

On Searle on Austin on Truth

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Abstract

John Searle gives two different interpretations to Austin's view on truth: 'the propositional interpretation' and 'the stating interpretation'. The former identifies what is true or false with the locutionary meaning, and the latter with the illocutionary act of stating. In this article, I argue that both interpretations are inaccurate, and I introduce a fresh interpretation that identifies what is true or false with the whole speech act.

Keywords: Truth, Speech Act Theory, Propositions, J.L. Austin, John Searle

According to J.L. Austin, in analysing utterances we need to 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'" (Austin 1975: 94). 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:

asking 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 (Austin 1975: 98-99).

Every utterance¹ possesses a locution and an illocution, or what Austin sometimes calls 'meaning' and 'force' respectively.² Thus, for example, we distinguish between the meaning of the utterance: "Shoot her!", and the force of that utterance,

¹ Actually, *almost* every utterance: "whenever I 'say' anything (except perhaps a mere exclamation like 'damn' or 'ouch') I shall be performing both locutionary and illocutionary acts" (Austin 1950: 133).

² 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', &c. But I want to distinguish *force* and meaning" (Austin 1975: 100).

which depends on the circumstances but could consist in urging, or advising, or ordering me to shoot her.³

Precisely how to interpret this distinction, and how it relates to truth is disputed. In this article, I discuss John Searle's interpretations to Austin's view on truth. He gives two different interpretations, and the reason is that he does not find in Austin's writings a clear and conclusive explanation. The first interpretation, which I call *the propositional interpretation*, says that the locutionary meaning is the part of the speech act which corresponds to the facts, and which is true or false. The second interpretation, which I call *the stating interpretation*, says that the illocutionary act of stating is to be judged as true or false. I will argue that both interpretations are inaccurate, and that it is better to read Austin in a third way: what is true or false is the whole speech act.

I will start in 1 with Searle's first interpretation. This interpretation depends on a specific way of reading Austin's distinction between performatives and constatives, and his reasons for abandoning this distinction and to introduce instead the theory of speech acts. We therefore need to examine the first distinction. I will do this in 2, where I introduce my reading of Austin's text. In 3, I go back to the propositional interpretation and show why I find it incompatible with Austin's text. In 4, I discuss and criticise the stating interpretation. Next, in 5, I address a problem in my interpretation regarding the assessment of illocutionary forces and speech acts. Finally, in 6, I draw some conclusions.

1. Searle's First Interpretation

Searle's first interpretation, the propositional interpretation, suggests that for Austin what is true or false is the locutionary meaning.

To explain his interpretation, Searle starts with his understanding of Austin's distinction between locutionary meaning and illocutionary force:

Austin may have had in mind the distinction between the content or, as some philosophers call it, the proposition [...] and the force or illocutionary type of the act. Thus, for example, the proposition that I will leave may be a common content of different utterances with different illocutionary forces, for I can threaten, warn, state, predict, or promise that I will leave. [...] the same propositional act can occur in all sorts of different illocutionary acts (Searle 1973: 155).

It seems that Austin would agree with the main idea here. As we have seen above, "shoot her" might be taken as advising, ordering, urging, etc., and these are different illocutionary forces, but the 'content', the 'locutionary meaning', is the same in all of them.⁴ However, I will argue that Austin would not agree with what follows.

Searle continues, "it is the proposition which involves 'correspondence with the facts' [...] Propositions [...] can be true or false" (Searle 1973: 158-59). Searle then takes the content, the locutionary meaning, to be the part which is either true or false.

³ The example is from Austin 1975: 101-102.

⁴ We need to add, on behalf of Austin and Searle, that only after we fix reference and sense of the sentence used on different occasions, we say that, in these different occasions, the different uses of the same utterance share the same locutionary meaning, but have different illocutionary forces.

