THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN SENTENCE CLASSIFICATION

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An aspect of Performative Grammar is advanced and justified in these pages. Performative Grammar is a context-sensitive performance approach to the scientific characterisation of Language structure, first elaborated in UWAJEH (1979) at the Université de Montréal, that takes into account the specific (kinds of) communication contexts in which particular language textures are bona fide communicative constructs of language users.
Specifically, this paper argues that communication context, not language structure as generally believed since antiquity, is the crucial factor for basic classifications of sentences in particular and for sentence description in general. The implications for Grammar of such a conclusion are then discussed with special reference to AUSTIN's (1962) doctrine of 'illocutionary force' in Speech Acts Theory and the 'performative preface' of the so-called Performative Hypothesis outlined by BERCKMANS (1988).

1. "Recent Work on the Performative Hypothesis"

In his article "Recent Work on the Performative Hypothesis", BERCKMANS (1988)[1] attempts a serious evaluation of the so-called **Performative Hypothesis** as a speech acts theory component of the deep structure level of sentences description in Generative Grammar. The Performative Hypothesis, in the words of BERCKMANS (1988:29),

> is a linguistic theory of illocutionary force according to which every declarative sentence in language is derived from a string in whose highest clause a performative preface is present. This clause contains a subject **I**, an illocutionary verb like **STATE**, and the indirect object **you**. It is held that the verb indicates the illocutionary force of the utterance.

After his elaborate review and discussion of the issues involved (i.e., the pros and cons of the descriptive adequacy of the Performative Hypothesis in Generative Grammar), BERCKMANS (1988:62) concludes that, although the Hypothesis appears invalidated by all the counterexamples against it, a 'Weak Version' of the theory must be maintained somehow "in light of the syntactic phenomena which require some sort of Performative Hypothesis", even though he for one finds it "impossible to state, in a general and non-**ad hoc** way, the conditions under which the Weak Version ... applies".

But, as has become increasingly evident over the years, one is **not** obliged to adopt **any** version of the Performative Hypothesis, given the extent to which the doctrine is manifestly problems-infested. So, let us present instead in this paper a universal principle for the classification of both declarative and non-declarative sentences, within the **Performative Grammar** framework, which hopefully accounts satisfactorily and elegantly for the kind of linguistic phenomena that the Performative Hypothesis was formulated to deal with.

2. *Performative Grammar and Levels of Sentence Categorisation*

We should emphasise at this juncture that Performative Grammar and the Performative Hypothesis are **no** relations whatsoever. The latter is named after John L. AUSTIN's' term 'performatives'[2], for a class of declarative sentences, and is ostensibly an unsuccessful venture to date to design a post-CHOMSKY (1965) Generative Grammar mini-theory of declarative sentences, based on AUSTIN's doctrine of 'illocutionary forces',[3] which replaced his earlier constatives-performatives dichotomy in his classification scheme for declarative sentences. Performative Grammar, for its part, essentially different from Generative Grammar, is a self-contained approach to the scientific characterisation of Language structure which was first worked out in UWAJEH (1979) at the Université de Montréal.[4] It is a context-**sensitive** and **performance** Grammar (as opposed to Generative Grammar, which CHOMSKY (1957 & 1965) designed and explicitly described as a 'competence' and context-**free** Grammar), based on the fundamental and overriding tenet that 'Language is an **intelligent** '**performance**' – i.e., that each language is something 'performed' intelligently[5] by members of that language community – in the specific sense that language texture is constructed **purposively** by language users to match **contextual** exigencies of communication in real life.

Within the Performative Grammar scientific paradigm, then, it is necessary from the start here to appreciate the model's notion of 'level' in sentence categorisation. A 'level' in the context is a specific global pragmatic perspective from which sentences may be considered. The way we see the matter in Performative Grammar, it does not really make sense to talk of a sentence category without specifying in advance from which particular global perspective one is dealing with the matter; for, depending on the levels of categorisation, the same sentence may indeed be classified in different, but nonetheless correct, ways.

