

Performatives in the Boot of my Car: and it is not an Austin (J. L.)¹

Patrick Hutchings

Afterword

When one goes seriously op-shopping, all sorts of things end up in the boot of the car. When one is interested in a particular word, here ‘performative’, it’s suddenly to be found almost everywhere. So found, are all the instances of J. L. Austin’s sort, or are some just not?

My first:

Her manner was not openly hostile, it was studiously neutral. Have you had a coffee? she abruptly asked. She didn’t wait for a reply before she moved past me to the cabinets, she took out two cups. What would you like? Cappuccino? Americano? I said I would take an Americano, and she nodded and turned back to the machine. I couldn’t help but feel that she occupied the space with quiet aggression, that this preparation of coffee was in some way *performative*, designed to remind me who the true owner of the apartment was...²

If the woman who made the coffee had scolded the one already in the flat, it would have been a direct perlocutionary.³

My second:

‘PLAYING THE PART’: Any reader who has watched a top-tier barrister in full flight might wonder how much of their appearance is *performative* ... On Tuesday the Victorian Bar offered a seminar on “Commanding the Room” from theatre director Richard Lawton, promising to improve barristers’ vocal delivery strength, communication style and body language ... Seminar graduates are not the only *actors* at the bar...⁴

All actors’ performances have essentially the jussive, ‘Look at me!’ Thus they may be, in that way, perlocutionary. In other ways too? Think of Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*, and so on.

My third:

On Women Playing Football in the late Nineteenth Century:

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¹ J. L. Austin had two very large Austin motor cars, vintage, possibly veteran. ‘One or other of them usually starts on cold mornings.’

² Katie Kitamura, *Intimacies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2021), pp. 201-202. Here ‘performative’ is merged with ‘performing’. The sense is of a performance indicating, ‘I resent you’. It would be a spoiler further to contextualize a snippet of this rather splendid novel. Read it yourself. There is a final act to this performance; the woman who has made the coffee, tips her own cupful down the sink. The jussive is ‘Feel bad’. So the performance is an – oblique – perlocutionary. Perhaps there needs to be a term: for performance/ action/ body language subsets of the perlocutional.

³ I once said to Austin that I found Elizabeth Anscombe rather tetchy: ‘Oh, she’s a common scold!’

⁴ From the news and comment column on the left of page 2 of *The Age*, 12 September 2002.

‘A common objection was that women’s matches were *performative* rather than *competitive*, an entertainment designed to titillate, to “gratify vulgar curiosity” as the *Manchester Guardian* put it. There’s some truth in this: the Scotland v England matches were organised by the impresario Alec Gordon, and the players were a mix of young ballet dancers and rep actresses from the Princess’s Theatre in Edinburgh. Women’s football as organised by women in this era was more interesting. Nettie Honeyball and Lady Florence Dixie began recruiting for their Ladies’ Football Club in 1895, making no secret of their suffragist leanings. Honeyball – the pseudonym of Mary Hutson – told *Sketch* that she intended to prove that women are not the “ornamental and useless creatures that men have pictured”. The team wore gender-neutral kit (no corsets allowed) and trained next to a racecourse, having been refused to the Oval. Their first match prompted an editorial in the *Evening Standard* “We hope [that] in a very short time the Club will die a natural and unlamented death ... it cannot be pretended that football is either a decent or an elegant occupation for girls.”⁵

The ‘performative’ in ‘performative rather than *competitive*’ is rather strained: It looks as if it has popped in from J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*. The natural sense is ‘The match was more a performance – a show – than a competitive event’. As for ‘decency’, there was recently in Melbourne a tiny storm in a teacup over a young woman’s high kick photographed, and reproduced in newspapers. She was playing ‘Australian Rules’ a rugby-derived sport. High-Kicking male players have been commemorated in bronze in a couple of club-fields in Victoria. No doubt some woman player will have such a statue, eventually. The WFB outfit is unisex-guernsey with the trademarks of sponsors sewn on; and baggy shorts. It is not a showgirls’ show. And it is as competitive as the men’s games.

