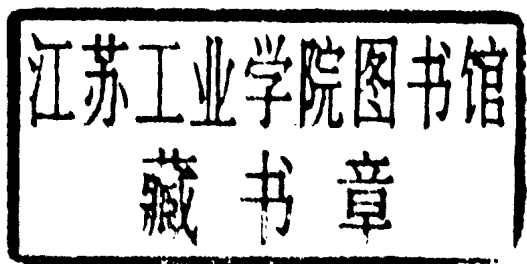# PERFORMATIVE

LINGUISTICS

speaking
and translating
as doing things
with words

By Douglas Robinson

Performative Linguistics

Speaking and translating as doing things with words

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Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*

Acknowledgments

This book has been some time in gestation, beginning in the early fall of 1987, when I gave a trial lecture at the University of Tampere, Finland, on the difference between constative and performative linguistics. I have also incorporated two early published articles of mine (from 1985 and 1986) into my argument here, in radically transformed ways – the material on illocutionary, perlocutionary, and metalocutionary implicature in Chapter 10 and the material on Peirce in Chapter 11 – and my thinking on the subject was salutarily shaped by interchanges with the editors of *Kodikas/Code/Ars Semeiotica* and *The Journal of Pragmatics*, respectively, as well as with Herman Parret in the late 1980s in connection with my article on Grice in the latter. In 1992 I wrote an early draft of the book without the translation tie-ins; that book bogged down a few chapters after Grice on metalocutionary implicature, and the draft sat on various floppy disks for seven years, waiting for new inspiration, only sporadically discussed with interested souls like Bob Ashley, who ended up reading the new draft as well and, as usual, giving me invaluable feedback. That earlier version also took significant impetus from a graduate seminar I taught on language theory at the University of Mississippi around that same time, for which thanks are due especially to Dave Powell, Debra Rae Cohen, and Dianne Bunch, and from lengthy discussions with other grad students, especially Bill Kaul.

The new version of the book likewise arose out of a teaching situation, this time a doctoral seminar in the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Vic in Spain, where I taught in the winter of 1999–2000 on a Fulbright: I assigned Grice's "Logic and Conversation" and Venuti's attack on Grice from *The Scandals of Translation* and then, while preparing for the class, wrote a good deal of what here appears as Part III (most of Chapters 8–10). I would especially like to thank Richard Samson, a colleague who sat in on the course, and my students Cristina Mallol i Macau, Angela Colomer i Font, and Anna Argemi-Catllá de Carson. Thanks also to Martha Tennent, Dean of the Translation Faculty in Vic, and the other colleagues with whom I discussed various translation-related issues while there, especially Ron Puppo, Sheila Waldeck, Victor Obiols, Eva Espasa, Xesca Bartrina,

and Maria Gonzalez. And of course thanks are due to the Fulbright Commission for making my five months in Spain possible.

One of the great things professionally about being based in Barcelona for five months was my close proximity to Anthony Pym, just a one-hour train ride away in Tarragona. He and I met several times during my stay there and discussed matters performative and implicative at length, both in person and over e-mail and the phone. As my discussion in Chapter 3 should make clear, Pym is the only translation scholar to have tackled the issue of performative utterances in anything like what I would call a performative spirit; all the other translation scholars who have addressed Austinian or Gricean issues have been constative linguists concerned to anchor all of their comments in equivalence. This of course makes speech acts and implicatures things that only the original author is by definition capable of perpetrating: the translator's only possible interest in Austin or Grice, for these others, lies in *recognizing* source-text performative and implicative speech acts effectively enough to reproduce them accurately in the translation.

After the book was complete I taught a graduate seminar in linguistics based around it at the University of Mississippi, and my students in that class helped me rethink many of my ideas as well, and rewrite a few passages based on our discussions: thanks to Ingrid Haynes, Max Heidel, Carson Chittom, Natal'ya Litvinova, and Lola Kaufova. The last chapter of the book, on cross-cultural miscommunication, grew out of my preparations for a cross-cultural discourse pragmatics class that I taught to 20 seniors at Ole Miss the next spring.

Thanks also to Don Dyer, who helped me with the Bulgarian in Chapter 1, and Manon Bergeron, who helped me with the Québécois French in Chapter 13.

Oxford, Mississippi, 2002

Contents

Part I

Performatives

We were to consider, you will remember, some cases and senses (only some, Heaven help us!) in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which by saying or *in* saying something we are doing something. This topic is one development – there are many others – in the recent movement towards questioning an age-old assumption in philosophy – the assumption that to say something, at least in all cases worth considering, i.e. all cases considered, is always and simply to *state* something. This assumption is no doubt unconscious, no doubt is precipitate, but it is wholly natural in philosophy apparently. We must learn to run before we can walk. If we never made mistakes how should we correct them?