Three basic levels of sentence categorisation are posited in Performative Grammar – viz, the 'compositional', the 'thematic', and the 'performative' levels – whose determination depends on the different ways we view the realities of

experience represented with Language for their communication in appropriate contexts. The compositional level of sentence categorisation is concerned with the cognised **number** of communicative units the sentence comprises: the sentence at this level of description is categorised according to the communicated complexity or componency of the realities represented with it. The distinction traditionally made between 'simple' and 'complex' sentences, for example, concerns compositional level categorisation. The performative level (which is logically the **third** and last level) of sentence categorisation concerns the relative **importance** of the communicative units the sentence comprises: the sentence of this level of description is categorised according to the communicated pertinence or immediacy of the realities represented with it. The typification 'topicalised sentence', for example, is an instance of performative-level categorisation. The thematic level (which is logically the **second** level) of sentence categorisation is concerned with the express **function** of the communicative units the sentence comprises: the sentence at this level of description is categorised according to the communicated purpose or goal of the realities represented with it. Interrogative sentences are a thematic-level category of sentences; so, to, incidentally, are declaratives and imperatives. In this paper, our illustrations for sentence categorisation are, for exposition convenience, drawn exclusively from thematic-level categorisation.

3. *AUSTIN's Performance Theory of Sentences*

Notwithstanding the fact that Performative Grammar and the Performative Hypothesis are radically different from one another in orientation and scope, AUSTIN's theory of sentence types, from which the Performative Hypothesis derives its existence, is useful for appreciating properly our contribution in these pages to the problem of sentence categorisation in grammatical description. So, let us take a brief look at pertinent aspects of AUSTIN's insights in the domain which are relevant to our discussion in this paper regarding our own contribution there.

John Langshaw AUSTIN was a Philosopher, not a Linguist. However, his intuitions in the intellectual fields of linguistic philosophy and philosophy of language nowadays generally known as Speech Acts Theory[6] are quite illuminating for linguistic description; and his discussions make very interesting reading. The first phase of his insights is where he made the significant distinction between 'constatives' and 'performatives', as we relate hereafter.

According to AUSTIN (1962),[7] performatives and constatives are two kinds of what grammarians had for long rather indiscriminately called by the sweeping collective name 'declarative sentences'. These (that is, so-called

declarative sentences), as we know, also happen to be of special *epistemological* interest for philosophers in that they inherently make claims about **knowledge** of states of affairs. For illustration, sentence example 1 below, a declarative sentence, would be said to be a **true** statement in the sense that it posits *true knowledge* or *truth* about reality, while sentence example 2 below, another declarative, would be said to be a false statement in that it posits false knowledge or falsehood about reality; and sentence example 3 below, as an imperative sentence, is apparently irrelevant to the philosopher in terms of truth conditions because it seems unreasonable to inquire whether this sentence posits truth or falsehood about states of affairs.

1. Ripe fruits are not always yellow in colour.
2. Bats are large insects that fly only at night.
3. Power to the people!

But, explained AUSTIN further, truth value as such is surprisingly applicable **only to one type**
of declaratives, the type of which our sentences 4,5, and 6 below – in addition to our sentences 1 and 2 – are also exemplars.

1. Ripe fruits are not always yellow in colour.
2. Bats are large insects that fly only at night.
4. It will rain tomorrow.
5. The door opened.
6. Ben Nwabueze isn't complaining.

AUSTIN then named 'constatives' those sentences belonging to this category of declaratives – that is, to the category of declarative sentences for which it makes sense to inquire whether a given sentence is a true or false statement. For the other category of declaratives, the type exemplified by sentences 7, 8, and 9, it does **not** make sense in principle, according to AUSTIN, to inquire whether the sentence is a true or false statement.

7. I bet you a million naira that it won't rain tomorrow.
8. We hereby admit it was a dastardly action to annul the June 12 election results.
9. I beg you to give me the job of Petroleum Resources Minister.

