

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS AND CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Marina Sbisà's Austinian Themes:

Illocution, Action, Knowledge, Truth, and Philosophy

Program Committee: Mitchell Green (University of Connecticut), Paolo Labinaz (University of Trieste) and Madelaine Angelova-Elchinova (Sofia University)

20 March

14:00 – Welcome and Introduction

Session 1 – Chair: Madelaine Angelova-Elchinova (University of Sofia)

14:15 – Marina Sbisà (University of Trieste): *Précis of the Book*

14:45 – Cristina Corredor (UNED, Madrid): *Adducing a Reason as Illocution*

Abstract: In *Austinian Themes*, Maria Sbisà offers an exemplary work of exegesis in reconstructing and interpreting Austin's ideas. She also advances a highly original and persuasive proposal in the philosophy of illocution, one that sheds light on the relationship between linguistic communication and action, knowledge, and truth. In earlier work on argumentative discourse, she appears to treat arguing as an expositive, a move that is, at first sight, well aligned with a straightforward reading of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*. In my view, however, there are grounds for analysing arguing as an illocutionary act—specifically, the illocution of adducing a reason. To support the plausibility of this approach, I propose to follow closely Sbisà's insightful analysis of stating as an expositive verdictive.

15:30 – Mitchell Green (University of Connecticut): *Convention, Illocution, and Cultural Evolution*

Abstract: In her masterful *Austinian Themes: Illocution, Action, Knowledge, Truth, and Philosophy* (Oxford, 2024), Marina Sbisà offers a charitable and cogent interpretation of J.L. Austin as offering a systematic approach to the five topics mentioned in the book's subtitle. In this talk I will address Sbisà's reconstruction and defense of Austin's view that illocutionary acts are across-the-board conventional. That reconstruction depends on the idea that such acts characteristically modify the deontic status of interlocutors in a way that depends on intersubjective agreement. Further, a putative symptom of the conventionality of illocutionary acts is their ability to be "undone" by interlocutors, such as when a speaker retracts an assertion previously made. One feature distinguishing conventional practices from those that are products of cultural evolution is that only the former exhibit a significant degree of arbitrariness: Culturally-evolved practices are by contrast justified by their efficacy.

Further, many illocutionary act-types, such as asserting and promising, appear to be intelligible as serving a valuable role, the former in the reliable transfer of information, and the latter in the construction of multi-person plans. Accordingly, it's arguable that such illocutionary act-types are products of cultural evolution, and as such lack the arbitrariness that we expect from conventional practices. There is thus a tension between Sbisà's Austinian conventionalism, and a recognition of some illocutionary types as culturally evolved. I will offer a resolution of this tension by contending that we may accept Sbisà's deontic conception of illocutionary effects without being committed to conventionalism about illocutions.

16:15 – Break

Session 2 – Chair: Paolo Labinaz (University of Trieste)

16:30 – Rae Langton (Newnham College, University of Cambridge): *Accommodation, illocution, and social construction*

Abstract: Illocutions contribute to social construction in many ways, including through 'accommodation' of felicity conditions they 'presuppose'. As Sbisà explains, when 'successful execution of the illocutionary procedure is reached', the required deontic properties of participants 'may be accommodated', even if they were absent before (Sbisà AT p.59). So a speaker who e.g. lacks authority to issue an order may gain it by accommodation. I spell out some consequences for (i) the construction of social hierarchies; (ii) the construction of norms and 'procedures' (cf. Austin on the 'procedure' initiated by 'the man who first picked up the ball and ran' in football); (iii) the retroactive 'undoing' of illocution, when the 'presuppositions' of an illocution get blocked (cf. Austin on 'making undone', Sbisà AT p. 53).

17:15 – Open discussion

21 March

Session 3 – Chair: Paolo Labinaz (University of Trieste)

14:00 – Guy Longworth (University of Warwick): *"If you know, you can't be wrong"*

Abstract: My topic will be some of the things that Austin and Sbisà have to say about knowledge. I'll discuss some initially puzzling aspects of what Austin has to say about the schematic principle, "If you know, you can't be wrong." I'll then bring that discussion to bear on some suggestions made by Sbisà in her Austinian Themes, potentially including suggestions that can be organised under the following four headings: (1) a purported connection between successfully asserting that p and knowing that p; (2) some purported responsibilities incurred by asserting that p; (3) the proposal that success—and, specifically, success in knowing and asserting—is a sort of default, so that one can take a case to be

successful unless there are specific reasons to suspect failure; (4) the idea of *de iure* knowledge.