Note that this is the pervasive interpretation, in two ways: it is attributed to Austin, but it is also the reading which Searle himself and many philosophers adopt as the right way to relate truth to speech acts.⁵ For example, P.F. Strawson has a similar view:

Propositions [...] are supposed to be bearers of truth-value [...]. On any view, propositions may be expressed by parts of utterances [...] parts which are not themselves advanced with the force which belongs to the utterance as a whole; and it may be expedient to [replace] the term 'propositions' [...] with one less general. For the purpose Austin's own term 'constative' offers itself as a convenient candidate (Strawson 1973: 59-61).

Strawson suggests that we can abstract from the whole utterance the locutionary meaning, and separate it from the force. The locutionary meaning is the proposition, or the constative, and is to be assessed as true or false.⁶

It is important to note that both Searle and Strawson do not claim that they are just giving an interpretation to Austin's distinction: according to them, Austin himself is not completely clear about the distinction. However, they find indications in Austin's account of locutionary meaning which encourage them to adopt the propositional interpretation. These largely consist of what they take to be continuity between, on the one hand, the distinction between performatives and constatives, and, on the other, that between the locutionary and the illocutionary. Since this is the case, we need to regress for a while to introduce the distinction between performatives and constatives, in some length. It is only on the background of the relation between the two distinctions that we will be able to understand the propositional interpretation and what I claim to be its flaws.

2. The Performative/Constative Distinction and its Collapse

In his early writings, such as "Other Minds" and "Truth", Austin proposes that we can distinguish between 'performatives' and 'statements'. In *How to Do Things with Words*, "Performative Utterances" and "Performatives-Constatives", however, Austin later finds that the distinction is unstable, 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 in 2.1, and its collapse in 2.2. After that, in 2.3, I will explain what he means by a *dimension-word*, the key to understand Austin's position.⁷

Let me be clear that the following is my reading to Austin's text. My claim is that Searle ignores the importance of Austin's view that 'true' is a dimension-word, and that this is the reason he fails to give the right interpretation to Austin's theory of truth.

⁵ Marina Sbisà, against the pervasive interpretation, argues that the propositional interpretation is incompatible with different aspects of Austin's philosophy (Sbisà 2006). She identifies his views on truth as one of them. I agree with most of her remarks. I focus here only on one aspect: Austin's claim that 'true' is a dimension-word, a claim that she touches on only briefly.

⁶ Nat Hansen, in a recent paper, gives a similar interpretation, see Hansen 2012.

⁷ In Al Zoubi 2016, I used the same argument introduced here in section 2 to discuss a recent debate between Alice Cray 2002 and Nat Hansen 2012 regarding Austin's views on literal meaning.

2.1 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 state of affairs, or report or state facts. As a result, they thought that they must be either true or false.⁸ Other utterances, which do not 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*.⁹ 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, &c.) are not in fact descriptive, nor susceptible of being true or false (Austin 1950: 131).

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” (Austin 1950: 131). These are different kinds of utterances: they take the declarative form, but are not descriptive. One important kind of such an utterance is the ‘performative’.

According to Austin, the distinction between performatives and constatives is as follows.¹⁰ 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 state of affairs is, or is 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” (Austin 1975: 6); 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.

⁸ Austin discusses this *descriptive fallacy* in a number of different places: see Austin 1946: 97-103; 1950: 130-32; 1956: 233-34; Austin 1975: 1-4 and 100.

⁹ Austin was suspicious of the two terms, ‘descriptive fallacy’ and ‘statements’, which he himself employed in his early writings: “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’” (Austin 1975: 3). The point is this: the fallacy takes all utterances of the affirmative grammatical form as either true or false. Austin was led to see that there is a problem in lumping all these terms, such as stating, describing, reporting, etc. under the heading ‘descriptive’ or ‘statement’. See “How to Talk”, where Austin tries to give an account of the differences between these different terms. We need a term to describe what seems to be either true or false, and ‘constative’ is the one Austin used in his major work, Austin 1975. This will be an important observation when we discuss Searle’s second interpretation.