By the saying of "I bet ...", "We ... admit ...", or "I beg ..." in such sentences the speaker, according to AUSTIN (1962), is at the same time performing the activity in question designated by language units such as **bet**, **admit**, and **beg**, etc. – and a proper appreciation that this observation can in fact be extended somehow to correctly cover the use of language in its entirety eventually led scholars to the current appellation "speech **acts**"[8], or "language **acts**" more correctly according to us, for sentence constructions in discourse studies. The **saying** of each of the activities (**bet, admit, beg**) mentioned above in the sentences 7 to 9 is also, then, according to AUSTIN, the **doing** of the activities. To be more explicit, if in a communication situation you offer/claim that you bet someone a million naira, as per sentence example 7 above, then the question whether your statement is true or not does not arise at all; for you have bet, no matter what, by so claiming verbally. One might therefore question any number of things conceivable about your betting as per sentence example 7 – for example, whether you really have a million naira and would pay it if required, or whether yours is only a hollow/foolhardy bet (issues which in AUSTIN's estimation and terminology properly concern the **'felicity conditions'** or the **'felicitousness'** versus **'non-felicitousness'** of your claim), but the fact itself of your betting is not and cannot be in dispute. AUSTIN accordingly named this second class of declaratives (where the saying is the **performing**) that of **'performatives'** – as opposed to the first class of declaratives (where it *does* make sense to inquire whether the statement is true or false), that of **'constatives'**[9].

Howbeit imperfectly, AUSTIN (1962) quickly realised, among other things, what we have already indicated earlier above – namely, that the 'doing' or 'performing' associated with the so-called performatives is *not* exclusive to them – and eventually (partially) abandoned the constatives-performatives dichotomy for a more comprehensive language acts theory of 'locutionary', 'illocutionary' and 'perlocutionary' (language) acts. According to this second-phase tripartite theory, every sentence production in language is a 'locutionary (language) act' and the sentence itself is a 'locution'; the same sentence is an 'illocution' as the product of an 'illocutionary (language) act' which consists, of the fact of the sentence having been constructed with some functional intention called 'illocutionary force' (e.g., that of informing simply, promising, warning, etc.) in view; and that same sentence is a 'perlocution' inasmuch as it is the product of the 'perlocutionary (language) act' which consists of constructing that sentence with some purported pragmatic effect (e.g., conviction, rage, death, etc.) For some reason(s) never yet made explicit, the central and most influential component of this Austinian doctrine just outlined has become the illocutionary feature; it encapsulates, albeit in a radically modified texture, his

earlier constatives-performative insights, and is the basis for the so-called Performative Hypothesis in Generative Grammar presented in section I of this paper.

Unfortunately, there is an inherent flaw in the illocutionary force doctrine which renders it essentially suspect for sentence classification. Let us recall, the doctrine postulates – quite correctly, we opine – that underlying every sentence production act is some definite function intended by the producer of that sentence. Thus, with the simple declarative sentence example 10 below, a mafia boss could in fact be warning a boxer in the boxing ring to make sure he loses to his boxing opponent, a protégé of that mafia boss; and so, the sentence would be said to have an illocutionary force of warning.

10. My friends and I are sore losers.

Now, the trouble with classifying sentences this way is, according to us, that there is an indefinitely long list of different uses intended by their producers – such that the illocutionary force doctrine ultimately provides no known finite set of non-overlapping sentence categories. In effect, this would mean that in the Performative Hypothesis you have as many different types of declarative sentences as the indefinite list of illocutionary forces discernible in verbs – because according to BERCKMANS (1988:29) "It is held that the verb indicates the illocutionary force of the utterance".

Also, in adopting the Austinian illocutionary force doctrine as the critical basis for its sentence categorisation, the Performative Hypothesis brings to sentence classification another fundamental error in linguistic description first highlighted by Performative Grammar. This error is discussed in the next section of this exposition.

4. *Structure-Based Sentence Classification Schemes*

At first blush, it seems perfectly reasonable to uphold the commonsensical view that sentences of any conceivable language must somehow show by their structure (that is, by their texture make-up) whether the sentence is, for example, a declarative sentence, an interrogative sentence, or an imperative sentence. In this regard, sentences similar in construction pattern to sentence 11 below would be declarative, those similar to sentence example 12 would be interrogative, and those similar to sentence example 13 would be imperative.

