Austin on Literal Meaning

Odai Al Zoubi

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the debate between Alice Crary and Nat Hansen concerning Austin's view of 'literal meaning'. Crary suggests that Austin thinks that there is no literal meaning, while Hansen thinks that for Austin there is literal meaning. I will argue that for Austin there is indeed a literal meaning, a fixed meaning, which sentences carry across all occasions of use, however, such meaning does not suffice to determine whether, independent of these occasions, the sentences can be used to say something true or false. Thus I suggest a middle ground between the two readings. My reading highlights the importance of Austin's claim that 'true' is a dimension-word, which both Crary and Hansen overlook.

Keywords: *J. L. Austin, truth, literal meaning, speech acts*

In this paper, I analyse a recent debate between Alice Crary and Nat Hansen concerning Austin's view of 'literal meaning'. The question which Crary and Hansen debate is whether Austin thinks that there is a literal meaning of sentences, namely what is true or false *and* is invariant over different uses. Crary thinks that he doesn't and Hansen thinks that he does. I will seek to show that the answer lies somewhere between these two poles: I will argue that, according to Austin, (at least some) non-ambiguous sentences have a fixed meaning, which they carry across all occasions of use. Such sentences meaning what they do, however, does not suffice to determine whether, independent of these occasions, the sentences can be used to say something true or false. This interpretation stands in contrast to Crary's interpretation in so far as Crary denies that sentences have such a fixed meaning; it stands in contrast to Hansen's interpretation in so far as Hansen affirms that sentences having such fixed meaning suffices to determine whether, independent

of occasions of use, the sentences can be used to say something true or false.

My key claim is that both sides of the debate ignore one of Austin's most important findings: that 'true' is a dimension-word. Whilst both parties represent some aspects of Austin's position correctly, their failure to ramify fully his view that 'true' is a dimension-word undermines their conclusions. I will show that the identification of 'true' as a dimension-word is central to Austin's theory of speech acts and fundamental to his view on literal meaning.

Firstly, in section 1, I will introduce Crary's and Hansen's arguments. Next, in section 2, I will explain what a dimension-word is and how Austin takes 'true' to be such a word. I will then argue that Austin's view of 'true' as a dimension-word plays a central role in introducing his theory of speech acts. In particular, as we shall see in 3, it influenced the development of that theory, ultimately forcing him to abandon his distinction between performatives and constatives. It is only against this background that we will be able to understand the relation of truth to the two parts of the speech act, the locutionary and the illocutionary, as we shall see in 4, and then we will go back to the Hansen-Crary debate on Austin's views of 'literal meaning'. Finally, in 5, I will summarise my conclusions.

1   *Crary and Hansen on Austin on literal meaning*

Crary gives a reading of Austin which portrays him as attacking the view of 'literal meaning'. According to Crary, Austin tries to show that the 'traditional statement' is an illusion.

> The picture of correspondence between language and the facts that Austin takes to be implicit in a traditional ideal of the 'statement' is one on which the business of corresponding to the facts is the prerogative of what might be called bi-polar 'statements' or propositions, i.e. 'statements' or propositions that always describe states of affairs either truly or falsely.[1]

Crary continues '[Austin] proceeds by arguing that this idea [the traditional statement] is nourished by a view of meaning on which sentences possess what are sometimes called literal meanings (i.e. meanings they carry with them into every context of use) and by arguing that this view fails to withstand critical scrutiny.'[2]

Crary's argument can be divided into two steps. In the first, Crary maintains that

> Austin stresses that he thinks that whenever I say anything ... I perform both a locutionary act ... and an illocutionary act... He is drawn towards this view by the thought that there is no such thing as identifying the meaning of a combination of words (or: no such thing as identifying the 'locutionary act' performed when a combination of words is uttered) independently of an appreciation of how those words are being used to say something to someone on a particular occasion (or: independently of an appreciation of their 'illocutionary force')[3]

In the second, Crary takes the interrelated connection between locutionary and illocutionary acts to show that there cannot be a literal meaning of sentences.

> Austin's account of locutionary and illocutionary acts, taken as a whole, brings into question the idea that we might develop a theory that could be used to identify the locutionary acts performed whenever particular sentences are used... he criticizes it by rejecting as flawed an idea that it presupposes, viz., that it is possible to isolate the locutionary act that is performed when a particular sentence is employed in the absence of a grasp of the illocutionary force with which it is being used.[4]

According to Crary, then, Austin thinks that the sentence cannot carry with it an invariant literal meaning in all its uses because, in order to understand an utterance, the whole speech act has to be grasped. Because we can't separate the two acts, because we need to understand the speech act as a whole, it is not possible to understand the 'locutionary meaning' in isolation from the whole speech act, and there therefore cannot be an invariant literal meaning. So Crary doesn't just deny that sentences, independent of occasions of use, can be used to say something true or false; she also denies that such sentences have fixed meaning, independent of these occasions.

