HOW PERFORMATIVES REALLY WORK:
A REPLY TO SEARLE

One way to do things with words is to do them explicitly. As J. L. Austin observed, one can do this by using “special explicit performative verbs like ‘promise’, ‘pronounce’, ‘find’, etc.” in sentences beginning with “I” followed by a performative verb in the “first person singular present indicative active form” (1962, p. 61), such as “I promise you a rose garden” or “I pronounce you husband and wife”. Austin contended that making explicit “is not the same as stating or describing”. But we have long maintained that performative utterances are true or false, that performatives are statements too, and John Searle endorses this view in his recent ‘How Performatives Work’. He endorses little else in our account.

Searle rejects our contention that the reason performatives are true or false is that they are literally and directly statements and only indirectly promises, pronouncements, etc. Indeed, he argues, any account on which “performatives are primarily statements . . . confuses being committed to having an intention with actually having the intention” (p. 546). For example, using “I apologize” to state that you are apologizing commits you (insofar as you are committed to the truth of your statement) to having the intention to be apologizing, but this does not entail that you actually have such an intention. On Searle’s account performatives are primarily declarations, a kind of speech act whose performance makes it the case that, e.g., an apology has been made by virtue of guaranteeing the presence of the intention that constitutes the utterance as an apology. For “I apologize . . . ” to have performative force not only must it be “self-referential”, as on statement analyses, it must be “executive” as well. Searle argues that only by analyzing performatives as declarations, speech acts which “create new facts”, can we account for what he claims to be their “self-guaranteeing” character.

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1 Austin mentions words other than verbs which have a special performative function, such as “guilty” and “offside”, and other performative verb forms, “the second and third [person] and impersonal passive”.

2 The noun “performative” is short for “performative utterance”. We will always use “performative sentence” or “performative verb” when we are referring to expressions rather than acts.

3 See Bach and Harnish (1979), pp. 203–208, and Searle (1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all page references to Bach and Harnish are to our 1979 book and to Searle are to his 1989 article. “Performatives are statements too” is the title of Bach (1975), the original source of

Declarations are essentially institutional or conventional in character, when made under the right conventionally specified circumstances, succeed in effecting certain institutional states of affairs. Some performative utterances, such as "I pronounce you man and wife" and "I sentence you to twenty years at hard labor," fall into this category. But in our view ordinary performatives do not, because they, like most speech acts, are bound to particular institutional situations. Indeed, as we will argue, their performativity requires no special explanation. Ordinary performatives are acts of communication and succeed as such if one's audience shares one's communicative intention, the intention to be expressing a certain attitude. Declarations, being institution-bound, are but incidentally communicative and succeed by satisfying the relevant conventions.

To provide the necessary background for our case, in the first section we sketch our account of the role of communicative intentions in speech acts generally. The next two sections answer, respectively, Searle's specific objections to our account of performatives and his generic objection to any analysis of performatives as direct statements. The last two sections rebut his contentions that ordinary performatives are declarations and that performativity is built into literal meaning. Answering Searle's objections will enable us to clarify the distinction between the successful performance of a speech act and its communicative success. We agree with him that performative verbs and sentences "are not ambiguous between a performative and a non-performative sense" and that "performatives in virtue of their literal meaning are statements with truth values" (p. 640), but as we will show, Searle's critique of our account conflates performativity with communicative success. Although the performativity of these utterances does not depend on their being statements, their communicative success does.

1. Speech Acts and Communicative Intentions

In general, the success of an action does not depend on whether any witnesses happen to identify the intention with which it is performed, much less whether the agent intends them to do so. But acts of communica-

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4 When Grice first recognized the distinctively reflexive character of communicative intentions (in later years he wavered between thinking them reflexive and thinking them iterative), he suggested that a speaker means something by his utterance if he intends his utterance "to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention" (1957, 385). However, he imposed no constraint on the kind of effect to be produced. As Searle subsequently showed (1969, 47), the relevant effect is understanding or what Austin called "uptake", rather than such further (perlocutionary) effects as belief, desire, or even action on the part of the audience.

5 In Austin's terminology, requests, promises, etc., are "illocutionary" acts, which are generally associated with "perlocutionary" acts, e.g., requesting with getting someone to do something. Since perlocutionary acts are not relevant to the present discussion, we have been using and will continue to use "speech act" to mean illocutionary act.