¹⁰ In the three later works mentioned above, Austin examines the distinction before declaring that it does not work. Most of what follows depends on the characterization of the distinction as it appears in the major work, Austin 1975.

What we say is not true or false, and we do not 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” (Austin 1956: 236). 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 have not 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*” (Austin 1975: 133).

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

2.2 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” (Austin 1950: 131). He gives some examples, performatives being one.¹¹ 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” (Austin 1950: 133).

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 dimensions of truth. Any utterance is appraised in relation to both the appropriate circumstances under which it is uttered, and the facts which the utterance somehow ‘correspond to’. Thus, constatives are assessed (being true or false) in relation to facts, as is the ‘happiness’ of performatives: 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” (Austin 1975: 141).

Equally, “such adverbs as ‘rightly’, ‘wrongly’, ‘correctly’, and ‘incorrectly’ are used with statements too” (Austin 1975: 141). All this makes us question the original distinction between two kinds of utterances, constatives which are merely

¹¹ See Austin 1950: 133.

true or false and correspond to facts, and performatives, which were not thought to be either true or false because they neither describe nor state how things are, and therefore do not correspond 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? (Austin 1975: 142).

In assessing a performative to be happy or unhappy, using the adjectives above, “[F]acts come in as our knowledge or opinion about facts” (Austin 1975: 142). In other words, the happiness or unhappiness of performatives, which originally were thought to be independent of correspondence to facts, turns out to be related to facts, as are constatives.

A similar difficulty arises when we consider constatives, whose truth value were originally thought to be independent of the circumstances under which 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 (Austin 1975: 143).

According to Austin, it is a “rough description”. But we cannot simply assess if it is true or false. “It is good enough for a general top-ranking general, but not for a geographer” (Austin 1975: 143). 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 Raglan won the battle of Alma”. This is good enough for a school book, but not for historical research (Austin 1975: 143-44). More examples from “Truth” include: “Belfast is north of London”, and “the galaxy is the shape of fried egg”. In all these cases, it seems that we cannot 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.¹² 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, 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 the facts and to the circumstances under which they are uttered, and that they are both assessed in similar ways. The key reason for this, according to Austin, is his view of ‘true’ 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” (Austin 1975: 142-43).

Next, we will examine what exactly Austin means by a dimension-word.

¹² Austin abandons the distinction for other reasons as well, reasons that both Searle and Strawson rightly highlight, but they ignore the reason I highlight here. We will come back to this in 4.

2.3 '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*" (Austin 1962: 64). 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.¹³ There is, nevertheless, a middle ground between these two kinds of word. Many philosophers neglect this middle ground, he thinks, and, as a result, they fall into a false dichotomy: '*one meaning vs. 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.

One type of such words, which Austin studies in depth, is dimension-words.¹⁴ 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" (Austin 1962: 71). 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 because all members possess this abstract meaning along with their own context-related specific 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 specific meaning. Thus, although the abstract meaning/semantic function of all 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 changes according to the context.

It is the combination of the shared abstract meaning and the context-related specific meaning which suggests that dimension-words do not 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.

¹³ 'Yellow' and 'horse' are Austin's examples; 'bank' is mine.

¹⁴ The other types are trouser-words and adjuster-words. I discuss all three types of word and Austin's views on the meaning of words in my forthcoming "Austin on the Unity of Meaning".

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.¹⁵ 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" (Austin 1956: 250-51). 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, 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.¹⁶

Now we can understand Austin's position on truth: The different terms we use to assess the relation between our utterances and the world are diverse and rich. All these terms, in different ways, share the same semantic function of that assessment, but they differ according to the context, which specifies one of the different specific meanings. This is one of the reasons that the distinction between performatives and constatives collapses, as we have seen above, and Austin proposes a new theory of speech acts, where he distinguishes between locutionary and illocutionary acts.