Hansen disagrees with Crary. He argues that Austin seems to endorse the literal meaning view, where literal meaning 'is that grasp of the meanings of words and the rules by which they are combined into complex expressions (including sentences) [which] enables one to know what has to be the case in order for the sentence to be true.'[5]

Firstly, Hansen maintains that Austin thought that locutionary acts could be separated from illocutionary acts. 'Austin nowhere explicitly commits himself to the idea that identifying the locutionary act performed by an utterance requires an appreciation of the illocutionary act performed by that utterance as well.'[6] He quotes Austin saying that

> [i]t might be perfectly possible, with regard to an utterance, say 'It is going to charge', to make entirely plain 'what we were saying' in issuing the utterance... and yet not at all to have cleared up whether or not in issuing the utterance I was performing the [illocutionary] act of warning or not. It may be perfectly clear what I mean by 'It is going to charge' or 'Shut the door', but not clear whether it is meant as a statement or warning, etc.[7]

If Hansen is correct, and we can understand the locutionary meaning in isolation from the illocutionary force, it might be possible to read Austin as allowing that a literal meaning might be assigned to the locutionary part.[8]

But Hansen, secondly, goes further. According to him, even if you have to understand the whole speech act in order to understand the locutionary meaning, this does not entail that there is no 'literal meaning'. As long as there is a distinction between 'locutionary meaning' and 'illocutionary force', and as long as we think that there is a way to make this distinction clear, it is possible that different speech acts might have different 'forces' and still share the same 'meaning'. He maintains that there is nothing in Crary's argument which blocks this approach and that, as a result, it is plausible that this shared 'meaning' is indeed invariant across different uses, and is what is true or false.[9]

Hansen doesn't just affirm that sentences, independent of occasions of use, might have fixed meaning; he also affirms that this fixed meaning suffices to determine whether the sentences can be used to say something true or false, independent of these occasions.

However, both Crary's and Hansen's accounts of what is 'true' or 'false' and the locutionary/illocutionary distinction is problematic. I will argue that Austin's view lies in between these poles: for Austin, sentences have a fixed meaning, which they carry across all occasions of use, however, such fixed meaning does not suffice to determine whether, independent of these occasions, the sentences can be used to say something true or false.

The interpretation I propose is compatible, in its main lines, with Charles Travis's influential views of truth and meaning. Travis dis-

tinguishes between two kinds of what he calls semantic properties for sentences. 'The first sort of property is one of relating in a given way to truth (or falsity). Properties of being true (false) if, given, of, or only if, thus and so, or thus, or the way things are, are all within this class... The second sort are properties identified without mention of truth, and on which truth-involving properties depend'[10]. According to Travis, there are some properties, what we can describe as a level of meaning the words (sentences) would have independent of being true or false. However, there is another level of meaning, other properties, which relate to judgements of true or false. Travis then distinguishes between the fixed meaning sentences carry across all occasions of use, on the one hand, and what is to be true or false on the other. The latter is to be identified according to a specific speaking of the words, in occasions of use. I find Travis's view closer to Austin than Crary and Hansen, and I will explain why in this paper.

Travis does not intend to give an explicit interpretation of Austin's text nor does he cash out his view in terms of locutionary meaning and illocutionary force, as I will do, he nevertheless acknowledges Austin as an inspiration. In the introduction to his *Occasion Sensitivity*, he quotes Austin on the relation between sentences and truth,

> 'It seems to be fairly generally realized nowadays that if you just take a bunch of sentences . . . impeccably formulated in some language or other, there can be no question of sorting them out into those that are true and those that are false; for (leaving out of account so-called 'analytic' sentences) the question of truth and falsehood does not turn only on what a sentence *is*, nor yet on what it *means*, but on, speaking very broadly, the circumstances in which it is uttered. Sentences are not *as such* either true or false.[11]

The difference between my interpretation and Travis's view lies in my attempt to give an explicit interpretation of Austin's text, and in my claim that Austin's view that 'true' is a dimension-word is the key to understand Austin's views on truth, a claim Travis doesn't give the crucial role I give.[12]

To understand Austin's position on literal meaning, I start by examining his claim that 'true' is a dimension-word. To avoid any misunderstanding, I want to make it clear that in the following I distinguish between sentence-meaning, which is the subject of the debate on literal meaning as explained above, and word-meaning. My discussion in section 2 is restricted to word-meaning, in this case the word 'true'. My

argument is that Austin's claim that true is a dimension-word, i.e. that it has different but related meanings, as will be explained below, is crucial to understand his views of sentence-meaning. However, we need to keep the two accounts, the account of Austin's view of word-meaning and his view of sentence-meaning, distinct all through. This will be clearer below.