6 We have developed a detailed taxonomy of communicative speech acts (Chapter 3) in which a wide variety of act types are individuated in this way. For example (and to simplify our characterizations), predicting expresses a belief about the future, apologizing expresses regret for something one did to the addressee, and requesting expresses a desire for the
e game of charades – making faces and gestures to enable the audience figure out what you have in mind). You understand an utterance if you entitle the intended attitude (including its content, of course), such as a belief in the case of a statement or a desire in the case of a request. It is another question whether you take the speaker actually to possess that attitude, much less form a corresponding attitude yourself, such as a belief (thereby agreeing with him) or an intention (thereby complying with him). You think the speaker actually possesses the attitude he is expressing, whereas you are taking him to be sincere in what he is communicating, but there is no question about his being sincere in the communicative attention itself – what one can be insincere about is actually having the attitude one is expressing. The communicative intention must be identified by the question of the speaker’s sincerity can even arise. For this reason, despite Searle’s insistence that statement analyses of performative inflate the distinction between being committed to having a certain intention and actually having it, with communicative intentions this is a distinction without a (practical) difference.

Several distinctions do make a difference. We can perform a speech act (1) directly or indirectly, by way of performing another speech act. (2) Literally or non-literally, depending on how we are using our words. and (3) explicitly or implicitly, so depending on whether we spell out what we are doing. These are distinct contrasts and should not be confused. Of the third, Austin observed that making explicit what we are doing involves the use of performative verbs. The other two contrasts concern not the presence or absence of specific words but the relation between the utterance and the speech act(s) thereby performed. With indirectness a single utterance is the performance of one speech act by way of performing.

...Idresssee to perform a certain action. In each case, expressing the attitude is offering one’s utterance to the addressee as a reason to think one has the attitude. This reason need not be conclusive, but if in the context the reason is overridden, then the hearer will, in order to identify the attitude expressed, search for an alternative that perhaps non-literal interpretation of the utterance. For discussion see Bach and Harnish, p. 57–59 and 289–291.

In other words, deceiving your audience about your real attitude presupposes successfully expressing some other attitude. You can be unsuccessful in conveying your communicative intention – by being too vague, ambiguous, or metaphorical, or even by being wrongly taken literally – but not insincere about it.

1 Austin did not investigate these, but we do in our book, especially in Chapter 4, where we schematize the inferences involved in the recognition of intentions behind both indirect and non-literal speech acts. In some ways our “Speech Act Schema” is a generalization of Searle’s account of conversational implicature. Searle presents an account of indirect speech acts in his 1975.

2. Searle’s objections to our account

For Searle, the “puzzle of performatives”, which he claims our account fails to solve, is posed by the question. “How can there be a class of sentences whose meaning is such that we can perform the action named by the verb just by saying literally we are performing it?” (p. 538). In our view this is the wrong question to ask, for it presupposes that performative utterances are theoretically special. Of course, there is something superficially special about them: they are performances of acts of the type mentioned by the verb. For example, promises made performatively use the verb “promise”. But since you can perform an act of the same type without saying so (you can promise by saying “I will”), an account of what it is to perform an act such as a promise cannot require that the relevant verb (“promise” or a synonym) actually be used. The fact that the type of act is explicitly mentioned in a performative plays a special role not in the performance of that act, in the making of the promise, but in its communicative. The explicit specification serves merely to enable the addressee to identify that act without any inferential fuss, by eliminating the need for searching out a plausible candidate. Searle’s question arbitrarily rules out the null hypothesis, that the illocutionary force of performatives (“performativity”) requires no special explanation.

Also, Searle’s question, in assuming there to be a “class of sentences...
which effect institutional changes by virtue of convention, for though conventions involve precedents, precedents do not always involve conventions. Conventions provide a substitute for inference: precedents without conventions compress inferences. So it should be understood that the following inference pattern, the one that Searle finds objectionable, makes explicit the steps that would be required in the absence of precedent. Precedent renders this pattern needlessly explicit – the inference is, as we say, "short-circuited". Someone unaware that the performative formula is standardized for performing an act of type named by the verb could still figure out what act that is. For example, in hearing "I order you to leave", he could infer

1. He is saying "I order you to leave".
2. He is stating that he is ordering me to leave.
3. If his statement is true, then he must be ordering me to leave.
4. If he is ordering me to leave, it must be his utterance that constitutes the order (what else could it be?).
5. Presumably, he is speaking the truth.
6. Therefore, in stating that he is ordering me to leave, he is ordering me to leave.