The relation between the two distinctions is crucial if we want to understand Austin's view on truth. As we have seen in section 1 Searle suggests that there is a continuity between the two distinctions, in the sense that the locutionary meaning inherits the feature of the constative of being true or false. At the same time, the illocutionary force inherits the feature of the performative of being an act of a specific type, such as stating, or promising, or asking, etc., as we shall see in section 4.

I argue that the first of these two points is inaccurate, while I agree with the second. In arguing against Searle, I will explore in more depth Austin's views on truth and give a fuller account of it. My reading is that being true or false is to be assessed in relation to the whole speech act, and not any part of it. This is explained next in 3, and then utilised in criticising Searle's second interpretation later in 4.

3. The Problem with Searle's First Interpretation

Austin comments on the relation between the two distinctions as follows.

¹⁵ Austin gives other examples in his writings, such as 'real', 'good', and 'freedom'.

¹⁶ Austin discusses the different terms of the family of words we use to assess an utterance in ordinary language in Austin; 1950: 129-30; 1956: 250 and 1975: 122-74.

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 (Austin 1975: 145-46).

Both Searle and Strawson cite this remark to motivate the propositional interpretation,¹⁷ and, taken in isolation, it perhaps seems reasonable to infer that Austin's view is that the locutionary meaning is the heir of the constative, what is true or false, and the illocutionary force is the heir of the performative, doing something like arguing, stating, warning, etc.

However, on the same page Austin also writes:

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 (Austin 1975: 146).

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 constatives and performatives fail to conform to this strict interpretation. Austin seems to argue precisely for making a break with the very notion of such a distinction in practice.¹⁸ 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.

The strange thing about Searle's and Strawson's reading (apart from failing to place in context the quotation on which they rely) is that it seems to fall back into the same problem that led Austin to move away from the constative/performative distinction and propose the new speech act theory. In particular, it seems that Austin recognises that at the heart of the collapse of the distinction is the realisation that we cannot separate the two categories by appealing to two distinct notions of appraisal: true/false and happy/unhappy. However, if the locutionary meaning is not directly heir to the constative, what is it in an utterance that can be validly appraised as being true or false?

I argue that the most plausible reading of Austin's position is that we should assess an utterance as true or false in relation to the whole speech act, and not just one 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 assessment of true and false merge and overlap with terms of assessments of happy and unhappy.

¹⁷ See Strawson 1973: 53 and Searle 1973: 155.

¹⁸ I do not have space here to discuss the cases Austin mentions where the truth of what is said is not related to the circumstances under which the utterance is issued.

The lesson there was that both types of assessment generally depend on, and are determined by both facts *and* circumstances of utterance.¹⁹

Finally, let me clarify one aspect of my objection to the propositional reading. 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 with Searle that the locutionary meaning might be shared by different speech acts²⁰ and that it is something which we abstract from those different speech acts, Searle identifies the locutionary meaning with what is true or false, whereas I argue that Austin does not. If Searle is right, then the locutionary meaning, which we abstract from different speech acts, can by itself—and independently of being uttered under specific circumstances, since it is abstracted from the actual circumstances under which it is uttered—be true or false. This is precisely the opposite of what I have tried to show for Austin: that the circumstances under which we utter the words is vital for applying the terms of the truth family.

This account is symmetrical with Austin's account of dimension-words, and truth in particular. 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 which better matches the context.

In summary, I argue that the propositional interpretation is not compatible with Austin's text, and that, in the general case, it is the whole speech act which is to be judged as true or false. I do not deny that there is a relation between the constative/performative distinction and the locutionary/illocutionary distinction. Indeed, Austin himself thinks that there is such a relation: "[T]he doctrine of the performative/constative distinction stands to the doctrine of locutionary and illocutionary acts in the total speech act as the special theory to the general theory" (Austin 1975: 148). However, as I have shown, Austin does not think that the locutionary meaning is the heir of the constative in the crucial sense that it is not to be assessed as true or false.