2   *True as a dimension-word*

Austin distinguishes between two kinds of words: words that have one meaning, and words that have multiple, unrelated meanings. In his examination of the different uses of 'real', Austin points out that this word 'does not have one single, specifiable, always-the-same *meaning... Nor* does it have a large number of different meanings – it is not *ambiguous*, even "systematically."'[13] According to Austin, there are words that have always-the-same-meaning, like 'yellow' or 'horse', and, on the other hand, there are ambiguous words like 'bank', which can mean either a financial institution or the edge of a river. These are completely different meanings.[14] There is, nevertheless, a middle ground between these two kinds of words. He writes; 'If we rush up with a demand for a definition in the simple manner of Plato or many other different philosophers, if we use the rigid dichotomy "same meaning, different meanings"... we shall simply make hashes of things.'[15] Many philosophers neglect this middle ground, he thinks, and, as a result, they fall into a false dichotomy: 'one meaning/ambiguity', which often causes them erroneously to look for one meaning for each word.

In particular, Austin argues that with certain types of word that have multiple meanings there might be something in common between all the uses of the word, but that this commonality exists at an 'abstract' level, and that focusing on this common factor obscures the many differences that exist at the 'concrete', contextual level. In other words, the meaning of these words involves two levels: what we might term 'abstract meaning'/'semantic function' and 'specific meaning'. The former, in virtue of being abstract, might well be consistent across uses of the word in different contexts and cases, whereas the latter is likely to vary depending on the circumstances and contexts in which the word is used. To use today's jargon, we might say that these two levels of meaning correspond to the semantics-pragmatics division: abstract meaning is semantic, and specific meanings are pragmatic.

We can say that according to Austin, we have three types of words:

unambiguous words, which always have the same meaning, like 'yellow' and 'horse', and ambiguous words, which have two or more totally different and unrelated meanings, like 'bank'. The third type of word is words that have different but related meanings: multiple-related-meanings words like 'true', 'real' and 'freedom'. There are many different kinds of words of this type; one prominent type is 'dimension-words'. [16] According to Austin, 'true' is a dimension-word: as we will explain below, its abstract meaning is to appraise the relation between words and the world, its specific meaning is to specify this appraisal in different ways: 'accurate', 'not very good', 'too concise', 'general'... etc.

Things would be clearer after we examine some examples below. The dimension-word 'is the most general and comprehensive term in a whole group of terms of the same kind, terms that fulfil the same [semantic] function.'[17] For example, according to Austin, 'real' is the most abstract word in a group of words which have the same semantic function, the same abstract meaning. Members of this group of words, 'on the affirmative side, are, for example, "proper", "genuine", "live", "true", "authentic", [and] "natural"; and on the negative side, "artificial", "fake", "false", "bogus", "makeshift", "dummy", "synthetic", [and] "toy".' (Austin, 1962, p. 71). Thus, 'real' picks out a set of words which all possess the same semantic function, the abstract meaning 'real', but which are also individually chosen in their different forms in order to convey the particular sense of 'reality' (or its opposite) appropriate to the specific context in which they are used.

Dimension-words define a semantic dimension and the range of terms appropriate to the particular abstract meaning or semantic function of the particular dimension-word. The dimension-word could, in fact, substitute for any of the members of the family of words within its dimension in virtue of all members possessing this abstract meaning along with their own context specific concrete meaning. However, the necessarily abstract nature of the meaning of the dimension-word means that its usage in particular situations would be unlikely to convey the required specificity of concrete meaning. Thus, although the abstract meaning/semantic function of all of the terms in one family is the same and is constant in all the uses of a dimension word, Austin wants to show, that identifying this common thing and focusing on it will not provide a sufficiently robust or accurate basis on which to determine meaning. The semantic function is too thin; it needs to be supplemented by the specific meaning, which is to be changed according to the context.

It is the combination of the shared abstract meaning and the context-

related specific meaning which means that dimension-words don't have one meaning in all of their uses, and yet are not ambiguous. Rather, they have a number of different-but-related specific meanings which are unified by their common possession of the 'abstract meaning' of the term.

Austin thinks that 'true' is a 'dimension-word', in virtue of which it has something in common in all of its uses, what we called the 'abstract meaning'/semantic function, but no one *specific* meaning in all of its contexts or circumstances of use.[18] The semantic function associated with 'true' fulfils the following purpose: ''True' and 'false' are just general labels for a whole dimension of different appraisals which have something or other to do with the relation between what we say and the facts.'[19] In addition, he notes that the different terms which belong to the family, and share this semantic function, are quite diverse. Thus, we find within its ambit terms such as 'exaggerated', 'vague', 'bald', 'rough', 'misleading', 'not very good', 'general', 'too concise', 'fair' ... etc. These are the terms which we, in ordinary language, use for the appraisals of utterances. All members of the family share the same semantic function, to assess the relation between utterances and the world, but differ from each other in other aspects and characteristics.

According to Austin, it is rare that we use 'true' or 'false' in ordinary language. Austin, as we shall see, thinks that ordinary users employ these abstract terms only in logic and mathematics. Instead, we tend to pick a member of the family (such as 'exaggerated' or 'vague') that better represents the particular aspect of truth or falsity appropriate to the situation. Philosophers, however, are inclined to do the opposite and focus only on the two most abstract terms in their discussions, and ignore the other terms of the family more suited to normal or ordinary cases.[20]

To illustrate the point, let us examine an example from Austin: 'the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg'.[21] He encourages us to ask whether this statement is true or false. His view is that we cannot tell if this statement is 'true' or 'false' independent of the purpose of making it and its audience. Thus, if the context and audience are such that a rough or approximate similarity will suffice, such as might occur in a discussion with young children about shapes of different star systems, then we may agree that the statement is 'true'. Similarly, if we were talking to an astrophysicist who would base a number of precise calculations on our answer, we will almost certainly have to reply that the statement is 'false'.

