UNIT 15: AUSTIN'S SPEECH ACTS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the concept of Austin's speech act
- discuss the characteristics of performative utterances
- discuss the necessary conditions of performatives
- explain the different types of speech acts

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you Austin's speech act theory.John Langshaw Austin is a leading spirit of ordinary language philosophy or linguistic philosophy. His book ***How to do Things with words*** introduces himself as a genuine supporter of ordinary language philosophy views that the business of philosophy is not puzzle solving. His emphasis on ordinary language can be discussed under the distinction between constatives and performatives. Austin's speech act theory bears a very close affinity in technique and style with Wittgenstein's theory of language-games.

This unit includes the issues like-characteristics of performative utterances, necessary conditions of performatives, and types of speech acts.

15.3 AUSTIN'S SPEECH ACT

Austin's philosophy of language rests on the concept of speech act. He holds it as the technique of ordinary language analysis. His view is that acts are performed with the help of words or sentences. There are different kinds of acts. Just as acts are performed in playing football or cricket or making ornaments or in building houses etc. so also there are various types of speech acts like stating, swearing, reporting, questioning etc. In this context, David E. Copper points out two important points Austin's insistence on Speech act— i) To discover what the sentence was being used to say, we must look at the total act performed by the speaker with the aid of the sentence. ii) there is the pragmatic justification that by etudingsentences as parts of total speech acts, unsuspected contributions to various philosophical debates may be derived.

It is evident that Austin's concepts of speech acts like constatives and performatives explore extrinsic and intrinsic structures of language. He identifies that speech act may be constative and performative. He by the performative utterance explicates that it is the utterance of doing an act. It is not true or false, rather it is an act-oriented utterance. While, constative utterance is an utterance of a sentence or statement which is either true or false. As for instance, 'the dog is on the mat', can be asserted to be true or false, but the utterance like 'I promise', 'I swear', 'I apologize', are neither true nor false, but the speaker performs some act thereby. These utterances are performative. In the context of performative utterance,an act is performed by the speaker immediately when the utterance is made. In case of performative utterance the verb like 'to apologize', 'to swear', 'to guarantee', are not used to describe or report something like 'he is apolozing', or 'I am swearing', but are used to describe or report something like 'he is apolozing', or 'I am swearing', but are used to perform certain acts.

15.3.1 Characteristics of Performative utterances

Austin has given two characteristics of performative utterances. They are respectively-

i) A: They do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all. Therefore, are not 'true or false'; and

ii) B: The utterance of the sentence is a part of the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as; saying something.

15.3.2 Criterion for distinguishing Performative utterance from Constative utterance

Austin puts –"we must ask: is there something precise way in which we can definitely distinguish the performative from the constative utterance? And in particular, we should naturally ask first whether there is some grammatical criterion for distinguishing constative from the performative utterance. There are two distinct criteria given by Austin. They are as follows:

The first criterion is grammatical criterion. According to this criterion, the using of the verb in the sentence/statement must be in the first person present tense. As for instance, 'He is swearing', 'I apologized', are not considered as performatives. Because the mentioned utterances are not made in the first person present tense. It also entails that acts are not performed immediately by uttering the sentences. Again the sentences like 'I apologized', 'He warned', are not considered as performative also because the above sentences/statements serve to describe or report the action performed by the speaker or somebody else in the past tense. Therefore, performative utterances are made to perform an act in the first person present tense alone. As for instance, 'I name this road LacitBorphukan Road', here the utterance is not used by the assertor to report or describe. Rather, it is used to perform the act of naming the road after LacitBorphukan.

The second criterion is vocabulary criterion. According to this criterion, the word 'here by' is used in the sentence/ statement. As for instance,

i) You are 'here by' authorised by

ii) He is 'here by' ordered to vacate….

iii) Passengers are 'here by' warned against crossing

Austin by the word 'here by' shows that it is utilised as instrument for effecting the act of 'warning', 'authorising', 'ordering', etc. So, he writes that the word 'here by' is a useful criterion that the utterance is performative.

An utterance is an act, What we talk or speak is an activity or act. So, the utterance is an act means performing or doing an act. But there is a difference between the utterance as an act and the utterance as content. As for example, the sentence, 'this day is very hot', can be explained from the two directions. One is from the utterance as an act and the other is from the utterance as content. The former identifies that the utterance is happy or unhappy, felicity or infelicity, fire or misfire. While, the later holds that the utterance as content is true or false.

Truth and falsity are the distinguishing marks of constatives, while happy or unhappy, felicity or infelicity are the distinguishing marks performatives. Austin says-

"Performatives utterances are not indeed false but in general unhappy. And for this reason, we call the doctrine of the things that can be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of infelicities."

15.3.3 Necessary Conditions of Performatives

Austin gives some necessary conditions for smooth functioning of performatives.

