other things, from the following remark: “infelicity is an ill”, Austin (1975, 19) says, “to which all acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all conventional acts” (we shall also turn at once to the question of what he means with a ‘conventional act’).

The second characteristic feature of P-actions is that they involve the understanding by an audience of what act is (being) performed. In Austin’s words, when I am promising, then it “is obviously necessary that […] I must normally (A) have been heard by someone, perhaps the promisee, [as well as] (B) have been understood by him as promising” (1975, 22). The requirement of understanding is quite an essential feature of P-acts. Austin classifies the failure to achieve it as a ‘type B’ flaw, and in the case of such a flaw, he explains, the act aimed at is not at all performed (see below, next section). See also Austin 1975, 36; cf. ibid., 16).

So there are two conditions of an act’s being a P-action:

1. P-actions are conventional acts
2. The performance of a P-action requires the securing of understanding, in an audience, that the relevant act is (being) performed.

Let us accommodate the (B) condition of performatives according to our discussion of the two criteria of P-actions. It can now be made more explicit in the following way.
(B′) The uttering of the performative is (part of) the performance of a P-action, rather than a mere act of saying something, where P-actions are conventional acts which involve the securing of understanding in an audience that the relevant act is (being) performed.

2.3 What is a ‘conventional act’?

Now what is a ‘conventional act’ (in the sense presently under consideration)? This question leads us back to the “doctrine of the Infelicities”. There are three kinds of infelicity, respectively assigned to the violation of three kinds of conditions which apply to ‘conventional acts’. Austin subsumes them under the three Greek letters $\alpha$, $\beta$, and $\gamma$.

2.3.1 “Conventional acts” are ‘felicitous’ or ‘infelicitous’

For a conventional act to be performed, (A) “there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect”, where (B) this procedure “must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely” (1975, 14-5). If either of these conditions is violated, then the conventional act is ‘infelicitous’ in a rather bad way: “the act in question, e.g. marrying, is not successfully performed at all, does not come off, is not achieved” (1975, 16). For example, when I say “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow”, aiming at a bet, and you reply “I do not bet”, then the act aimed at will be infelicitous—indeed, in such a case the bet does not at all come off, is not achieved. A similar failure occurs to the utterance of “I divorce you”, “said to a wife by her husband in a Christian country”: there is no such procedure; “we admit only some other verbal or non-verbal procedure”, as Austin (1975, 27) puts it, and thus the marriage will outlive this event (formally, at least).

In some cases, a conventional act “is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant”, and in such a case (G) the persons involved “must in fact have those thoughts or feelings”, as well as “intend so to conduct themselves”, and finally “actually do conduct themselves subsequently” (1975, 15).

Infelicities of the (G) type are less dramatic than those of type (A) or (B). They make the act in some way defective, but they do not prevent its occurrence tout court. When you suggest a bet that it will rain tomorrow, and I take it on by saying “O.k., let’s bet sixpence”, but do not have the intention to pay the stake should I lose, then the act will be infelicitous in a way, too, but it still does come off and actually is achieved. Examples of this type (G) of defects are insincere acts (such as false promises, or insincere congratulations), but also cheats (such as the case where the stake of the bet is not paid, or the promise not kept).

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7 Contrast, though, Austin’s remark on page 15.
8 … “that procedure to include the uttering of certain words …”, Austin continues, but he later (1975, 26) emphasises that this part of the condition “is simply designed to restrict the rule to cases of utterances”—which are the main issue of his study—, but is not a general requirement of conventional acts.
A conventional act, and thus a P-action, is infelicitous just in case it is subject to any one or more of these three kinds of infelicity, while in the absence of any such infelicity it is felicitous. As was quickly mentioned above, in the case of the performance of a P-action by means of a performative utterance, the infelicity of the act will lead to a corresponding unhappiness of the performative; if the act is felicitous, the performative will accordingly be happy. Thus, when I utter “I bet you five Euros that it will rain tomorrow”, but you reply “I do not bet”, then not only is the bet a failure, and thus infelicitous, but by the same token the sentence “I bet you five Euros that it will rain tomorrow”, as uttered by me on that occasion, will be unhappy in an analogous way.9

[DIAGRAM: ‘infelicities’]

2.3.2 “Conventional acts” are ‘institutional acts’ à la Anscombe

The type of phenomenon which we are getting into here was perhaps first focused by G.E.M. Anscombe (1958), when she introduced the distinction between “brute facts” and “institutional” states.10 Roughly, Anscombe calls a fact ‘brute’ when it does not require any rules of institutions for its occurrence (existence, appearance). In contrast, the occurrence (existence, appearance) of ‘institutional’ states does depend on such rules. Thus, “[a] set of events is the ordering and supplying of potatoes, and something is a bill, only in the context of our institutions” (1958, 70).