This example thus supports his underlying claim that 'true' is a

dimension-word. As we have seen above, we are generally able to answer the question concerning the truth of the claim only if we are given sufficient context. In addition, it seems equally clear that, in ordinary language, we would indicate any contextually determined lack of precision by using a more specific word from within Austin's putative family of words in the 'true' dimension. Thus, in the circumstances of discussing the shapes of star systems with small children, we might well say that the galaxy is 'like', or 'roughly' the shape of a fried egg. This seems to indicate that the range of words Austin's 'true' dimension can be used, from the abstract through to the concrete, depend on the purpose, audience and context of the utterance.

Let us take another example from his explanation on 'real'. The difference between the dimension word 'real' and the less abstract terms in its family of words is the following: 'the less general terms on the affirmative side have the merit, in many cases, of suggesting more or less definitely what it is that is being excluded; they tend to pair off, that is, with particular terms on the negative side and thus, so to speak, to narrow the range of possibilities.'[22] Austin offers some examples of this; '[I]f I say that I wish the university had a proper theatre, this suggests that it has at present a makeshift theatre; pictures are genuine as opposed to fake, silk is natural as opposed to artificial, ammunition is live as opposed to dummy, and so on.'[23] In each of these cases, that which is excluded is more clearly defined, and the intended meaning better captured, because the more specific and more concrete member of the family is used rather than the more abstract dimension-word.

The abstract word can substitute the more specific word in any context. Note that the substitution works only in one direction: For example, in assessing an utterance as 'fair', what we are doing can always be done by using the more abstract word, the dimension-word, 'true'; however, if we want to assess an utterance as 'true', we cannot use 'fair' instead of 'true' in any context, but only in some specific contexts.[24] In addition, you cannot substitute one of the specific words of the family with another specific word.

The context-independent abstract level (in this case 'true') is generally too thin to carry the burden of expressing specific semantic meaning, hence its substitution in specific circumstances by the sorts of words Austin lists. However, the dimension-word, in virtue of being the most abstract representation, *can* in principle substitute for any of the specific words in its family, but it is clear from these examples that its effectiveness in conveying meaning in such circumstances will be limited.

The problem, as Austin sees it, is that philosophers focus on the abstract words and ignore the more specific ones. In other words, they always substitute the abstract words for the specific ones. Austin looks at the words we use in everyday life and finds that we generally use the more specific ones while the more abstract words are only used rarely. He, thus, gives us a new insight into the working of dimension-words, and into their different, but related, meanings. This insight is crucial to understand his theory of speech acts, and his views of literal meaning and sentence-meaning, which we will discuss in the next sections, starting with the performative/constative distinction.

3   The performative/constative distinction and its collapse

In his earlier writings, such as 'Other Minds' and 'Truth', Austin proposes that we can distinguish between 'performatives' and 'statements'. I will call this the 'constative/performative doctrine'. In *How To Do Things with Words*, 'Performative Utterances' and 'Performatives-Constatives', however, Austin later finds that the distinction is instable, expressly because 'truth' is a dimension-word, and he comes to realize that a new theory of speech acts is needed as a result. In what follows, I trace his thought through this development, starting with the performative/constative distinction and its collapse.

3.1   The performative/constative distinction

According to Austin, philosophers used to take every utterance of the declarative grammatical form (an utterance which is a not question, command... etc.) to describe states of affairs, or report or state facts. As a result, they thought that they must be either true or false.[25] Other utterances, which don't take the declarative form, such as questions or commands, are not 'true' or 'false'. Let us call utterances which are either true or false 'statements'[26]. However, says Austin, 'it has come to be realized that many utterances which have been taken to be statements (merely because they are not, on grounds of grammatical form, to be classed as commands, questions, etc.) are not in fact descriptive, nor susceptible of being true or false.'[27] Austin observes that an utterance which takes the declarative form is not a statement 'when it is a formula in a calculus: when it is a performatory utterance: when it is a value-judgement: when it is a definition: when it is part of a work of fiction'.[28] These are different kinds of utterances: they take the declarative form,

but are not descriptive. One such important kind of utterance is the 'performative'.

According to Austin, the distinction between performatives and constatives is as follows.[29] Constatives are utterances which are either true or false. For example, when you state something, or describe something, or report something, your utterance is either true or false. Take for example 'the cat is on the mat'. This is a declarative sentence, which is descriptive. It describes how things are, and it is true or false, if the states of affairs are, or are not, as it states.

