

Introduction

John L. Austin's (1962) groundbreaking distinction between **constative utterances (constatives)** and **performative utterances (performatives)** and his investigation of how to act in saying something initiated a whole new research program in the philosophy of language.

If you are not familiar with the distinction between constative and performative utterances, please check the box **Defining Constatives and Performatives** to the right.

Austin introduced definitions for constatives and performatives as well as tests to distinguish between constatives and performatives.

Austin's definitions and tests were solely based on his own linguistic intuitions. Up to now, in the philosophy of language empirical evidence concerning the question whether *constative* and *performative* are existing categories in ordinary language and whether Austin's tests work are missing. In the following, we strive to close this gap by experimentally investigating speaker intuitions about constatives and performatives with respect to the following **Aims 1, 2, and 3**.

Defining Constatives and Performatives

Definition Constative: An utterance *x* is a **constative** if and only if *x* can be true or false and *x* is not the doing of an action in addition to the act of saying something.

Example: "The earth turns around the sun." (1)
In uttering (1), one is expressing a statement that is true or false (in this case, it is true) and is not doing an action in addition to the act of saying something. Hence, (1) is a constative.

Definition Performative: An utterance *x* is a **performative** if and only if *x* cannot be true or false and *x* is the doing of an action in addition to the act of saying something.

Example: "I promise to do the dishes." (2)
In uttering (2), one is not expressing a statement that is true or false, but one is promising something. That is, uttering (2) is to perform an action in addition to the act of saying something – the action of promising.

Aim 1

Research Question 1: Is there a distinction between constative and performative utterances in language with respect to Austin's definition of the constative-performative distinction?

In order to provide empirical evidence to answer **Research Question 1**, we present subjects **Question Truth** and **Question Act** which are derived from Austin's definitions of constatives and performatives.

Question Truth: Can the utterance be true or false?

"yes" = constative

Example: "The earth turns around the sun."

Explanation: The utterance expresses a statement that is true or false.

"no" = performative

Example: "I promise to do the dishes."

Explanation: The utterance does not express a statement but is the doing of an action. It is not true or false.

Question Act: Is there an action performed with the utterance?

"yes" = performative

Example: "I promise to do the dishes."

Explanation: With the utterance, one performs the action of promising.

"no" = constative

Example: "The earth turns around the sun."

Explanation: With the utterance, one expresses a statement, but does not perform an action.

Aim 2

Research Question 2: Do Austin's tests of the constative-performative distinction work?

Austin (1962: 79-80) proposed tests to decide whether a certain utterance is performative or constative. The test results indicate to which category an utterance belongs. In the following, we introduce and evaluate the two tests **Test Doubt** and **Test Deliberate**.

Test Doubt: Does it make sense to ask, "Do they really"?

"yes" = constative

Example: "I feel grateful."

Explanation: It is not senseless to ask whether one really feels grateful because one could have lied.

"no" = performative

Example: "I thank you."

Explanation: It doesn't make sense to ask whether one really thanks someone because uttering "I thank you" is the action of thanking.

Test Deliberate: Does it make sense to insert the adverb "deliberately"?

"yes" = performative

Example: "I thank you."

Explanation: If the utterance is a performative, then it is possible to insert "deliberately", because the utterance is the doing of an action, and thus, it should be possible to be done deliberately.

"no" = constative

Example: "I feel grateful."

Explanation: It doesn't make sense to say "I feel grateful deliberately" because one cannot feel grateful deliberately.

Aim 3

Research Question 3: We will propose a new test of the constative-performative distinction: **Test Time**. How does **Test Time** work compared to Austin's **Test Doubt** and **Test Deliberate**?

Every performative, like every action, is a single event that is not repeatable. That is, every repetition of a performative would be a new event. If an action is done by means of uttering a performative, this action is an event limited in time. Therefore, it is not possible to still perform this action at a later point in time. Hence, we suggest **Test Time** as a test to distinguish between constatives and performatives.

Test Time: Does it make sense to ask, "Are they still doing it"?

"yes" = constative

Example: "I feel grateful."

Explanation: It makes sense to ask whether one is still feeling grateful because one could not feel grateful anymore.

"no" = performative

Example: "I thank you."

Explanation: It doesn't make sense to ask whether one is still thanking because the action of thanking ended with the utterance.

Experimental Design and Method

In an **online experiment**, we present **two vignettes between subjects**, the first of which contains a constative utterance (**Treatment 1**) and the second a performative utterance (**Treatment 2**).

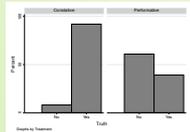
Treatment 1 (constative): Subjects were told that two persons – Petra and Hans – have a chat. Petra talks to Hans about what she eats for breakfast. She says: "I eat muesli for breakfast every morning".

Treatment 2 (performative): Subjects were told that two persons – Petra and Hans – are at the registry office to get married. All formalities are done and at the end of the marriage ceremony, the registrar says: "I hereby declare you husband and wife".

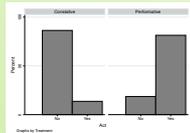
Subjects were asked **Question Truth**, **Question Act**, and the questions of **Test Doubt**, **Test Deliberate**, and **Test Time**. We performed χ^2 -tests to examine whether there are significant differences between our treatments. Effect sizes are estimated using **Cramer's V**.

Results Aim 1

Question Truth: The results are highly significant with a strong effect: $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 191) = 59.64, p < .001, \phi = .56$



Question Act: The results are highly significant with a strong effect: $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 152) = 68.69, p < .001, \phi = .67$



Conclusion: Subjects are much more likely to state that the utterance can be true or false in case of the constative and they are much more likely to state that an action is performed with the utterance in case of the performative. That is, subjects tend to distinguish between constatives and performatives due to their necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.

Results Aim 2

Test Doubt: The results are highly significant with a strong effect: $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 189) = 51.47, p < .001, \phi = .52$

Conclusion: The result provides evidence that **Test Doubt** works as a tool to distinguish between constatives and performatives.

Test Deliberate: The results are highly significant with a medium effect: $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 194) = 19.88, p < .001, \phi = .32$

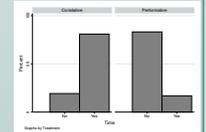
Conclusion: Contrary to the responses, the answer to **Test Deliberate** should be "no" in case of a constative and "yes" in case of a performative. Hence, the test doesn't work.

Conclusion: The result provides evidence that **Test Deliberate** does not work as a tool to distinguish between constative and performative utterances.

Possible Explanation: **Test Deliberate** only works for constatives expressing internal states (like feeling grateful), but not for constatives reporting actions or habits (like eating muesli every morning).

Results Aim 3

Test Time: The results are highly significant with the strongest effect of all tests: $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 194) = 79.35, p < .001, \phi = .64$



Conclusion: Compared to **Test Doubt** and **Test Deliberate**, the **Test Time** seems to be a more effective tool to distinguish between typical constative and performative utterances. The reason for this is that **Test Time** is based on the intrinsic property of performatives to be actions that are done with the utterance and, hence, end with the utterance. On the contrary, constatives refer to states of affairs that in principle could persist.