The occurrence (existence, appearance) of an institutional state is quite commonly led back to an agreement, saying or implying (for some x and some y) that ‘x counts as y’, or that ‘x is y’. To illustrate this, let us imagine a child (George) running with a ball through the park, and kicking it through the gap between a couple of trees. In this brief description, nothing is supposed to happen over and above the child’s kicking the ball through the gap between the trees. Let us now assume, in addition, that George belongs to a group of children playing football in this place, and that the two trees are determined to mark the goal of the opposite team. Given these additional features of the situation, George’s doing what she does will amount to more than just kicking a ball: in addition she will be scoring a goal. The basis for this additional feature of the situation is, besides her doing what she does, an agreement by the children to the effect that doing what George does counts as scoring a goal (including getting the own team a point, etc.).

The presence of such an agreement is often (e.g., by Searle)11 captured by saying that there is a rule to the effect that (for some x, and some y) x counts as (or, is) y. George’s scoring a goal is constituted by her kicking the ball through the gap, given the existence of a rule to

9 The distinction between ‘(in)felicity’ and ‘(un)happiness’ is here presented as a clear-cut matter. In fact, Austin’s terminological practice does not apply this distinction quite consistently—he does sometimes use “(un)happy” as applied to actions (rather than utterances). Still, in the vast majority of cases, his use does comply with the distinction as here construed.
10 Cf. chap xxx. Incidentally, there is some reason not to apply the term ‘fact’ to institutional states quite as easily as to brute states.
11 Id. 1969, chapp. 2 and 3; 1995, chap. 2; 1999, chap. 5; 2010, chap. 5.
the effect that doing so, in the present circumstances, counts as (or is) the scoring of a goal.12

Since the existence of “institutional” facts à la Anscombe depends on conventional agreement, let us in this chapter call them “conventional states”.13 When the conventional state is an act, we can, following Austin’s usage, call this act a “conventional act”. In this terminology, ‘conventional acts’ are states whose occurrence (existence, appearance) goes back to a rule to the effect (for some \( x \) and some \( y \)) that ‘doing \( x \) counts as [or, is] doing \( y \)’, together with the doing of \( x \). The performance of a conventional act (\( ca \)) can then be construed as follows.14

1. There is an agreement to the effect that (for some \( x \)) ‘doing \( x \) counts as [or is] the doing of \( ca \)’.
2. The performance of an instance of \( ca \) is realised by the doing of \( x \), and then constituted in virtue of the agreement.

2.3.3 P-actions as conventional acts, involving the securing of uptake

Turning back to P-actions, we said that these are characterised by two features. Firstly, they are conventional acts. Secondly, they involve the securing of uptake. The structure of conventional acts, as it was just construed, suggests an easy explanation of the connection between the conventional nature of P-actions and the requirement to secure uptake. As conventional acts, P-actions are constituted by the doing of some \( x \), together with an agreement to the effect that doing \( x \) counts as the performance of the relevant P-action. That the act involves the securing of uptake can easily be accounted for by assuming that the ‘\( x \)’ mentioned in the rule includes the securing of uptake. Thus, for instance, a promise to leave may be construed with reference to a rule saying that (for some \( x \)) doing \( x \), including the securing of uptake in the addressee that a promise to leave is (being) performed, counts as promising to leave.15

Although in philosophy the study of P-actions has not been too intensive up to these days, these acts appear to be an extremely widespread phenomenon both in public affairs and in

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12 One may, as Searle does, introduce a context \( c \): ‘\( x \) in \( c \) counts as \( y \)’; one may, however, also do without this when the \( x \) term is understood as admitting for descriptions of doing-something-in-a-context.