J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (1962: 12)

1 Introduction: linguistics and translation studies

Constative vs. performative linguistics: a first formulation

Linguistics is the study of language: even etymologically this is an obvious fact. In the twentieth century, however, the term came to signify a single fairly narrow approach to language and to exclude everything else of interest that might theoretically be included within it. Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky were linguists; Ludwig Wittgenstein and Kenneth Burke were not. Roman Jakobson was a linguist; Mikhail Bakhtin was not. Emile Benveniste was a linguist; Jacques Derrida was not.

The first glimmering of the idea that generated this book came one day when I realized that the students of language whom I found least interesting were called "linguists," and the students of language whom I found most interesting were called something else — philosophers of language, critical theorists, literary scholars. I had long pondered the conundrum in my own professional life that language fascinated me but linguistics repelled me: why? If I loved to learn languages and speak and write languages and translate from one language to another and think about language, surely I should love to study linguistics as well? But I didn't. I read Wittgenstein and Burke and Bakhtin and Derrida on language and was enthralled; I studied linguistics as an undergraduate and postgraduate student, and tried to read in it later as well, and kept throwing it down in disgust. I studied language professionally, published on language, but shuddered at the thought that I might ever be considered a linguist (and certainly never was, by any self-proclaimed linguists among my readers). How could this be? How could the term "linguistics" have become so narrowly specialized, so jealously circumscribed, that avid students of language like myself would shun it, and it them? The two philosophers of language whose theories form the intellectual core of this book, J. L. Austin and H. Paul Grice, have been assimilated to the "linguistic" mainstream, but only tentatively and problematically, and rather peripherally. Austin and Grice, it is clear from the remarks of linguists on their work, despite the massive impact that that work has had on linguistic theory, are not "true" linguists.

Is it possible, I began to wonder, that "linguistics" might be defined more broadly, more inclusively, so as to cover the full range of scholarship on

language? Might there be a sense of the term "linguistics" that could usefully and accurately describe the sorts of theoretical and practical work on language done by Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida?

This book was born out of my wranglings with this problem. What if, I wondered, Saussure was wrong and language is not *la langue*, not a more or less stable sign system, not *structure*, but something altogether different? What if the whole Saussurean system was wrong: what if the operative methodological choice was not between studying structure and speech (*la parole*), as Saussure insisted, but between structure and *act*?

These ruminations spawned the distinction that lies at the core of this book back in the late 1980s, at the University of Tampere, Finland. I was reading J. L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*, and puzzling over the moment that puzzles everyone in that book, when halfway through his book Austin discards his exciting and productive performative–constative distinction because all utterances perform actions *and* convey information. What if, it struck me then, we took the terms to apply not to *utterances* but to *approaches* to utterances, linguistic methodologies? Constative linguists would be those interested in stable ("constatic") patterns, structures, rules, with *la langue*, language in the null context, language as a set of structural properties and the logical interrelations among those properties, existing objectively outside of all human cognition and social use and describable using an objectivist methodology based on formal logic; performative linguists would be those interested in actual language use in real-world contexts, in the relationships between actual speakers and writers and actual interpreters, specifically in *how humans perform verbal actions and respond to the verbal actions performed by others*.

Since my own sympathies were overwhelmingly with the performativists, with those who saw language as act, against the constativists who saw it as structure, I was first inclined to dismiss constative linguistics as bad theory, an approach to the study of language based on a philosophically discredited paradigm – which is to say, on error and illusion. It was only gradually, through numerous discussions with intelligent and articulate constative linguists, that my thinking on the subject began to move in a more pluralistic direction: to recognize that we need both constative and performative linguistics. In English, as in German, French, Spanish, and other European languages, we always put the definite article in front of the noun and all adjectives: "The girl was walking through the woods." *Always.* We would never say *"Girl the was walking through woods." In Bulgarian that is precisely how they do it: there is a definite particle *-to/-ta* attached to the end of the noun or the first adjective: Момичето вървеше през гората (momicheto vŭrveshe prez gorata: *momiche* "girl" + *to*, *gora* "forest" +*ta*). Always. In Finnish, Russian, and other languages the definiteness of a noun is not signaled syntactically at all, and speakers of those languages learning English are hard pressed to understand the necessity of deciding whether something is definite or indefinite. These syntactic structures are not "acts" performed by speakers of the various languages; they are more or less stable patterns inherited and used by those speakers. It is

reasonable to assume that a constative syntactician will have more useful things to say about this stable pattern than performative linguists attuned to situationally contingent acts performed by speakers. As I will show in Part II, a performative linguistics can trace the "iterative" acts by which these syntactic structures came to have what relative stability they have, and thus has greater explanatory power in a historical purview than constative linguistics, which tends to assume stability as a matter of course. And cognitive linguists have shown that a conception of syntactic structure as the product of cognitive acts of *structuring* or categorizing can help linguists solve many knotty analytical problems left by an uncritically "static" or constative conception of structure. However, it should also be clear that constative linguists have developed methodological tools for the analysis of stability that continue to be useful in a wide variety of noncontext-specific cases.