Since the performative formula is standardized for the performative use, one need not go through this sort of inference explicitly, step by step. But even if the inference is compressed by precedent, still one must be sensitive to the possible falsehood of any of the steps so that the inference be blocked accordingly. For example, one might take the speaker to be joking and reject step (2). Or one might balk at step (5) on the grounds that the speaker is really (though non-literally) forbidding one from leaving.

Notice that step (4) in the above inference would be blocked if the hearer took the vehicle of the order to be not the utterance but some collateral act, e.g., pointing decisively to the door. If you take the speaker to be using "I order..." to refer to that very utterance, you do so partly because the speaker is doing nothing else that could constitute an act of the type mentioned. This suggests that performative utterances are not inherently reflexive but only reflexive by default, i.e., in the absence of

12 For more examples, explanation, and argument see Chapter 10 of our book.
Our citation of the above inference pattern is not meant to suggest that the connection between the statement and performance of the act named by the performative verb is one of entailment. Yet Searle thinks that “if we are going to take seriously the idea that performatives work by way of being statements to the effect that one performs a certain speech act, we would have to show how . . . John made a self-referential statement to the effect that his utterance was a promise that p’ entails, as a matter of logic, ‘John made a promise that p’” (p. 544). This is not at all what we were trying to show with the above inference pattern and not what we needed to show. Uttering “I promise” counts as a statement and as a promise not in virtue of any entailment between the statement and the promise and not in virtue of any inference on the part of the hearer. The inference pattern illustrated indicates how, from the hearer’s (not the theorist’s) point of view, the act named by the performative verb may be inferred from the statement, not how it is constituted by the statement. The statement, by virtue of intentionally providing evidence for the speaker’s intention to be making a promise, informs the hearer of the promise; it is the utterance, in virtue of the intention with which it is made (that of expressing a commitment that its utterance obligate him in a certain way to the hearer), which constitutes the promise. Searle confuses the inference made by the hearer, at least according to our theory, with the theory itself. The theory mentions the inference pattern in its account: it does not use the inference pattern as its account. In any case, the inference is relevant not to the performativity of the promise but to its communicative success, and besides, such inferences are not deductive but defeasible (as we explain on pp. 89–93). So the statement analysis of

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14 To suppose that the self-referentiality of performative utterances is a consequence of the semantics of performative sentences would be to posit a linguistic anomaly, whereby the first person present tense form “I order” would have a semantic feature different in kind from other forms, such as “You order” or “I ordered”, indeed one that is not compositionally determined by the meanings of the words “I” and “order”. The case is different when terms that are such that they are used to refer by default to the place and the time of utterance (Bach 1987, p. 189). On default reflexivity see Harman (1991).

15 A similar confusion is evident when Searle proposes his own version of the hearer’s inference pattern (p. 553), for it contains a host of Searle’s theoretical notions. Also evident is the confusion between the performance of a speech act and its communicative success: if performatives are declarations and are constituted by the intention to conform to a “special convention” (p. 548), an inference should be necessary not for the performance of an act but only for its conveyance.

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16 There are imaginable circumstances in which, as a matter of convention (rather than communicative intention), uttering “I am the King of Spain” could count as making oneself King of Spain; although it is unlikely that the requisite convention would allow the utterance to be in English.

17 The notion of authority does enter into our definition of an order, which is to express the intention for one’s audience to take the utterance, in virtue of one’s authority, as reason e.g., to leave. See pp. 47–59 of our book for details about the attitudes expressed in orders and in other directives.
3. Searle's generic objection to statement analyses

Searle poses one objection not to our account in particular but to statement analyses in general. It leads him to "go back to the drawing board" and develop an alternative, the declarative analysis. This objection is directed at what he sees as the best rationale for the statement approach, which is that it is persuasive. The idea is to derive the performative of performative utterances (like "I promise to come and see you next week") from the fact that they are self-referential statements made with a commitment to their truth (e.g., that the speaker promises to come and see the hearer next week); since statements in general can be dishonest or mistaken, there must be some special feature of a performative utterance like "I promise . . .", namely its self-referentiality, that makes it a promise. But Searle now realizes that self-referentiality is not enough, for this does not guarantee that the utterance is a promise or is even intended as such. Assuming "the preparatory and other conditions are satisfied, its being a promise consists in its being intended as a promise", but being committed to having the intention, by virtue of being committed to the truth of the statement, "doesn't guarantee the actual presence of the intention" (p. 546). So Searle's "decisive" objection to the argument that performatives are primarily statements is that it "confuses being committed to having an intention with actually having the intention". In other words, it fails to explain the "self-guaranteeing" character of performatives. Statement accounts are "doomed to failure" because "the performative character of an utterance cannot be derived from its literal features as an assertion" (p. 546). In Searle's view, a performative utterance succeeds by "manifesting" the intention to perform the speech act named by the performative verb, which "encodes" this intention. It is a "linguistic declaration", creating the linguistic fact that a promise (or whatever) has been made. It is not clear to us how anything linguistic could guarantee the existence of an intention. Searle's generic objection to statement accounts simply takes for granted that they aim to derive performativity from the statement made in using a performative sentence. Of course, an utterance does not gain its performative force by virtue of being a statement, not even by virtue of being made with the intention of being a true statement. Searle is surely right to insist that for an utterance actually to be a promise requires a further intention, but it is a mistake to think the utterance should guarantee the existence of the intention rather than just intentionally provide evidence for it.