13 Following authors like Anscombe, G.C.J. Midgley and J.L. Searle, it has also become common to call states like these “institutional” states, leading the existence of the relevant constitutive rules back to so-called “institutions” (like money, business, or universities). I feel that the term “conventional state” fits better in the case of such non-public states as a bet or a promise, while “institutional state” may be more appropriate in connection with elections, declarations of war, and marriages.

14 This construal can be interpreted either realistically or non-realistically. For a realistic account see, e.g., Searle (1995, 1999, 2010); on it, the conventional state is a “fact”, brought into existence by the agreement. In a non-realistic construal, conventional states are just collective illusions; this view may be supported by doubts about the possibility of creating facts or states by agreement: after all, there seems to be no general/principle reason for believing that an agreement to the effect that \( p \) results in the existence of \( p \), and it is not easy to see why a derivation of the existence of \( p \) from an agreement to the effect that \( p \) should be assumed even in single cases.

15 For a detailed analysis of promising along these lines see Searle 1969, chap. 3; see below, chap. xxx.
our private lives. Consider, for example, buying a bike, renting a room, betting and promising: Each of these acts can plausibly be construed as a conventional act, and each of them apparently cannot be performed without an audience recognising that the act is (being) performed. Nobody can buy a bike, or rent a room from me without me coming to know this; and neither can I make a bet with you or promise you to leave without communicating to you that the relevant bet or promise is (being) performed. Thus, buying, renting, promising and betting are obvious candidates for being P-actions.

2.4 Inexplicit performatives and the search for a grammatical criterion

2.4.1 Inexplicit performative utterances

Above, it was quickly mentioned that Austin distinguishes between explicit and inexplicit performatives. In order for an utterance to be “explicit”, he (1975, 32) explains, it has to “begin with or include some highly significant and unambiguous expression such as ‘I bet’, ‘I promise’, ‘I bequeath’”. An explicit performative utterance “makes explicit both that the utterance is performative, and which act it is that is being performed” (1975, 62); in performing an act by means of an explicit performative, I “make my performance explicit” (1975, 39). There are, however, also “inexplicit” performatives. These are expressions which, although performative, are not explicit in the relevant sense – do not make explicit the act which the utterance of the expression aims at, that means.

Contrasting explicit and inexplicit utterances, Austin (1975, 69) refers to “I promise that I shall be there” (explicit) versus “I shall be there” (inexplicit), to “I state (suggest/bet) that he did not do it” (explicit) versus “I did not do it” (inexplicit) (1975, 134f.), to “You are hereby warned that this bull is dangerous” versus “Bull” (1956, 243), to “I order you to shut the door” versus “Shut the door!”, and to “Strangers are warned that there is a vicious dog” versus “Dog”. Further examples of inexplicit performatives which Austin introduces are “Go!” (used in ordering someone to go) (1975, 32), as well as (1975, 58) “Turn right!” (ordering someone to turn right), “Done” (accepting a bet) and “Out!” (giving someone out).

[DIAGRAM: performatives, ‘explicit’/‘inexplicit’]

2.4.2 Austin’s search for a grammatical criterion

As we saw, Austin introduces the performative utterances as another variety of non-truth-evaluable sentences, on a level with, for example, interrogative sentences, syntactically ill-formed concatenations, and sentences containing certain “specially perplexing words”. It

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16 See Austin (1975, 32f., 36, 69); as alternatives to “inexplicit” he introduces “implicit” (1975, 32, 69, 71), “primary” (1975, 69, 71, 72, 78., 83, 135, 150, 158), and “primitive” (1975, 33, 72f.) ones (see Austin (1975, 4, 69, 150)).
might then be expected that performative utterances constitute a syntactically discrete phenomenon, like a sentence type, or a mood of its own. And indeed, Austin himself apparently had such expectations; at least after introducing the performative/constative dichotomy, he starts examining with great zeal if there is not a grammatical characteristic of performative utterances.

Scrutinizing this idea, however, he rather soon (1975, 55-59; 1956, 241-243; 1958, 15f.) realises that there is no grammatical peculiarity which all performatives have in common as they stand. The main reason is the existence of inexplicit performatives: for, as it seems, these are not subject to any formal restrictions. Thus, to say “Shut the door” is “every bit as much the performance of an act, as to say ‘I order you to shut the door’”; and even “the word ‘Dog’ by itself can sometimes […] stand in place of an explicit and formal performative; one performs, by this little word, the very same act as […] ‘Strangers are warned that here there is a vicious dog’” (1958, 16).