4. Searle's Second Interpretation

Now we move to Searle's second interpretation. Here, Searle attributes to Austin the view that what is true or false is the illocutionary act of stating. I will argue that Austin's text does not support such a reading.

Searle says that he wants to examine "one of Austin's most important discoveries, the discovery that constatives are illocutionary acts as well as performatives, or, in short, the discovery that statements are speech acts" (Searle 1973: 157). It is true, as Searle explains, that Austin in the new theory regards stating, describing, arguing, warning, etc., as illocutionary forces. "Stating, describing, &c., are just two names among a very great many others for illocutionary acts" (Austin 1975: 148-49).

¹⁹ As mentioned above, Sbisà takes Austin's views on truth to be incompatible with the propositional interpretation, and her sketchy remarks are in line with my own interpretation. For example, she writes that Austin wants "to interpose the illocutionary dimension between meaning and truth/falsity assessment, thus contextualizing truth/falsity assessments to the 'speech act in the speech situation'" (Sbisà 2006: 167).

²⁰ As we said above, after we fix the sense and reference.

Before going on to Searle's second interpretation, let me regress to the collapse of the distinction between constatives and performatives: In secondary literature, the collapse is seen, mainly, as a result of this discovery. 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 developed in Austin 1975 gives him a sophisticated tool to clarify how each utterance consists of different doings (acts), in different ways.²¹

My discussion in 2.2 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.²²

Now let us go back to Searle's second Interpretation: It is this discovery with which Searle in fact agrees that he identifies as the source of the mistakes in Austin's theory of truth.

Searle starts by explaining that 'statement' "is structurally ambiguous" (Searle 1973: 157). It has two meanings: "'Statement' can mean either the act of stating or what is stated" (Searle 1973: 157). He calls the former *statement-acts*, which are illocutionary acts, and the latter *statement-objects*, which are the propositions/locutionary meanings stated. According to Searle, the distinction helps us to identify clearly what is true or false: "Propositions but not acts can be true or false; thus statement-objects but not statement-acts can be true or false" (Searle 1973: 159). It is the statement-object, the proposition, and not the illocutionary act of stating, Searle claims, which is to be identified as true or false.

Austin, Searle thinks, has confused the two:

[T]he failure to take into account the structural ambiguity of 'statement' [...] had very important consequences [...] For since statements are [illocutionary] speech acts, and since statements [the statement-objects, the propositions] can be true or false, it appears that that which is true or false is a [illocutionary] speech act. But this inference is fallacious, as it involves a fallacy of ambiguity [...] And the view that it is the act of stating which is true or false is one of the most serious weaknesses of Austin's theory of truth (Searle 1973: 157).

Searle concludes,

Statement-acts are illocutionary acts of stating. Statement-objects are propositions [...] The latter but not the former can be true or false. And it is the confusion between these which prevented Austin from seeing [...] [that illocutionary] acts cannot have truth values (Searle 1973: 159).

²¹ We do not need here to go into details with how to distinguish exactly between the different acts.

²² Similar readings are offered by other interpreters, Max Black 2011 and Jennifer Hornsby 1988 and 1994, 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.

For Searle, it is the locutionary meaning / the proposition/ the statement-object which is true or false. Austin was mistaken in taking the illocutionary act of stating to be true or false because Austin confused the act of stating with what is stated.

I find this reading problematic for two reasons. Firstly, as we have seen in section 2, Austin uses the term 'constatives' rather than 'statements' in his later writings, such as his major work on speech acts, Austin 1975²³. It is therefore difficult to understand the suggestion that he equivocates on the term 'statements' in his argument. Indeed, it seems from Austin's reservations about the terms used to designate what is true or false in the initial distinction he makes that he was at pains to avoid using terminology that carries any specific traditional philosophical charge, precisely to avoid misleading himself or the reader.