My fifth:

NOT AMUSED. The death of a monarch means different things to different people. For the traditionalists, enamoured of the royals and all they represent it was a day of solemn, if at times slightly *performative* mourning.⁶

The use of ‘performative’ here is odd, and not Austinian, unless one uses it as a complaint, or an invitation to complain about: a) the rather lengthy rituals which the ancient protocols prescribe; or, b) their being endlessly presented on Australian television. And c) the same events being repeated, again and again on television. The heading ‘Not Amused’ (H. M. Queen Victoria of course) is in doubtful taste, unless one goes to events of this sort only for the music. Death itself is not amusing. A Queen who did her duty for a lifetime deserved to be mourned.

‘Performative’ used in this way in the snippet suggests that someone is just ‘going through the motions’ – or going through these motions in good faith, getting bored at some point, but carrying on out of politeness. In anthropology the participant-observer who takes part in a tribal ritual instead of just observing it may have a *frisson* which mere observation does not give. So, understanding may be fortified.

⁵ Emma John, ‘On the Pitch’, *London Review of Books*, 4 August (2022), p. 7. The game played is soccer. The politics of women’s football is discussed, briefly.

⁶ From the news and comment column on the left of page 2 of *The Age*, Monday 12 September (2022).

For the royals, in their uniforms and rôles, it is doubtless real, in a way that it is not for somebody watching television. For those of us who have never been invited even to a local State Funeral our own ‘performative mourning’ may be a quick half-interested scan of the local newspaper.

My sixth:

‘Thomas Kennedy writes in the Tate catalogue that Sickert is offering ‘realistic representations of people who visited music halls ... His works show how people unconsciously join with the social *performative* act of being part of an audience.’⁷

Watching a performance is usually not itself a performance. However in a music hall where people sing along, or shout ‘Sing that one again’, ‘Sing us another’, and so on, it may be a second order performance. To say that it is a ‘performative act’ seems strange. It is hardly a clear *perlocutionary* act: or, if one, only a second order one: e.g., ‘Sing it again’ is in its way jussive: *perlocutionary* in its effect. ‘Performative’ seems here, and elsewhere, to have slid into being mere jargon. And this in a Tate catalogue.

For some reason ‘performative’ is often – or seems – a word which does not have an Austinian sense. It may have been borrowed from Austin by writers even though they may have never read him. On the other hand, ‘performative’ may have a totally non-Austinian an pedigree, as in Ms Jacqueline Maley’s ‘performative fun’ cited above. Whether Ms Maley has read Austin I don’t know. However Guy Sebastian, about whom her article was written, had had his cocaine snorting videoed, and it was accidentally uploaded onto Instagram. So: we have a performance, not a ‘performative’. There was no jussive, ‘Do this too’. Quite the contrary: Sebastian was “embarrassed and remorseful”. He apologised.

Performatives are – often – small commands: *perlocutionary*. Performances are mostly not any sort of command. Mostly: One thinks of Hitler’s and Trump’s circuses, however. Language changes: Meanings bleed into quite other meanings. Hitler’s Circuses at Nuremberg and elsewhere had a civilised nation doing unspeakable things. The second – Trump’s – may yet bring down the American Republic. It has already poisoned the *soi disant* ‘Republican’ Party, which has swallowed the big lie that the election was stolen, though they know it to be a lie. “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.” (Attributed to Joseph Goebbels). Performances may, so, be *perlocutionary*. This may well account for the meld of ‘performative’ and ‘performance’.

⁷ Tim Crewe, ‘Real Busters’, *London Review of Books*, 18 August (2022), pp. 17-22. A review of in Sickert exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, and three new books on the painter Walter Sickert (1862-1942). In his dark music hall paintings executed in the late nineteenth century, with a few dabs of paint Sickert could render the faces, and even the emotions of some of the people in the theatre. They are in a sense, *performing*: See the colour reproduction on p. 20. But the term ‘*performative*’ in the Tate catalogue is just misused. Misused, unless members of the audience egg each other on to shout. This might count as an odd sort of *performative*: Join in! Because of his dark palette, and his often posing female figures in claustrophobic settings, Sickert has been accused of being Jack the Ripper. This in two or three books. The one on this theme which I read was an exciting thriller, circumstantial but unconvincing. Sickert is not well represented in Australian art galleries. I cannot remember seeing any paintings by him here.