Still, Austin maintains that there is an asymmetry connected with what he calls “[explicit] performative verbs”. A ‘performative verb’ is a verb that refers to a P-action. Now “with these verbs [there] is a typical asymmetry between the use of this person and tense of the verb and the use of the same verb in other persons and tenses, and this asymmetry is rather an important clue” (1956, 241f.). “Thus, ‘I promise’ is a formula which is used to perform the act of promising; ‘I promised’, on the other hand, or ‘he promises’, are expressions which serve simply to describe or report an act of promising, not to perform one” (1958, 15). This asymmetry, Austin (1975, 67f.) argues, “is just the characteristic of a long list of performative-looking verbs”. And this leads us to another idea Austin has in connection with the grammatical criterion. He suggests 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. (1975, 68)

Indeed, Austin argues that performatives, even if they actually are inexplicit, are at least “reducible, or expandible, or analysable” (Austin 1975, 61; cf. 1956, 243) to an explicit performative formula, such as “I order …” or “I apologise …”. Thus if I apologise for the delay by saying “Sorry!”, then this can be expanded to “I apologise for the delay”, and when I order you to go by saying “Go!”, this can be expanded to “I order you to go” (see also Austin (1956, 243-245; 1958, 16)).

Even granted that this condition is valid, however, we should not mistake it for making the search for a grammatical criterion successful. Neither the asymmetry nor the ‘reducibility’ under consideration, even though they do refer to certain grammatical features, are criteria concerning the grammatical form of the performative. Thus, the hope to find a formal characteristic of performative utterances in general (as contrasted with the special case of explicit performatives) eventually was, “alas, exaggerated, and, in large measure, vain” (1958, 15) (cf. Austin 1956, 243; 1975, 63).

2.5 Performative utterances: utterata, rather than utterationes?
Before summarising the findings of this chapter, let us briefly turn to what may be called the “bearer question” concerning performatives, the question of what the bearer of the property of being performative is. After Austin’s death, the notion of a ‘performative utterance’ was often, and by prominent authors, used as applying to the utterance of an expression (a sentence, or sequence of words), rather than to an expression (a sentence, or sequence of words). In the present introduction, both performatives and constatives are introduced as expressions (sentences, sequences of words), rather than utterances thereof—as utterata, rather than utterationes, as Austin (1975, 92n1) famously put it.

It must be admitted that Austin himself neglects the distinction between expressions and their utterances once and again, and there surely are some places which allow for more than one reading. Thus, for instance, he (1975, 6) says that “[t]he term ‘performative’ will be used in a variety of cognate ways and constructions”, and he subsequently does, though only sporadically, speak of such things as “performative uses” of words (1975, 59, 62, 160—contrasting non-assertive uses with assertive ones), as well as of “performative acts” (1975, 80, 142—referring to P-actions). Additionally, there are several ambiguities.\(^{17}\) Despite these facts, however, there are good reasons for the assumption that Austin’s ‘performative utterance’ is to be conceived of, after all, as a linguistic expression, rather than as an utterance act.

To start with, Austin introduces (explicit) performatives and constatives as instances of the contrast between sentences which are truth-evaluable and sentences which are not, such as “sentences expressing commands or wishes or concessions”: this implies that both constatives and (explicit) performatives are sentences. Secondly, in the same context Austin treats performatives as being on a level with Carnap’s “pseudo-statements”: these, however, are not supposed to be acts of uttering, but rather sentences. Thirdly, as a variety of performative utterances Austin introduces the “operative clauses of legal instrument” (1958, 14), that means, those “clauses [...] in which the legal act is actually performed, as opposed to those—the ‘preamble’—which set out the circumstances of the transaction” (1958, 14n): quite clearly, he thereby refers to sentences, rather than utterance acts. Fourthly, Austin (1975, 1, 2) identifies (explicit) performative utterances with “grammarians’ statements”, and he (1975, 4) characterises them by saying that they “fall into [the] grammatical category [...] of ‘statement’”: expressions, rather than utterance acts, are commonly taken to fall into grammatical categories. Fifthly, Austin (1975, 6) explicitly introduces performatives as a type of “sentences or utterances”, where “utterances” is unambiguously to be interpreted as referring to linguistic expressions, rather than utterance acts: “Sentences form a class of utterances”, he (1975, 6n2) explains, “which class is to be defined so far as I am concerned grammatically”. Sixthly, this is later reconfirmed, when Austin (1975, 55-66) searches at length for a grammatical feature of performatives.