11. Henry attended the meeting.
12. Did Henry attend the meeting?

13. (Henry,) attend the meeting!

All mainstream serious linguistic description frameworks since antiquity – from ancient Indian and Greek linguistic studies to twentieth century Structuralist and Generative Linguistics – have endorsed the above neat and structure-based approach to sentence classification. Thus, the Traditional Grammar *GRAMMAIRE LAROUSSE du Français Contemporain* by CHEVALIER et al (1964), the Structuralist Garmmar *The Structure of English* by FRIES (1952) and the Generative Grammar *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* by CHOMSKY (1965) all use structure-based approaches to the thematic classification of sentences. We claim it is a *wrong* approach to sentence classification in particular and linguistic analysis generally – as explained hereafter.

Consider, for illustration, the following possible English sentence.

14. Burn down Central Bank!

One might readily infer from its structure that this is a command or imperative sentence. However, supposing in actual fact that this sentence was a construction transmitted from a disgruntled Nigerian complaining about the ridiculously low value of the national currency the naira, in answer to the following question from a television station reporter.

15. What would be your first executive action, sir, if you had the singular good fortune to become the President of this great country of ours?

Then it would be immediately obvious that we are actually dealing with a **declarative** sentence. Similarly, one could easily think, without any further index to go by than the sentence structure, that the sentence example 16 below must be an interrogative sentence.

16. Are you mad?

But we have now coincidentally had for neighbours two different families in which the sentence example in question is a routine way whereby the mothers concerned react to some mischief or the other committed by their children. From observing the situations, we have come to realise that the mothers are in fact **declaring** to the children by the sentence that they the children are mad (in behaving the way they have done) and not trying to find out whether indeed the children are mad. The sentence in question is thus, under the circumstances, clearly a declarative – in spite of its structure.

The examples just presented highlight AUSTIN's own initial error and that of proponents of the so-called Performative Hypothesis in hoping to discover the indicator of what constitutes a performative utterance, or of the specific illocutionary force an utterance carries, through **the kind of verb** used in the specific language act. Let us recall apropos what BERCKMANS (1988:29) for example says of a 'performative clause'.

> This clause contains a subject **I**, an illocutionary verb like **STATE**, and an indirect object **you.** It is held that the verb indicates the illocutionary force of the utterance.

According to us, the 'verb' by itself is not the determining factor as to the illocutionary status of the sentence in which that verb occurs. Consider sentence example 17, for illustration.

17. I bet you a hundred naira.

Even with the so-called 'performative verb' **bet** in the construction, we could be dealing with AUSTIN's constative and not his performative if by this sentence you are **informing** an inquirer about how much you actually offered to pay up earlier (i.e., a hundred naira, and not a million naira) when you said you bet. Notice also, as already mentioned above, that sentence example 10, where *no* verb ostensibly indicates any warning illocutionary force, nevertheless has the illocutionary force of warning as we presented it.

10. My friends and I are sore losers.

5. *The Importance of Context*

What our demonstrations have of course been pointing to is the crucial role of **context** in sentence categorisation. Are we therefore claiming by our illustrations that sentence structure is irrelevant for its classification? No, that is not our argument.

It is actually quite true that certain sentence construct types do **tend to** reflect their classification category. Indeed, were the situation essentially otherwise 'language' would to that extent be a chaotic phenomenon indeed, and corresponding linguistic communication would be fundamentally inefficient. Generally speaking, however, sentential structures by themselves although necessary as we have just noted for discovering the communicator's intention,

are yet an insufficient guide to that effect. More importantly, according to us, communication context is the overall guarantee as to the communicator's intention. Thus, a sentence's make-up (i.e., structure) per se is only a rough index towards the specific type of information provided by the communicator, by which we may categorise that sentence; the make-up is necessarily supplemented, even overridden, by contextual indices – such as body posture, a telling cough, the topic of conversation or that just discussed, an accompanying frown or smile or sneer, etc. – which usually go a long way to direct and focalise the intelligent guesses of the communicatee's (that his linguistic decodings essentially are anyway) regarding the communicator's exact intentions[10].