In uttering a performative, on the other hand, I do not describe a state of affairs, or report something, and my utterance cannot be taken to be true or false. Instead, I *do* something. For example, in a marriage ceremony, when I say 'I do', 'I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it'[30]; or when in some official ceremony I am supposed to name a ship, I say, 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth'; or when I say 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow'. Other examples include: 'I promise that ...' and 'I apologize'. Thus, in uttering a performative we get married, or name something, or promise, or apologize. What we say is not true or false, and we don't state, or describe, or report anything. We do something else.

However, simply uttering a performative is not sufficient to constitute the specific act. Saying a few words is not marrying: 'The words have to be said in the appropriate circumstances.'[31] One way to highlight this dependence on appropriate circumstances is to consider how we might *fail* in doing the act. For example, if I am married already, then saying 'I do' in the ceremony, will not make me married. If I am not the person who was chosen to name the ship, then saying 'I name this ship...' fails: the ship was not named, even though I uttered the words; and if no one wants to bet with me, then I haven't bet anyone. In each of these situations something goes wrong because some factor in the context is inappropriate. In such circumstances, according to Austin, the act is 'to some extent a failure: the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general unhappy'.[32]

However, in the next section we will see that Austin comes to realise that the constative/performative distinction is instable, and in accordance with its collapse, he offers his theory of speech acts.

3.2   *The collapse of the distinction*

In 'Truth', Austin says that 'many utterances which have been taken to be statements. . . are not in fact descriptive, nor susceptible of being true or false.'[33]   He gives some examples, performatives being one.[34] However, in the same paper, he states that it is common for statements to have a performatory aspect. He explains that '[I]t is common for quite ordinary statements to have a performatory 'aspect': to say that you are a cuckold may be to insult you, but it is also and at the same time to make a statement which is true or false.'[35]   The utterance 'you are a cuckold' is both: it is performative, to insult you, and it is descriptive, it is a statement, which is either true or false.

The difficulty is that this position seems inconsistent: on the one hand Austin seems to be denying performatives the capability to indicate truth or falsehood, but, on the other, he seems to grant them this ability. As a result, the fundamental distinction between performatives and constatives seems to be threatened, and Austin himself quickly realises this.

In particular, he recognises that for both kinds of utterances we often appraise the relation between the words and the world in the same way, using the same family of terms which belong to the dimension of 'truth'/ 'happiness'. Any utterance is appraised in relation to both the appropriate circumstances under which it is uttered, and the facts which the utterance somehow 'corresponds' to. Thus, constatives are assessed (being true or false) in relation to facts; however, the 'happiness' of performatives are assessed in relation to facts: we estimate rightly or wrongly; we find correctly or incorrectly; we argue soundly; we advise well; we judge fairly; we blame justifiably. In all these cases, our assessment relies on the facts: 'the question always arises whether the praise, blame, or congratulation was merited or unmerited'.[36] Equally, 'such adverbs as 'rightly', 'wrongly', 'correctly', and 'incorrectly' are used with statements too.'[37] All this make us question the original distinction between two kinds of utterances, constatives which are merely true or false and correspond to facts, and performatives, which were thought not to be true or false in virtue of neither describing nor stating things, and therefore not corresponding to facts. As a result, Austin asks 'Can we be sure that stating truly is a different class of assessment from arguing soundly, advising well, judging fairly, and blaming justifiably? Do these [performatives] not have something to do in complicated ways with facts?'[38] In assessing a performative to be happy or unhappy, using the adjectives above, '[F]acts come in as our knowledge or opinion about

facts.'[39] In other words, the happiness or unhappiness of performatives, which originally were thought to be independent of correspondence to the facts, turns out to be related to facts, as are constatives.

A similar difficulty arises when we consider constatives, whose truth values were originally thought to be independent of the circumstances of uttering the words. Austin gives the following example. 'Suppose that we confront 'France is hexagonal' with the facts, in this case, I suppose, with France, is it true or false? Well, if you like, up to a point; of course I can see what you mean by saying that it is true for certain intents and purposes.'[40] According to Austin, it is a 'rough description'. But we can't simply assess if it is true or false. Thus, as we saw earlier, 'it is good enough for a general top-ranking general, but not for a geographer'.[41] It is difficult to see how we can say it is true or false, without taking the circumstances of uttering it into account. Take another example: 'Lord Reaglan won the battle of Alma'. This is good enough for a school book, but not for a historical research.[42] More examples from 'Truth' include: 'Belfast is north of London', and 'the galaxy is the shape of fried egg' which we also discussed above. In all these cases, it seems that we can't tell if the statement is true or false without taking into account the circumstances under which it was uttered.

The upshot of this is that the distinction between performatives and constatives collapses. The distinction was supposed to show us that we have, on one hand, utterances which are true or false, which correspond to the facts and are independent of the circumstances of utterance, and, on the other hand, utterances which are not true or false, and are assessed according to the circumstances under which they are uttered. The above examination shows us that both kinds of utterances are often related both to facts and to the circumstances under which they uttered, and that they are both assessed in similar ways. And the key reason for this, according to Austin, is his view of 'truth' as a dimension-word. The terms which we use in assessing the performatives overlap with the terms we use in assessing constatives: we use the same family of words to describe and assess both performatives and constatives. Austin concludes '[W]hen a constative is confronted with the facts, we in fact appraise it in ways involving the employment of a vast array of terms which overlap with those that we use in the appraisal of performatives.'