\(^{17}\) Among the reasons for ambiguities is the employment of such terms as “statement” and “utterance”, which succumb to act/object ambiguities. Although in *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin says, “I use ‘utterance’ only as equivalent to *utteratum: for utteration* I use ‘the issuing of an utterance’”, he introduces, however, this convention rather late in the book (1975, 92n1), after having finished his exposition of performatives and constatives, and even then, he does not follow it consistently.
2.6 Summary

Let us summarise the findings of this chapter. At the beginning, Austin’s analysis of performatives was restricted to explicit performatives such as “I apologize”, or “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow”. Explicit performatives belong to what Austin calls “the masqueraders”—sentences which are not truth-evaluable, contrary to appearances. Instead of being true or false, they are happy or unhappy. The reason, on Austin’s account, is that performatives are not uttered with constative intentions, but rather with the aim of performing a (non-constative) conventional act.\(^\text{18}\)

Developing Austin’s own statement on the basis of his subsequent discussion, we captured his notion of performatives in the following way:

(A') Performative utterances are not true or false, but instead happy or unhappy.

(B') The uttering of the performative is (part of) the performance of a P-action, rather than a mere act of saying something, where P-actions are conventional acts which involve the securing of understanding in an audience that the relevant act is (being) performed.

Conventional acts are conventional states (or “institutional facts”, as some call them); they are constituted by a rule to the effect that doing so-and-so counts as the performance of the relevant act. It is a characteristic of conventional acts that they are subject to so-called “infelicities”, and it is in dependence of such ‘infelicities’ of the conventional act aimed at that a performative utterance is either ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’—it is unhappy when the P-action aimed at is in one way or the other infelicitous, and it is happy just in case there are no infelicities to the P-action.

That P-actions require the securing of uptake is easily explained by the assumption that the constitutive agreement (or rule) which underlies the act requires the securing of uptake as one of the conditions necessary for the occurrence (existence, appearance) of the act.

Austin seems to have initially thought that performatives are a kind of expression of their own, on a level with declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, or syntactically ill-formed concatenations, identifiable with reference to certain definite grammatical features. His search for a grammatical characteristic failed, however; the main reason is the existence of non-explicit performatives, on whose grammatical make-up there appear to be no restrictions at all.—In the next chapter, we shall be concerned with his attempt to find distinctions between performative and constative utterances, after all, and with the doctrine of acts which he developed in the course of this endeavour.

2.7 Questions and problems

2.7.1 Some limitations of the performative/constative dichotomy

\(^{18}\) This is why, as an alternative for “performative”, Austin (1975, 7) suggests the term “operative”, thereby aiming at “that part, i.e., those clauses of an instrument which serves to effect the transaction (conveyance or what not) which is its main object”.
Let us turn to some questions and possible problems. Throughout his writings, Austin gives the impression that the performative/constative distinction was an antagonistic dichotomy, where each essential property of the one kind is absent in the other kind, and *vice versa*.

Moreover, one may at times get the impression that performatives and constatives exhaust the range of utterances. But, of course, there are utterances which are neither performative nor constative. Austin acknowledges the existence of such cases right at the beginning of his investigation when introducing kinds of sentences which are not truth-evaluable—among which he then puts the performative utterance as another variety. Examples of expressions which apparently are neither performative nor constative are jokes (1975, 9, 104-5), poetry (1975, 9, 92, 104-5), cases of acting in a play (1975, 92, 104), exclamations (1975, 1, 133) and swearwords (1975, 6, 133).

### 2.7.2 Stating as a kind of illocutionary act

Let us next consider some possible problems. As a start, we turn back to criterion (B), according to which the utterance of a performative is a P-action, rather than a mere act of ‘saying’. In first stating his doctrine of performative utterances, Austin observed that to perform a P-action is not just to ‘say’ something (in the sense of the mere utterance of words). Furthermore, he also assumed that only when I am ‘saying’ that something is the case (making an assertive utterances, that means), my utterance can be true or false—and thus, constative. Equating ‘saying’ in the first sense and ‘saying’ in the second sense, he concluded that constatives can never be performative. However, as he later recognises, “when we state something [then] we are doing something as well as and distinct from just saying something” (1975, 133); indeed, he finally admits that “to state is every bit to perform an illocutionary act [sc., a P-action] as, say, to warn or to pronounce” (1975, 134).