We might say: constative linguists tend to be more attentive to those aspects of language that do not change contextually, and that therefore come to seem like stable "objective" structures akin to the foundation of a building; while performative linguists tend to be more attentive to those aspects of language that depend on individual speakers' and listeners' perceptions of contextual features and desire to manipulate those features in personally and socially significant ways, and that therefore come to seem like social acts akin to smiling ironically or patting someone on the back.

Since constative linguistics has for almost a century been the dominant and indeed almost the *only* form of language study accepted as "linguistics," I do not consider the methodological elaboration of constative linguistics to be a particularly pressing task. Anyone who knows anything at all about linguistics as it is taught in most universities today knows basically what I mean by constative linguistics. The almost total exclusion of what I am calling performative linguistics from the discipline of "linguistics" makes its elaboration considerably more urgent. Hence, obviously, my titling of the book *Performative Linguistics* and not, say, *Performative and Constative Linguistics*. This book is designed to expand the discipline of linguistics to include performative approaches, and focuses on that expansion.

I should note, however, that "constative linguistics" takes two rhetorical forms in this book: it is both a modest local quest for stable structures, which will always be an important part of the linguistic project, and a more arrogant universalizing quest for a single dogmatic formalism that will dominate all linguistic analysis. When I praise constative linguistics in what follows, I am imagining it positively in terms of the former modest quest; when I attack it, I am attempting to dislodge the latter arrogant one.

To the extent that constative linguists recognize that the search for stable structures is only one important analytical task undertaken by linguists, they will be willing to make room for, and work alongside of, performative linguists. I have no quarrel with these scholars.

To the extent that some constative linguists have continued to follow Saussure in assuming that the study of the stable abstract structures of *la langue*

is the only acceptable analytical task undertaken by linguists, they have been contemptuous and dismissive of the language scholars that I am calling performative linguists, have closed the disciplinary gates against these scholars, ruled their work beyond the disciplinary pale. I offer some fairly strong critiques of these latter thinkers, especially in Part I. But those critiques are aimed not at constative linguistics per se, rather at the universalizing tendencies behind certain hegemonic forms of constative linguistics that would elevate the study of stable structures into the study of all language.

The constative notion of language as stable objective structure is a limited philosophical construct that can be quite useful in analyzing those aspects of language that do not vary greatly from context to context; constative linguists who embrace that construct as a useful fiction have a great deal to offer their more contextually, socially, actionally oriented performative colleagues. By the same token, the performative notion of language as contextually contingent act is also a limited philosophical construct that can be quite useful in analyzing those aspects of language that vary strikingly from context to context; constative linguists who dogmatically deny the usefulness of this latter fiction may, in what follows, be handled somewhat roughly.

Let me also say here at the outset of my argument that I am not claiming a high degree of originality in what follows. Most of the radical pioneering work I present here has been done by others: Austin and Grice, Derrida and Bakhtin, many others whose names do not appear in these pages. What I am here calling "performative linguistics" is far from a "new" approach to language. It has been around and in some circles highly influential for at least half a century. Apart from my somatic theory of language, which as far as I know is original with me, my only original contribution in this book is the consolidation of existing "peripheral" or "nonmainstream" or "extra-linguistic" theories of language under the rubric "performative linguistics." I came up with the idea of using constatives and performatives as descriptors of linguistic methodologies, and of expanding the field of linguistics to include both. Most of the rest of what you will read here is the work of far greater minds than my own.

The problem of translation in the study of language

Constative linguistics, as I say, is the study of stable linguistic forms, the structures that we inherit and use without conscious awareness or expressive purpose. As long as linguistics is conceived as "basically" about those structures – say, phonemes, morphemes, and syntactic structures – it will seem natural to restrict linguistic methodologies to what I am calling the constative.