The constative/performative distinction is instable; it distinguishes between constative: saying something, which is either true or false, and performative: doing something, which is either happy or unhappy. Now we have seen that the true/false and happy/unhappy criterion is flawed.

Next, we will see how Austin introduces a new theory of speech act to replace the collapsed distinction, how it is related to truth, and how the saying/doing distinction is also flawed.

4   *Austin's theory of speech acts and the role of truth into it*

The failure of the distinction between 'performatives' and 'constatives' prompted Austin to propose a new theory of speech acts. His key idea was that in analysing utterances we should distinguish between a locutionary act and an illocutionary act.

The locutionary act is 'the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain 'meaning'...'[43] This contrasts with the illocutionary act. As Austin puts it: 'To determine what illocutionary act is so performed we must determine in what way we are using the locution:

> [a]sking or answering a question,
> giving some information or an assurance or a warning,
> announcing a verdict or an intention,
> pronouncing a sentence,
> making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism,
> making an identification or giving a description,
> and the numerous like.[44]

What we have here, then, is a new theory which distinguishes between two acts, and between two different levels of meaning in accordance with the two acts. Thus, for example, we distinguish between the meaning of the utterance: 'Shoot her!', and the force of that utterance, which depends on the circumstances but could consist in urging, or advising, or ordering me to shoot her.[45] The words uttered in the locutionary act have a 'meaning', or a 'locutionary meaning', and in the 'illocutionary act' they have a 'force'. Note that Austin gives a technical sense to both 'meaning' and 'force'. 'Admittedly we can use 'meaning' also with reference to illocutionary force- 'He meant it as an order', etc. But I want to distinguish *force* and meaning.'[46]

Before going back to Austin's views on literal meaning, let me clarify one important point on the collapse of the constative/performative distinction: In secondary literature, the collapse of the distinction is seen, mainly, as a result of Austin's finding that stating is an act, just like performatives: stating, in the new theory, is just one of the illocutionary

acts. For example, John Searle writes that 'one of Austin's most important discoveries, [is] the discovery that constatives are illocutionary acts as well as performatives, or, in short, the discovery that statements are speech acts.'[47] Austin is clear enough on this point: 'Stating, describing, etc., are just two names among a very great many others for illocutionary acts.'[48]

The constatives/performative distinction is thus flawed, because it is based on a distinction between saying something and doing something, and Austin finds that constatives and performatives are both 'doing' and 'saying'. The new theory gives him a sophisticated tool to clarify how each utterances consists of different doings (acts), in different ways.[49]

My discussion in 3.2 above on the collapse of the distinction does not exclude the importance of this 'discovery', but it focuses on a neglected aspect of Austin's work: his claim that 'true' is a dimension-word.[50]

Now we can go back to the Hansen-Crary debate, and clarify the role of 'truth' in the new theory of speech act. Crary denies that sentences have a fixed meaning; Hansen affirms that sentences have a fixed meaning, and that this fixed meaning suffices to determine whether, independent of occasions of use, the sentences can be used to say something true or false. My claim is that for Austin, contrary to Crary's claim, there is an invariant meaning the sentences carries through different uses, this is the locutionary meaning. However, contrary to Hansen's claim, this meaning is not to be identified with what is true or false: what is true or false is the speech act as a whole and not any one part of it.

Let us start with the first of these two points. If we examine Austin's text we will see that he is happy to say that there is an invariant meaning the sentence carry in all its uses, and that this is the locutionary meaning, as Hansen argues.

Austin's position runs something like this. On the one hand, as Crary argues, Austin stresses that the illocutionary and locutionary acts are inseparable *as acts.* Austin writes of the relation between them: 'in general the locutionary act as much as the illocutionary is an abstraction only: every genuine speech act is both. . .'[51] Again, he says that '[T]o perform a locutionary act is in general, we may say, also and *eo ipso* to perform an *illocutionary* act.'[52] It seems that this is what impresses Crary and gives strength to her reading. However, on the other hand, it seems clear that Austin doesn't preclude the idea that the same locutionary meaning may persist across different forces. I agree with Hansen that it doesn't seem that there is textual evidence for taking Austin to reject such an idea.

I therefore agree with Hansen that for Austin it is possible to abstract from the whole speech act 'meaning' and 'force', and that it *is possible* to abstract the 'literal meaning' of sentences, the 'locutionary meaning' from different speech acts. For example, by uttering 'Shoot her!', we might have different forces, such as urging, or advising, or ordering me to shoot her, but we have one locutionary meaning 'shoot here'.[53] In that sense, there might be literal meaning which is invariant in different uses. However, Hansen conflates meaning and truth evaluability in making his claim that the literal meaning, once abstracted, is what is true or false. On this point, I think Austin is better interpreted as follows.