Consider sentence example 18 below for further illustration of the very serious theoretical claim above in Performative Grammar.

18. May I ask you a question?

Is this sentence a question? That depends essentially on the context of its production. Firstly, the sentence might of course be an interrogative – as is evident from the following exchange.

18. May I ask you a question?
19. Yes, you may.

In the context, the communicatee has fairly obviously interpreted the communicator's intention in sentence example 18 as a desire to be informed about something. Secondly, the sentence could be a request (i.e., a polite imperative) and not an interrogative – as is evident from the following exchange.

18. May I ask you a question?
20. Go ahead, please

Thirdly, it could be a 'double-barrelled' expression – here, both interrogative and request imperative – if the response to sentence example 18 happened to be somewhat like this.

18. May I ask you a question?
21. Yes, go ahead.

We are obviously **not** implying in the above discussion that a linguistic response to a specific sentence is **the** contextual determinant regarding the category of that particular sentence; we have merely demonstrated that such a clue can point to the true intention of the communicator concerning what type of information is conveyed to and understood by the communicatee, and therefore how the sentence may be classified.

We can also see clearly now from the role of context in sentence categorisation as explained in these pages that AUSTIN himself **was right** (while the advocates of the Performative Hypothesis with an opposing view are wrong) for noting that the meaning of an utterance is quite distinct from the illocutionary force of that utterance: to the extent that meaning is an integral component of language, meaning is intralinguistic while illocutionary force is extralinguistic since it is essentially context-indicated. Incidentally, we think that the major evaluation handicap over the years in the controversy concerning the adequacy or lack of it of the Performative Hypothesis has been precisely that of addressing **the wrong issues** by appealing to so-called 'syntactic' criteria, instead of contextual indices in support of one's arguments. Actually, to the extent that the notion involved is properly apprehended, the Performative Hypothesis 'performative preface' for instance, Performative Grammar's 'thematic intention' or AUSTIN's 'illocutionary force', is **contextually deducible** but **not necessarily linguistically represented** by the language communicator himself; and is therefore *not* amenable to proofs, such as those labeled 'syntactic', which hinge on what type of language structure is actually produced by the language user and is available for the language theorist's analysis and description. In order to evaluate, then, the grammatical significance of a postulated contextually deducible piece of information which is said to underly language texture itself in communication (as both Performative Grammar's 'thematic intention' of the communicator and AUSTIN's 'illocutionary force' as well as the Performative Hypothesis 'performative preface' really do), we need **context-sensitive** tests; *not* a battery of 'syntactic' arguments!

Endnotes

1. See BERCKMANS, R.P. (1988): "Recent Work on the Performative Hypothesis". In *Communication and Cognition* Vol. 21. No. 1
2. See AUSTIN, J.I. (1962): *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press.
3. Ibid
4. See UWAJEH, M.K.C. (1979): *Structures Syntaxiques du Deuxième Registre*. Doctoral thesis, Département de Linguistique, Université de Montréal.

5. Language as a systemic-structured object is, of course, never the performing activity itself of using language (which activity is usually referred to as 'performance' since CHOMSKY (1965). When we describe Language as 'a performance' we are referring specifically to Language as a context-bound communicative construct of language users.

6. More correctly, we think, we ourselves would say 'Language Acts Theory'

7. See SEARLE, J.R. (1969): *Speech Acts.* Cambridge University Press.

8. I bet you a million naira that it won't rain tomorrow.

Where we grew up in the Igbo-speaking part of Eastern Nigeria, you bet by 'planting' the tip of your right hand's little finger firmly in the centre of your left hand palm; and your betting challenger dared you by removing that little finger with his right hand little/index finger. No betting activity could be said to have occurred without the above ritual. So, your possible sentence 'I bet you a million naira ...' would be false in the event that the ritual we designated as 'betting' was not duly executed and that you did not therefore bet while reporting that you bet.

9. It is also the case, from our own investigations into the matter, that performatives can be false –, contrary to AUSTIN's original claim. Take, for illustration, the sentence example 7 already discussed.

10. It goes without saying that a communicatee may still misunderstand the communicator's intention despite all available contextual clues.

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