(A-1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that

procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,

(A-2) The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.

(B-1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

(B-2) Completely.

(T-1) Where, as often, the procedure 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, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further.

(T-2) must actually so to conduct themselves subsequently

Austin holds that making an utterance is a speech activity. Activity comes into light when the utterance made by the speaker is performed. Speech acts denote various activities (stating or warning or promising etc.) Austin's both performative and constative utterances imply speech acts. Therefore, dissolving the distinction between the two propounds the new concept, i.e., speech act theory.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who is the author of the book- How to do things with words?

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Q 2: What are the different kinds of speech acts?

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Q 3: What is performative utterance? Give an example

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Q 4: What is constative utterance? Give an example

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Q 5: What is meant by grammatical criterion?

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Q 6: What is the difference between utterance as an act and utterance as content?

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Q 7: State the distinguishing marks of constatives and performatives

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15.3.4 Types of Speech acts

Austin formulates three types of speech acts. They are respectively-

i) Locutionay act

ii) Illocutionary act

iii) Perlocutionary act

Locutionary act can be exposed as such whenever we make an utterance, we perform an act, what Austin calls locutionary act. As for instance, 'what is your name?', here we perform an act i.e., locutionary act. Austin says, "Locutionary act includes the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with certain meaning."

In saying something (performing a locutionaryact) we perform another kind of act. It can be shown through examples as such- If I ask, 'what is your name?' I have performed in this context a locutionary act. Butlocutionary act can produce different kinds of speech acts (i.e., in making a promise or in issuing an order or in asking question etc.) in the context of utterance of a statement. Austin calls such acts illocutionary act. So, locutionary utterance is the initial stage to perform illocutionary act. It provides a force to perform illocutionary act. Therefore, illocutionary act is known as illocutionary force. Therefore, he writes- "to state is surely every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce."

The last act can be explained as such- when we say something we perform a locutionary act and in performing locutionary act we perform another kind of act, i.e., perlocutionary act. It imparts certain effects upon the feeling, thoughts or actions of the audience or of the speaker. Therefore, it is perlocutionary act. For instance, when I say –Do this work, I perform an act i.e., locutionary act (utterance of the statement). And in performing the locutionary act I order someone to perform the intended act (illocutionary). And by this utterance I see that the act is performed (perlocutionary). To sum up, here I have performed locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary act.

Austin's performative and constative utterances and his speech act theory are basically dealt with ordinary language. His locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts are the best device to unveil the defects of ordinary language.

Austin's three types of speech acts namely locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary act imply the different functions of language. Like Wittgenstein's language games or forms of life he wants to show that language is not confined to one function. Here Austin also like Later Wittgenstein seems to corroborate the depth grammar through the illocutionary or perlocutionary force of language. Austin involves the speech act theory in order to bring out the different functions of language. Similarly, Wittgenstein also involves the concept of language games or forms of life in order to point out the multifarious functions embedded in language. Hence, it can be opined that Wittgenstein's speech act theory are same from the standpoint of its aim and objective.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What is locutionary act?

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Q 9: What is illocutionary act?

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Q 10: What is per-locutionary act?

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15.4 LET US SUM UP

- Austin's philosophy of language rests on the concept of speech act. His view is that acts are performed with the help of words or sentences. There are different kinds of acts. Just as acts are performed in playing football or cricket or making ornaments or in building houses etc. so also there are various types of speech acts like stating, swearing, reporting, questioning etc.

- According to Austin, speech act may be constative and performative. He by the performative utterance explicates that it is the utterance of doing an act. It is not true or false, rather it is an act-oriented utterance. While, constative utterance is an utterance of a sentence or statement which is either true or false.
- Austin formulates three types of speech acts. They are respectively- i) Locutionay act, ii) Illocutionary act, iii) Perlocutionary act
- Locutionary act implies that whenever we make an utterance, we perform an act, what Austin calls locutionary act. As for instance, 'what is your name?', here we perform an act i.e., locutionary act.
- Locutionary utterance is the initial stage to perform illocutionary act. It provides a force to perform illocutionary act. Therefore, illocutionary act is known as illocutionary force.
- When we say something, we perform a locutionary act and in performing locutionary act, we perform another kind of act, i.e., perlocutionary act. It imparts certain effects upon the feeling, thoughts or actions of the audience or of the speaker. Therefore, it is perlocutionary act.
- Austin formulates the speech act theory in order to bring out the different functions of language. Similarly, Wittgenstein also involves the concept of language games or forms of life in order to point out the multifarious functions embedded in language.



15.5 FURTHER READINGS

1) Austin, J.L. (1961). *How to Do things with Words*. Clarendon press. Oxford

2) Ammerman, Robert R (ed.) (1965) Classics of Analytic Philosophy (Tata McGraw- Hill Publishing Company, Bombay- New Delhi