What I propose to do in this book is to start at the other end of the linguistic spectrum, with a speech act that is traditionally considered so complicated, so problematic, so rife with irresolvable methodological difficulties as to be virtually beyond the pale of linguistic study: the act of translation. It is, I will be arguing, at this extreme that the need for a broader paradigm for linguistics studies becomes most clearly evident. If translating is regarded as a language

act, a use of language – and what else can it be considered? – then linguistics, the study of language, should be able to explain it. If we agree to include the act of translation within the purview of linguistics, then we are going to need a performative branch of linguistics. Let's see how that works.

The subtitle of this book, "Speaking and Translating as Doing Things With Words," is a somewhat tendentious one, because speaking and translating have been perceived by many scholars in both the linguistics and the translation studies camps as sufficiently different that any casual juxtaposition of the two is suspect. In the introduction to his volume in the St. Jerome "Translation Theories Explained" series, for example, *Translation and Language*, Peter Fawcett notes that the relationship between linguistics and translation studies has long been a "troubled" one:

> Since linguistics is the study of language and has produced such powerful and productive theories about how language works, and since translation is a language activity, it would seem only common sense to think that the first had something to say about the second. Indeed in 1965 the British scholar John Catford opened his book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* with the words: "Clearly, then, any theory of translation must draw upon a theory of language – a general linguistic theory." In exactly the same year, however, the famous American theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky was rather more skeptical about the implications of his own theory for translation, saying that his theory "does not, for example, imply that there must be some reasonable procedure for translating between languages" (1965: 30). Although no expert in translation, Chomsky nonetheless divined that there was something about the activity that put it beyond reason. Perhaps he had read what the academic Ivor Richards (1953: 250) said about translation: "We have here indeed what may very probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos."
>
> (1997: 1)

Well, yes: translation is the most complex type of event ever produced, if you look at it through a rigid enough lens. If your model for studying language is derived from the study of phonemes, say, translation is going to look pretty frighteningly complex. All we need to do to get past Richards' extreme view, however, is to develop a model that is more in tune with the complex dynamics of social action.

The specific problem for the constative study of translation is that, in order to maintain a sense of language as more or less stable structure, constative linguists – here excepting Firthian (1957) context-of-situationists, Hallidayan (1978) systemic-functionalists, sociolinguists like Labov (1966, 1972a,b, 1994) and Gumperz (1971, 1982), and anthropological linguists like Sapir (1949, 1955), Whorf (1941/1956), Hymes (1962), Geertz (1966), Hanks (1999), and Silverstein (2001) – need to stay out of the volatile world of the communicative situation. The stable structures of constative or "formalist"

linguistics are the methodological byproducts of a conceptual lens called the "null context" – an imaginary context that has been analytically cleansed of all contextual variation, which is to say cleansed of everything that might complicate it in real-world ways. When constative formalists do venture out into speech situations, they typically reduce them to a tidy depersonalized (mechanized) null-context formula borrowed from early information theory:

Sender → Message → Receptor

The Sender, in this model, possesses a quantum of information, a message, which he or she wants to send to the Receptor. As we will see in Part II, especially in connection with the dialogical theories of Mikhail Bakhtin in Chapter 7, this "telementational" model (to use Roy Harris's term, for which see pp. 34–9) is based on a mind-as-machine paradigm that is utterly inadequate for describing the intersubjective complexities of human communication. But never mind that for now: that is a problem for performative linguists, and so is not part of what bothers *constative* linguists about translation. The problem arises for constative linguists when they attempt to insert translation into this information-theory model. Where exactly *do* you slot the translator? Nowhere, really. The translator is a Receptor who becomes a new Sender; but making the translator a Sender implies that she (secondary and all-too-human in this depersonalizing model, therefore in hegemonic patriarchal purview implicitly female) somehow has her own Message to send, which can't be, because then the Message sent would no longer be a translation but something else. This means that the translator must somehow come to be seen as a nonsending Sender who intervenes in the communicative situation without actually intervening in the communicative situation – a level of philosophical complexity with which constative linguists do not traditionally feel comfortable, so that this particular move usually has to be methodologically mystified. The translator should either be a Sender or a nonsender, not both. In order to minimize the problems this model raises, constative linguists have historically resorted to two basic stratagems:

1. *Ignore translation altogether.* By far the most popular solution.
2. *Deal with translation but ignore the translator.* Compare the source text and the target text in quest of equivalences and nonequivalences. Treat translation as a fairly mechanistic process (not one performed by a human being with her own experiences or thoughts or feelings, in a specific social and historical context shaped by a multitude of conflicting forces) that somehow manages to create target texts that convey the original message with varying degrees of conformity to the source text. This generates ideally dehumanized models for the "translation" process that look something like this:

Sender → Message (SL) → Receptor (SL)

↘ Message (TL) → Receptor (TL)