Performativity itself requires no special explanation, as we suggested earlier. Rather, on the null hypothesis, the way in which an utterance of a performative sentence counts as a promise is no different from the way in which any other utterance counts as a promise. If one can make a promise by saying "I will . . ." or "Yes", locations which do not encode the intention to make a promise, there is no reason why making a promise by saying "I promise . . ." should require anything more. Performatives are just a special case of indirect speech acts, in which the audience identifies one communicative intention by way of identifying another. They are special only insofar as the direct statement explicitly specifies which type of act (e.g., a promise) is being performed indirectly. But the fact that this is explicitly specified plays no special role in the performance of the act, in the making of the promise. Explicitly specifying the act type merely facilitates the audience's inference by eliminating the need to search for

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9 At one point he says "encode the actual performance" (p. 551), but this is surely an exaggeration. Verbs do not encode actual events of the type they label.

9 The statement, at least if otherwise literal, also specifies the content. But the content might not be specified literally. At the end of a violent argument I might say, "I suggest that you stay here indefinitely", but really be suggesting (ironically) that you leave immediately. Also, a performative verb can be used non-literally, perhaps to perform an act of some other type. A dear friend drops in at dinner time and you say, "I prohibit you from joining us for dinner", so as to invite her to join.
The null hypothesis is supported by the case of hedged and embedded performatives, such as “I’m sorry to inform you...”, “I want to assure you...” and “I’m sorry to say that I must ask you to leave” (both hedged and embedded), to which the declarative analysis could not plausibly apply. Here the mechanism of performance is essentially the same as with simple performatives, except that the intended inference is a bit more complex (of course, standardization of a given form will streamline the inference). As with simple performatives, the audience identifies the act being performed by way of understanding a statement of some matter of fact closely related to the act to be inferred, although in these cases, obviously, it is not enough to impute to the speaker the intention to be speaking the truth. Details aside (see Bach and Harnish, pp. 210–219), the relevant point is that with hedged and embedded (as with simple) performatives, the audience identifies the act being performed by way of understanding the statement being made and seeking a plausible explanation for the fact that the speaker made it. The obvious candidate is that the speaker intends to be performing an act of the sort named by the performative verb. Again, our position is not that the statement is constitutive of the action; rather, the statement provides the audience with a rational basis for identifying the action.

So we reject Searle’s contention that statement analyses inevitably confuse being committed to having an intention with actually having it. This contention is based on confusing performativity with communicative success. The same confusion is evident in his reference to “the currently fashionable view that performatives are some kind of indirect speech act where the supposedly non-literal performance is somehow derived from the literal assertion by Gricean mechanisms” (p. 551), for what Gricean mechanisms explain are the rational means by which oblique communicative intentions are formed and recognized.

In this regard consider just how a communicative intention constitutes a speech act. It is not as though you say something and then, by an inner decree (the intention), determine that you are thereby expressing a certain attitude. Rather, you decide to express a certain attitude and try to select words whose utterance will enable your audience, under the circumstances, to identify the attitude you are expressing. So even though your speech act is in a sense constituted by the intention with which you make it, you can’t intend just any old thing. You can’t utter “The cow jumped over the moon”, for example, and thereby intend to request your ad-

choose your words to fit your intention, not your intention to fit your words.