Secondly, Searle's reading does not engage with the idea that for Austin 'true' is a dimension-word. This means, as we have seen, that Austin thinks that we apply a family of different terms to appraise the relation between utterances and the world, and that it is therefore the full speech act which is liable to be true or false. In particular, it seems clear that Austin believes that the whole speech act is assessed for truth or falsehood *whatever the illocutionary force*. In addition, Searle's position here is weak because of the lack of pertinent textual evidence in support of his claim. Although Searle is perfectly right in saying that, for Austin, stating is an illocutionary force, there is no textual evidence to suggest that Austin might have thought that what is true or false is the illocutionary act of stating. In fact, there is a paragraph where Austin seems explicitly to reject Searle's reading. Here is what Austin writes in the last lecture of Austin 1975, on the very page where he also writes that stating is an illocutionary force:

Stating, describing, &c., are just two names among a very great many others for illocutionary acts; they have no unique position [...] In particular, they have no unique position over the matter of being related to facts in a unique way called being true or false, because truth and falsity are (except by an artificial abstraction which is always possible and legitimate for certain purposes) not names for relations, qualities, or what not, but for a dimension of assessment-how the words stand in respect of satisfactoriness to the facts, events, situations, &c., to which they refer (Austin 1975: 148-49).

Here, then, Austin re-states the position that we examined earlier: except in extreme cases or artificial circumstances of abstraction, truth and falsity represent a family or dimension of terms the use of which depends upon the circumstances (facts, situations, etc.), and illocutionary acts of any type, whether or not they consist in stating or describing, are insufficient on their own to determine truth or falsity. Instead, consideration of the speech act in the round is necessary for such an assessment.

It therefore does not seem that Austin was misled by the two meanings of 'statement', as Searle claims. First this assertion is not backed up by the text, and second it is not compatible with Austin's explicit perspective on 'true' as a dimension-word, a factor which Searle ignores.

²³ See footnote 9 above.

5. The Fate of 'Happiness'

In this final section, I will point out a tension in Austin's conclusions on the fate of the happy/unhappy assessment: on one hand, he suggests that it survives the collapse of the performative/constative distinction, and that it is inherited from the performative by the illocutionary force; on the other hand we might read him as saying that it emerges with the true/false assessment, as I argued above. I will examine this tension and suggest that the second option seems more plausible.

Let us start with the first. Austin seems to suggest that the distinction between two kinds of assessment, happy/unhappy and true/false, survives the collapse. He ends lecture XII of Austin 1975, where he examines the performative/constative distinction and draws his final conclusions in what he calls the "real conclusion", stating what needs to be done after the collapse:

[we need] critically to establish with respect to each kind of illocutionary act [...] what if any is the specific way in which they are intended, first to be in order or not, and second, to be 'right' or 'wrong'; what terms of appraisal and disappraisal are used for each and what they mean (Austin 1975: 146-47).

It seems here as though Austin has in mind first the happiness of the illocutionary ("in order or not") and second its truth or falsity ("to be 'right' or 'wrong'"). It might be, then, that Austin thinks that being true or false is not inherited by the locution, but being happy or unhappy is inherited by the illocution.

However, there is a problem with this line of thinking, and we must investigate it. Austin says at the beginning of this very lecture that he will examine the performative/constative distinction in two steps: first, looking at the doing/saying distinction, and second, looking at the two kinds of assessment (the true/false and happy/unhappy). I will repeat quickly the main arguments discussed in detail above in order to explain our problem. In the first step, he rejects the saying/doing distinction, suggesting that all utterances are both 'sayings' and 'doings'. Next, he examines in detail the two kinds of assessment, or the "alleged contrast" between them, as he calls it (Austin 1975: 136). It is this second step which is relevant to us here. He starts "from the side of the supposed constative utterances", where he argues at length that "we find that statements are liable to every kind of infelicity of which performatives are liable" (*ibid.*). After that, he moves on to "looking at the matter from the side of performatives" (Austin 1975: 140), where he argues, again at length, that we use the same terms in assessing constatives and performatives. The core argument of his second step is that the true/false assessment was supposed to show whether the constative corresponds to the facts, and the happy/unhappy assessment was supposed to show whether the performative is uttered under the appropriate circumstances. But both performatives and constatives are, in real life, assessed according to both considerations, and we use the same family of terms in these assessments. Consequently, it seems plausible to conclude that there are not two kinds of assessment, but only one.