### 2.7.3 Are ‘constatives’ never happy/unhappy?

Furthermore, as to criterion (A), according to which constatives are true or false, rather than happy or unhappy, this distinction is in danger, too. For if a statement is (or at least can be) a P-action, then it would appear that (at least some) statements can be felicitous or infelicitous; and this, in turn, would seem to suggest that constatives, being uttered in the performance of a statement, might at the same time figure as performatives. And, indeed, Austin does himself defend this position at the end of his investigation: “statements are liable to every kind of infelicity to which performatives are liable, such as infelicity, breach and voidness” (Austin 1975, 136; cf. 1975, 91, 136-9).

### 2.7.4 The identification of ‘saying’ and ‘stating’

This view is the reason why Austin is a bit puzzled by the case of “I warn you that it is going to charge”, because “it is both a warning and true or false that it is going to charge” (1975, 135-6; my emphasis). For the background of this somewhat peculiar view see Austin (1950).
In fact, one of the assumptions implicit in these reasonings may well be doubted. When Austin contrasts ‘doing’ (the performance of P-actions) with ‘saying’, then ‘saying’ can be interpreted in two different ways: either as the performance of a statement, which then may be a P-action (such as, for example, in “He said that Napoleon was murdered”), or else as the mere uttering of meaningful words (an example may be “Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall”, where no assertive aim is implied). Our present doubts about the two criteria appear to be based on the identification of ‘saying’ with ‘stating’; while in the subsequent discussion of the terms ‘saying’ and ‘doing’ (see the next chapter), the other interpretation rather seems to apply. According to this interpretation, to say something is not to state something, but just to utter words with a certain meaning. (That Austin ever contrasted statements and P-actions may go back to the fact that he failed to keep these two sense properly separated.)

2.7.5 ‘Performativ e utterance’: a genuine type of expression?

Let us go yet a step further. Apparently, Austin thought that the performative utterance was a genuine type of expression, perhaps definable by grammatical or other formal features. Thus, as we saw, he seriously tries to find a grammatical criterion; and even though he admits the failure of this search, he insists at some “quasi-grammatical requirements” (1975, 68) that each performative must be “analysable into” an explicit performative formula (1975, 61-2), and that the main verb in this formula is subject to a characteristic asymmetry (1975, 62-3). It may be doubted, however, whether performatives can be expected to satisfy any formal criterion, given their definition. For it may be doubted that there are any formal restrictions to expressions with which P-actions can be performed. Up to the present day, at least, no formal restrictions have been found to apply to the expressions which can (rather than characteristically do) figure in a statement or a request. It may be that, after all, performative utterances cannot be performed with reference to any special formal features (because there are none), but that we are left with the definition Austin gives, in terms of how the expression is used.

In the case of constatives, it may be asked, too, if Austin’s apparatus is not unnecessarily elaborate. At any rate, Austin’s view that an expression must be stated in order for it to be truth-evaluable has not, until today, been established. In one standard view, a sentence can be truth-evaluable without being uttered at all, and in another it can be true or false even if not uttered assertively. Austin himself may finally seem to sympathise with this latter view:

So that there is no necessary conflict between
(a) our issuing the utterance being the doing of something,
(b) our utterance being true or false.
For that matter compare, for example, ‘I warn you that it is going to charge’, where likewise it is both a warning and true or false that it is going to charge; […] (1975, 135-6)

Thus, in the end it may be that the performative is not a genuine type of expression at all (rather than a diverse group of expressions’ tokens, tied together only by the use made by them in particular situations; and that constatives are a special type of sentences, or tokens thereof, which are defined by the semantical feature that they express a proposition and thus are truth-evaluable, quite independently of the use which constative tokens are (being) made of in particular situations. On such a construal, being a performative and being a constative would be different matters, though there would be no obstacle to a constative token’s being a performative by means of being uttered in the performance of a P-action.