

Austin's Quartet?

On pages 137-138 of “How to talk” (in *Philosophical Papers*), Austin describes the conditions on a “satisfactory” utterance in speech situation S_0 . It is not quite clear why he opts for the word satisfactory, rather than simply calling the assertion true. At the expense of possibly reading too much into Austin’s terse definition, I assume something along the lines of the following: Truth is a speaker independent property of a proposition in a possible world, while the assertion is crucially speaker and situation dependent. That is, a speaker may misrefer and/or misapprehend a natural link, and thus produce an utterance which is not satisfactory, but (coincidentally) nonetheless true. Thus truth is a byproduct of the requirement that, in asserting, a speaker must be aware of a natural link (match) *and* the conventional links (reference and sense) which license the linguistic expression of that natural link.

As the speech situation stands, the speaker has nothing to gain from making an assertion.¹ Since we are assuming, with Austin, that a speaker is not misinformed about any of the “conventional links” or mistaken as to the nature of any natural links (p. 140), we cannot really claim that there is a difference (for the speaker) between taking the type of an item or the sense of a T-word for granted, or *not* taking them for granted – either the speaker knows the conventions, or (s)he doesn’t. On the other hand, it is quite clear that there is a real difference for the speaker between fitting a type to an item, and fitting an item to a type; specifically, if we follow Austin in assuming no type ambiguity, there will be one and only one type for any item, while for any type there may be many items

¹ In fact it does not seem to me that we ever have much to gain in the short term from asserting. An assertion seems to be more of an investment in the discourse; we gain, not by asserting *per se*, but only when our discourse partner(s) react to the assertion. This is just as true of sermons and political speeches, where the reaction is expected in terms of converted sinners or votes. It is also true that we occasionally assert things to ourselves, from which we may gain clarity of thought, or by which we may structure memory, but this isn’t really a discourse situation. While Austin’s quartet may be applicable to these assertions as well, discussion of them is appropriately framed at the intersection of language and cognition (and flirts dangerously with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), not at the intersection of language and use as Austin seems to intended.

which match it.² On this view, it seems that a speaker must choose (or be compelled) to make either a “top tier” or a “bottom tier” assertion, but that the assertion, per assertion will be ambiguous between Placing and Describing, or Instancing and Casting. I may alter *how* I give the assertion depending on what I perceive your needs to be; but if I match a type to an item for you, firm in my conviction that you are looking for a Placing, if you needed a Description you will take it that way, my intentions notwithstanding. The fact that you perceive my mistake is irrelevant.

If this seems counterintuitive, a more mundane example may help. It may happen that you ask me to hand you a gun which I am holding. Assuming that I do not perceive that I have a choice in this, I may nonetheless vary my actions depending on what I expect you to do. If I expect that you are collecting evidence, I will simply hand you the gun, expecting you to put it in a bag. If, on the other hand, I expect that you want to turn the gun on me, I will first remove the bullets hoping for some strategic advantage, however slight – maybe I can run away while you are fiddling with the various bits I’ve handed to you. Crucially, once you have the weapon, you can do with it what you will. Either way, I have handed you the gun that went into the bag... or shot me.

All of this is to say that it is only possible to rank an assertion (questions are not limited in this way) in the quartet once it has been both given *and taken*. So I will speak as follows: I can *frame* either a top or bottom tier assertion, but I can *perform* any of Austin’s quartet *for someone*. If I have perceived the need correctly, then the event will be of the same type as the performance. I will not go further into events which do not correspond to the associated performance. Henceforth I will assume that the speaker’s intention in performing an assertion is identical to the questioner’s (listener’s) need, and will speak as if they were

² Naturally, there can also be types which match only one item (First presidents of the United States), as there can be types which match no items (species evolved from humans – Austin is not clear whether S_o allows for item-less types). Of those types which match many items, those items may be finite (residents of NYC) or infinite (natural numbers) in number.

interchangeable. What is needed know is a purpose for our asserting. While many purposes are available, the clearest and simplest should an exchange of information. Each content of the assertion should be informative *for the listener/questioner*. Of the listener/questioner we must require not only a need or want of being informed, but also a willingness/openness to accept that information (e.g. if a tell you that your best friend is a crook, you may have need of this information, but nonetheless, be unwilling to accept it). Both conditions are necessary for an informative *event* to occur.

The following are Austin's quartet in the context of an informative event, described from a neutral perspective:

- Placing – I have (know) an item and want to use it learn (tell) about a type.
- Describing – An item exists and I want to find a type which will tell me (you) something about that item.
- Instancing – A type exists and I want to find an item which will tell me (you) something about that type.
- Casting – I know (have) a type and want to use it to learn (tell) about an item.

The top tier seems perfectly clear, so I will concentrate on the bottom. As mentioned above, since both Instancing and Casting are Item fitting (I assuming that each type contains more than one, but finitely many items), there will be no one unique correct event of either type. If I know that a type exists – say A-bar movement (this has the advantage that its type can be identified by inspection) – then I may ask for an Instance of it. Having this instance will inform my knowledge of the convention of sense associated with that T-word. Presumably we can say that, within the speaker, the onus of match was on the part that turned out to be informative. But as I have revealed above, that particular turn of phrase doesn't really say anything to me. It may also be that I not only know that a particular type exists, but also what its nature is. In this case, I want an example of it, not in order to know more about the type, but in order to have an

item of that type (in hand, as it were) so I can take advantage of the fact that it is of that type – e.g. get me a remote that will work with this TV.

It is not clear to me, that either Instancing or Casting should place any requirement on the number of items that are provided. If I wish to know about A-bar movement, I may not feel sufficiently informed by one Instance, and will therefore require several. I may even request that you Instance me every item of a type – e.g. show me every issue of LI ever published, so I can know the exact nature of the type “LI.” Similarly I can ask for several examples in a Casting – e.g. bring me ten remotes that work with this TV, so I can put one on under and next to each of my three chairs, plus one on the TV in case I lose the other nine. I can also ask for every item in a Casting – e.g. give me a list of every student in this department, so I can put them on a mailing list. Linguistics may put a requirement on number or completeness, but the nature of the bottom tier does not seem to.

Corrupt politicians:

The corrupt politician example does not comply with the conditions that I set up above in that the questioner is not receptive to the information proffered, so it can only reach the level of a communicative performance, not an informative event. The situation is as follows:

Rudy: NY has been completely cured of corruption, I challenge you to find even one corrupt politician here.

Response: *Al* is a corrupt politician.

Again, this is not a case of an informative event, because there is no possibility that Rudy’s world view will change in any way at the end of this exchange. However we have performed a casting here, because our intention was not to inform Rudy about the nature of corruption, but to inform him about

AI's *type*. Of course, we could equally imagine that Rudy is somehow misguided about the nature of corruption, and then tell him (sadly), "AI is a corrupt politician... that thing we saw him do last week: that showed it." Of course we would still not really expect this assertion to change anything, but this performance would be an Instancing.

This leads to the conclusion that a request for an instance (note: lower case) issued as a challenge, is a request for a Casting performance. We may only perform an Instancing if we believe that the challenger is misguided.