For Austin, it is not the locutionary meaning which is to be identified with what is true or false. Rather, it is the whole speech act. From my earlier explanation of truth as a dimension-word and the collapse of the constative-performtive distinction, we can now explain what is true or false for Austin.

Austin writes, commenting on the relation between the old distinction and the new theory of speech acts:

> With the constative utterance, we abstract from the illocutionary ... aspects of the speech act, and we concentrate on the locutionary... With the performative utterance, we attend as much as possible to the illocutionary force of the utterance, and abstract from the dimension of correspondence with facts... Perhaps neither of these abstractions [constative as focusing on the locutionary, and performative as focusing on the illocutionary] is so very expedient: perhaps we have here not really two poles, but rather an historical development. Now in certain cases, perhaps with mathematical formulas in physics books as examples of constatives, or with the issuing of simple executive orders or the giving of simple names, say, as examples of performatives, we approximate in real life to finding such things. It was examples of this kind, like 'I apologize', and 'The cat is on the mat', said for no conceivable reason, extreme marginal cases, that gave rise to the idea of two distinct utterances.[54]

Austin here makes explicit the instability of the distinction between constatives and performatives that I identified above. Whilst there are extreme cases where the distinction is clear, the vast majority of utterances fail to conform to such a division. It is on the basis of this realisation that Austin wants to introduce his new theory of speech acts, the collapse of

the old distinction having been driven, as we saw earlier, by the recognition that 'true' is a dimension-word, and that we use the same family of words to appraise both kinds of utterances. In particular, it seems that Austin recognises that at the heart of the collapse of the distinction is the realisation that we can't separate the two categories by appealing to two distinct notions of appraisal: true/false and happy/unhappy.

Now the question that arises is what is true or false in the theory of speech acts?

I claim that the most plausible reading of Austin's position is that being true or false is to be assessed in relation to a whole speech act, and not any part of it. This position is consistent with the moral of the collapse of the first distinction, where we had to take into account that the terms of assessments of 'true' and 'false' merged and overlapped with terms of assessments of 'happy' and 'unhappy'. The lesson there was that both types of assessment generally depended on, and were determined by, both facts *and* circumstances of utterance. As Austin points out, it is only in extreme cases, such as propositions of logic and mathematics, and performatives such as 'I apologize', that we have constatives which are true or false regardless of the circumstances, and performatives that are happy or unhappy regardless of the facts. Being true or false in the general run of utterances, then, is to be understood being determined by both circumstances and facts. As we have seen, the different dimensions of being 'true' or 'false' are related to both of these features, which are present in the different terms we typically use to appraise utterances.

The problem with identifying the locutionary meaning as that which is true or false is that it treats it as a 'proposition' which is to be appraised as true or false *regardless of the circumstances under which it is uttered*. Whilst I take Austin to agree that the locutionary meaning might be shared by different speech acts and that it is something that we abstract from those different speech acts, I don't take Austin to identify the locutionary meaning with what is true or false. If the locutionary meaning, which we abstract from different speech acts, were by itself – and independent of being uttered under specific circumstances, since it is abstracted from the actual circumstances under which it is uttered – true or false, then being true or false would not be related to the circumstances under which the words are uttered. This is precisely the opposite of what I have tried to show for Austin: that the circumstances under which we utter the words are vital for applying the terms of the 'truth' family. Whilst, in extreme cases, the abstract component of the dimension word can be used on its own without reference to the circumstances

of use, in almost every normal case the abstract element is too weak to be used and, instead, other words in the same family are employed, words that better reflect the context.

It is therefore my position that it is the whole speech act which is to be judged 'true' or 'false', and not the locutionary meaning: being true or false is related to issuing a whole speech act in a specific situation.

One last clarification: We said that we distinguish between sentence-meaning and word-meaning. Austin's views of sentence-meaning mirrors to a large degree his position on word-meaning. Whilst the two accounts are distinct, what they share is a caution concerning the attempt to isolate a common feature, either representing the essential factor in the specification of a concept or the essential component of sentence-meaning, *independent of the influence of context*. In both cases, Austin recognises the initial attraction of such an approach, and is happy to concede that there may be a common feature shared by the discussed concepts on occasion, and an invariant literal meaning for sentences. However, his key point is that we need to take into account, in analysing 'meaning', the different contexts and circumstances in which the word is used, or the sentence uttered. Nevertheless, the two accounts are different. As we said above, Austin studies three kinds of words which have multiple meanings, 'trouser-words', 'adjuster-words' and 'dimension-words'. In addition, he concedes that some words have one and the same meaning in all their uses. There doesn't seem to be parallel distinctions when it comes to sentence-meaning, and there is no reason to expect such a parallel. We don't have space here to go into details on this. But we need to guard against an unnecessary generalization or confusion in the relation between sentence-meaning and word-meaning.

In this paper, I have argued that the discussion on word-meaning, in this case the word 'true', is crucial to understand Austin's views of sentence-meaning. Austin's claim that 'true' is a dimension-word serves him for, first, arguing for a collapse of the performative/constative distinction, and, then, for identifying what is 'true' or 'false' with the issuing of the whole speech act in a specific situation.