What I find problematic in Austin's first position, where he keeps the distinction between true/false and happy/unhappy assessments, is the following: being uttered under the appropriate circumstances, the consideration taken into account for the happy/unhappy assessment, is part of our consideration when assessing the truth or falsity of the whole speech act, and, at the same time, when assessing the happiness of one part of it, the illocutionary force. This does not seem very

convincing. In addition, he argues that ‘corresponding with the facts’, the consideration taken into account for the true/false assessment, is to be considered when we assess the happiness of performatives, and this is one of the reasons why the first distinction collapses. Why, then, does he think that the happy/unhappy assessment will survive? Again, this does not seem convincing. Finally, he argues that the terms we use to assess constatives and performatives overlap. If this is so, is it not more plausible to think that the two kinds of assessment merge into one big family rather than stay separate? The first position, then, seems to run against what he tried to establish throughout the lecture. The second option, where you look at the whole speech act and assess its success with one family of terms, is more plausible.

However, the text is inconclusive. We probably have to follow Austin’s advice and think about the different kinds of illocutionary forces: what terms do we use to assess them? Do they overlap? What are the considerations we take into account when we assess the success of speech acts with different kinds of illocutionary force? Such an examination is beyond the scope of this paper, though. I will leave it here, suggesting that, initially at least, the merging of the two kinds of assessment into one is more plausible, but admitting that only the examination of how to assess speech acts and different kinds of illocutionary forces would settle the issue.

6. Conclusions

I have examined Searle’s two interpretations to Austin’s theory of truth, and argued that neither is accurate. Searle’s first interpretation identifies what is true or false with the locutionary meaning, while his second interpretation identifies it with the illocutionary act of stating. I suggest that there is a third reading of Austin, to which I subscribe. It identifies what is true or false with the whole speech act.

The key to understand Austin’s position, which Searle ignores, is that ‘true’ is a dimension-word: It has one and the same semantic function in all its uses, but different specific meanings according to the context. It is the most abstract word in a family of words that are used to assess the relation between words and the world. It is only by appreciating the importance of Austin’s view that ‘true’ is a dimension-word that we will be able to properly interpret his theory of truth, and the relation between the locution and illocution. We saw that the distinction between constatives and performatives fails *partly* because ‘true’ is a dimension-word and the terms we use to assess both kinds of utterance overlap. These terms belong to the family of ‘true’ where all terms are used to assess the relation between utterances and the world in different dimensions and degrees. The propositional interpretation fails to appreciate the importance of, and the reasons for, the collapse of the constative/performative distinction; it sees a continuity between the constative and the locutionary meaning in the sense that the latter inherited the feature of being true or false. This, as we have seen, is incompatible with Austin’s text and arguments. Again, the stating interpretation, which identifies what is true or false with the illocutionary act of stating fails for the same reason. I have argued that, for Austin, contrary to both interpretations, the whole

speech act is to be assessed as true or false.²⁴ I ended up with a question regarding how to assess illocutionary forces, where I pointed out a tension between Austin's views on two positions. To solve this tension, we need to look at how we assess different kinds of speech acts with different illocutionary forces. This is a project that will have to be undertaken in the future.

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²⁴ My interpretation is compatible, in its main lines, with Charles Travis's and Francois Recanati's influential views on truth and meaning. See Travis 2008 and Recanati 1994 and 2001. However, 'true' as a dimension-word does not play the role in their work I claim it plays in Austin's work. Furthermore, if my claim is correct, there will be some considerable differences between Austin and their views on truth. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to pursue these differences further.

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