To illustrate, compare an utterance of “I ask you to leave” with an utterance of “I ask you to slash your throat”, “I ask you to breathe”, or “I ask you to pluck out my eyes”. You could not utter “I ask you to leave”, at least not in normal circumstances, without intending it as a request, for you could not but expect it to be taken as such. In this case being committed to having the intention to be making the request, by virtue of making the literal statement, is tantamount to actually intending to make it. In the other cases, though for different reasons, you could not reasonably intend (assuming no special circumstances) your utterance to be taken as a request. You could intend the utterance as a statement, thereby committing yourself to its truth, i.e., to your having the intention to be making a request, but you could not reasonably expect your audience to regard it as true. So you could not reasonably intend them to take it as a request. Thus the statement analysis has the virtue of showing how, in these bizarre examples, communication can fail precisely because of the distinction between being committed to having an intention and actually having one. In such cases the audience does not infer, and cannot reasonably be expected to infer, the one from the other. As we will see next, the distinction between the performance of an act and its communicative success undermines the need that Searle sees for giving performative special treatment by analyzing them as declarations.

4. Why Ordinary Performatives Are Not Declarations

Declarations have the distinctive feature of producing changes in the world. There is nothing magical or supernatural about how they manage to do this, and they change the world not by what Searle calls “physical causation” but by convention. They succeed by virtue of meeting certain conventional conditions that constitute an utterance as effecting, generally within an extra-linguistic institution, a certain change or creating a certain fact. That is why in our taxonomy we call them “effectives” (Chapter 6), which fall under the class of conventional as opposed to communicative illocutionary acts. We largely agree with what Searle gives as the four characteristic features of declarations, but we deny that in addition to their falling under the appropriate conventions, their success “requires recognition by the audience” of the intention with which they are performed (p. 548). For this intention need not be communicative; with
crification” (p. 117).

Clearly certain performatives are declarations, such as acts of adjourning meeting, sentencing a criminal, or christening a ship, but in general performatives are not confined to institutional contexts. As Searle observes, many performatives do not create extra-linguistic facts and do not require special institutional contexts for their successful performance. But he thinks they at least create linguistic facts and do so in essentially the same way, namely by satisfying conventionally specified conditions. For instance, “When I say, ‘I order you to leave the room’, I create a new act, the fact that I have ordered you to leave the room, but that fact is linguistic fact” (p. 549). This is why he describes ordinary performatives as “linguistic declarations”. As we have seen, Searle opts for the declaration analysis only because the statement you make by uttering, e.g., “I order you to leave”, does not guarantee its truth. Its truth consists in the act that I am ordering you to leave, but how could a statement make itself true? In Searle’s terms, how could a statement, with the “word-to-world direction of fit”, bring about the “world-to-word direction of fit”? Only declarations, with their “double direction of fit” (p. 547), are capable of doing that. Searle formerly thought he could account for this “with self-referentiality plus the lexical meaning of some peculiar verbs, but it turned out that the apparatus was too weak” (p. 547). So he now thinks that “executive self-referentiality” is needed, and only declarations made using performatives sentences have it.

We agree with Searle that declarations are acts of the sort that conventionally effect changes and create facts, and that they do this not causally but constitutively. They can end meetings, start wars, and establish marriages. However, the declarative analysis does not apply to ordinary performatives, for these do not create facts in the same way as genuine declarations. The linguistic fact created by an ordinary performatives consists simply in the fact that an act of a certain sort (and with a certain content) has been made, such as the fact that I have ordered you to leave, and this, in turn, consists simply in the fact that a certain attitude has been expressed. No special convention is needed to account for this fact, which is merely a matter of having a certain communicative intention, and there is no further fact “created” by the performatives as the result of

20 However, as we point out when we contrast conventional with communicative speech acts (pp. 116–119), a single utterance may count as an act of both sorts. For example, a policeman who says “You’re under arrest!” may be not only arresting you but telling you (indirectly) that you’ve committed a crime.

21 These cases typically involve a special ritual phrase, like “I dub thee”, “Guilty”, or “Nay”. We call such cases “locution-specific” (p. 110).
true. Performative utterances are statements too, and only those confined to specific institutional situations are declarations. We have argued that Searle's critique of our account depends on conflating performativity with communicative success. We agree with him that the performativity of performative utterances does not depend on their being statements: only their communicative success does. However, their performativity requires no special explanation, such as that offered by Searle's declaration analysis, for they are but one example of standardized forms of words used to perform speech acts indirectly. Their communicative success has essentially, though not in detail, the same pattern of explanation as other standardized indirect speech acts. The mere fact that performatives make explicit the type of speech act being performed does not make them theoretically special.\footnote{We are indebted to Bruce Fraser, John Searle, and an anonymous referee for their comments, suggestions, and (from two of the three) endorsements.}

\section*{References}


Department of Philosophy
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA 94132
U.S.A.

Department of Philosophy
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721
U.S.A.