The conclusions of the debate on sentence-meaning might be summarised as follows: contrary to Crary's claim, there is an invariant meaning, a literal meaning, that sentences carry through different uses, this is the locutionary meaning. This 'literal meaning' is context-independent. However, contrary to Hansen's claim, this meaning is not to be identified with what is true or false: what is true or false is the speech act as a whole

and not any one part of it, or more accurately, the issuing of the speech act in a specific situation. Being 'true' or 'false' is context-dependent.

5   Conclusions

In summary, I have argued that there is a middle ground that should be taken between Crary's and Hansen's readings of Austin's views on literal meaning. According to my analysis, his claim that 'true' is a dimension-word plays a crucial role in his theory of speech acts. Specifically, 'true', as a dimension-word, has one and the same semantic function in all its uses, but different specific meanings according to the context, a finding that causes Austin to abandon the performative/constative distinction.

It is only against this background that we come to appreciate the role of 'truth' in his theory of speech acts: for Austin, (at least some) non-ambiguous sentences have a fixed meaning, which they carry across all occasions of use. Such sentences meaning what they do, however, does not suffice to determine whether, independent of these occasions, the sentences can be used to say something true or false. What is true or false is the whole speech act, and not any part of it.

Notes

1 [8], 59-60.

2 [8], 60.

3 [8], 68.

4 [8], 69-70.

5 [12], 3.

6 [12], 6.

7 [3], 98.

8 See [12], 6-7. He is aware that the text is not conclusive, which is why he only thinks we might attribute to Austin the literal meaning view.

9 See [12], 6.

10 [19], 110.

11 [1], 110–11.

12 Travis mentions the idea that true is a dimension-word in [20]. However, even when he does mention it, it doesn't play the role in his work I claim it plays in Austin's work. Furthermore, if my claim is correct, there will be some considerable differences between Austin and Travis on truth. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to pursue these differences further. The same is applied to Francois Recanati's work. Although my interpretation is compatible with his, he

doesn't give the claim that 'true' is a dimension-word the crucial role I give. See [15] and [16]).

13 [1], 64.

14 'Yellow' and 'horse' are Austin's examples; 'bank' is mine.

15 [4], 74. Austin takes Plato to be committed to the search for one meaning for each word. Elsewhere, he also contrasts this with Aristotle.

16 The other types are trouser-words and adjuster-words.

17 [1], 71.

18 Austin gives other examples in his writings, such as 'good', and 'freedom'.

19 [4], 250-251.

20 Austin discusses the different terms of the family we use on ordinary language in 'Performative Utterance', see [3], 142-147 and [4], 129-130 and 250.

21 [4], 130.

22 [1], 71.

23 [1], 71.

24 As we use them to assess utterances, only. Note that words have other uses. 'True', for example, is one word in the family of 'real'. The relation between the different uses of words is a complicated issue, and Austin doesn't say a lot about it.

25 Austin discusses this 'descriptive fallacy' in a number of different places: see [4], 97-103, 130-132 and 233-234; and [3], 1-4 and 100.

26 Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* was suspicious of the two terms: 'descriptive fallacy' and 'statements', 'perhaps this is not a good name, as 'descriptive' itself is special. Not all true or false statements are descriptions, and for this reason I prefer to use the word 'Constative'.' [3], 3.

27 [4], 131.

28 [4], 131.

29 In the three later works mentioned above, Austin examines the distinction before declaring that it is not working. Most of what follows depends on the characterization of the distinction as it appears in the major work, *How to Do Things with Words*.

30 [3], 6.

31 [4], 236.

32 [3], 133.

33 [4], 131.

34 [4], 133.

35 [4], 133.

36 [3], 141.

37 [3], 141.

38 [3], 142.

39 [3], 142.

40 [3], 143.

41 [3], 143.

42 [3], 143-144.

43 [3], 94.

44 [3], 98-99.

45 The example is from Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 101-102.

46 [3], 100. The distinction between the two acts, and between meaning and force, has been interpreted in different ways. For example, John Searle ([17]) and ([18]) and Jennifer Hornsby ([13]) and ([14]) found it unclear in some points, and suggested different ways to improve it. I don't claim that the distinction is clear cut, but I think that we don't need, for the purposes of this paper, to go into complications regarding how to demarcate the illocution exactly.

47 [18], 157.

48 [3], 148-149.

49 We don't need here to go into details of how to distinguish exactly between the different acts.

50 Similar readings are offered by other interpreters, Max Black ([6]) and Jennifer Hornsby ([13] and [14]), for example. All these readings, correctly, point out that the saying/doing criterion is flawed, and they point out that the true/false and happy/unhappy criterion is problematic, in different ways. However, none of them brings out the importance of 'true' as a dimension-word.

51 [3], 147. He adds, 'But, of course, typically we distinguish different abstracted 'acts'...'

52 [3], 98.

53 [3], 101-102.

54 [3], 146.

Odai Al Zoubi
University of East Anglia
UK
<odai81@hotmail.com>

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