14:45 – Velislava Todorova (Bulgarian Academy of Science): *What type of speech act is an utterance of a sentence with a reportative evidential?*

Abstract: How do we know that we say? Sometimes we were direct witnesses of the events; sometimes we made an inference from observed results; sometimes it was someone else who told us. All natural languages have means to express the type of information source the speaker has for what they say. Interestingly, in some languages this is obligatory. These languages have a grammatical category – called evidentiality – the primary meaning of which is the type of information source. (Bulgarian, for example, is such a language.)

Linguists studying the semantics of evidentiality struggle to fit their findings in the theory of speech acts. To illustrate the difficulty, I will present the case of the Reportative: an evidential used to indicate that the information source is another person's utterance. I will further narrow my focus to declarative sentences.

What is characteristic of an utterance of a declarative sentence with a reportative evidential, is that the speaker is not committed to the truth of the propositional content and the utterance can be felicitous even if the speaker believes the propositions expressed to be false.

Some linguists (e.g. Martina Faller, Sarah Murray, and myself) have tried to place these special utterances into John Searle's classification of speech acts. Marina Sbisà's comparison of Searle's and Austin's classifications intrigued me and inspired me to apply an Austinian analysis to the reportative utterances.

I begin by viewing the reportative utterances in the light of the preliminary distinction between constative and performative utterances. Then, I look at these utterances as locutionary acts, considering their specifics as phonetic acts, phatic acts and rhetic acts. Before turning to the illocutionary level, I discuss how Austin's remarks on entailment, implication (Moorean) and presupposition apply to the reportative utterances, and I also comment on the relevant features of the original utterance (the one being reported). Finally, I turn to the illocutionary acts performed in saying a declarative sentences with a reportative evidential, and argue that they (most often) belong to the group of the verdictives.

15:30– Maciej Witek (University of Szczecin): *Situated assertions and conventional procedures*

Abstract: In "How to Talk: Some Simple Ways" (1953/1979), Austin distinguishes four types of assertions — Calling, Describing, Exemplifying, and Classing — that can be made in an utterance of the form *I is T*, where *I* identifies a particular item and *T* names a type of items found in the world. More specifically, the type named by *T* has been selected as a standard pattern and serves as its sense. Each assertion of the form *I is T* is satisfactory only if the type of the token identified by *I* and the sense of *T* match one another. Importantly, the number of types selected as senses of *T*-terms is smaller than the number of types that speakers can apprehend through perception when focusing their attention on items identifiable by *I*-terms. Therefore, as Marina Sbisà notes, each act of making an assertion — which consists in matching the type of an item and the sense of a predicate — involves an element of "judgement" (Sbisà 2024: 181) or "human intervention" (ibid.: 225), that is, the

speaker's decision that the similarity between the type of the identified item and the sense of the predicate used is sufficient to match the former with the latter. For this reason, Sbisà (2024: 176) classifies the four Austinian assertions among Verdictives in the sense outlined in *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1975: 153–155).

My aim in this talk is to account for the distinction between Calling, Describing, Exemplifying, and Classing by describing four specific conventional procedures governing their performance. To this end, I present these four types of assertion as situated speech acts in Jacob Mey's (2002) sense — that is, as acts afforded by specific conversational contexts. I argue that in invoking or reproducing the procedure for performing a particular assertoric act, speakers go through a series of choices (Fiengo 2017, 2020) afforded by the discourse situation in which they are embedded. As a result, Calling, Describing, Exemplifying, and Classing are subject to distinct standards of evaluation that go beyond the general question of whether the type of the demonstrated item and the sense of the predicate match one another.

Austin, J. L. (1953/1979). How to Talk – Some Simple Ways. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 53, 227–246; reprinted in J. L. Austin, J. O. Urmson (Ed.), & G. J. Warnock (Ed.), *Philosophical Papers* (3rd ed., pp. 134–153). Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/aristotelian/53.1.227> and

<https://doi.org/10.1093/019283021X.003.0006>

Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd edition, M. Sbisà, & J. O. Urmson (Eds.). Oxford University Press.

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Fiengo, R. (2017). Austin's Cube: The Speech Act of Asserting. In: Friederike Moltmann and Mark Textor (Eds.), *Act-based conceptions of propositional content: Contemporary and historical perspectives* (pp. 209-234). Oxford University Press.

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16:15 – Break

Session 4 – Chair: Madelaine Angelova-Elchinova (University of Sofia)

16:30 – Marina's replies

17:00 – Conclusion and closing remarks