



**SPEECH ACTS AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE:
AN ATTEMPT TO EVALUATE THE UTTERANCES
IN THE HOLY WRITINGS IN TERMS OF JOHN LANGSHAW
AUSTIN'S SPEECH ACTS THEORYⁱ**

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Abstract:

It is recently seen that religious language is discussed with regard to various theories related to language. In this study, religious language will be evaluated in terms of speech acts theory which is one of the most important theories associated with ordinary language. Accordingly, some questions will be the main concern of this article. Can the matters stated in the speech acts theory be applied to the religious language? If applicable, in what way can it be applied? Should we impose any restriction while applying this theory to the ordinary language? Firstly, it is necessary to discuss speech acts theory of Austin who is one of the most significant agents of the ordinary language philosophy in order to answer these questions. Afterwards, the expressions in The Holy Quranⁱⁱⁱ accepted by Muslims as a holy writing will be analysed in the sense of Austin's theory: It will also be investigated whether the approaches mentioned in Austin's theory take part in these writings or not.

Keywords: speech acts, locutionary act, illocutionary act, perlocution, utterance, religious language

John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960) criticizes the comprehension of Vienna Circle philosophers that all propositions are composed of empirical propositions. As known, these philosophers assume that the unverifiable and unfalsifiable propositions are pseudo propositions. However, in Austin's point of view, they make a big mistake. This fallacy results from their confusing utterances with propositions. There are a great number of explanandums for what we call as utterance except for proposition

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ⁱⁱⁱ Citations of the translation of Quran were retrieved from Meulana Muhammad Ali.

expressing the case of and object in reality. A considerable part of these propositions do not have the factual content. Still, they are constitutive factors of social life and communication. On that score, the existence of utterances are certain as the propositions are (Austin 1964: 1-2).

Austin's views related to utterances are divided into two periods. In the first period, the utterances are two parts on the condition that they are constative and performative. In the second period, all utterances are performative.

The constative utterances pertain to facts (Austin 1964: 3). For this reason, these utterances carry accurate value or inaccurate one (Austin 1964: 46). To exemplify, "x is running." The accuracy of the constative utterance depends upon x's running (Austin 1964: 47). The utterances which are neither wrong nor true are called as performative (Austin 1964: 6). The performatives go into division in respect to explanatoriness: the primary and explicit performatives. The primary performatives do not clarify which one should be the act to be carried out. Archetypally, "I will be there" is such a performative (Austin 1964: 69). On the other hand, the explicit performatives clarify which act should be carried out. For instance, "I promise to be there" is performative of this nature (Austin 1964: 69).

Austin puts the achievement conditions of performatives in an order in the following way (Austin 1964 14-15):

1. The accepted procedures should be conventional. These procedures should have a certain conventional influence. Namely, they should involve the specific utterances and enunciations of the particular people in the certain conditions.
2. The particular people and the certain conditions should be in accordance with a given case.
3. The procedure should be accurately carried out by participants.
4. The procedure should be completely carried out by participants.
5. The participants attending the procedure should share the sense and idea relevant to the aim of this procedure.
6. The attenders taking part in the procedure should realize their ideas and senses determined before relevant to the goal of this project.

If one of these six conditions is not satisfied, the utterance fails utterly. With regard to these failures, Austin uses the word "infelicity" which means inappropriate statement or behaviour, mischance and displeasure (Austin 1964: 14). According to his claim, in a performative progress, the neglecting of at least one of the first four of six conditions is a misfire. The neglecting at least one of the last two conditions is an abuse. To exemplify, if someone says "I promise" and if he aims not to keep his promise and if he does not make good on his word, this is the misfire. However, if he carries out the act, this situation is an abuse. The acts in these unsuccessful consequences are never applied in the wake of the neglecting of the first two conditions or they are improperly or faultily practiced as a result of not fulfilling the third or fourth condition. Regarding abuses, they express the affectedness. Therefore, they are unsuccessfully performed acts (Austin 1964: 15-19).

In parallel with these conditions, the linguistic performance brought about with the enunciation of the utterances is called speech acts. Hereunder, the enunciation of every utterance stands for an act. This act is the purpose of the utterance (Austin 1964: 8). Austin speaks of three kinds of acts: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act.

1. Locutionary act: It is divided into three parts; phonetic act, phatic act, and rhetic act (Austin 1964: 94). The phonetic act is merely the act of uttering certain noises (Austin 1964: 92). For example, when a speaker pronounces some noises like "a", "i", "o", etc, he carries out the phonetic act. Phatic act is to attempt act of uttering belonging to a particular grammar and vocabulary. As an example, "Ali said to him, 'go to school!'" is a kind of this act (Austin 1964: 92). This speech act directly utters expressions (Austin 1964: 96). As to rhetic act, it means referring to something. To exemplify, "Ali told him to go to school." is such a speech act (Austin 1964: 92-93). This speech act utters indirect speeches (Austin 1964: 96).

2. Illocutionary act: "*while we are saying something*" such as asking a question, warning, condemning, giving up, commanding and so on, "*at the same time we are performing something*", this is called illocutionary act (Austin 1964:99). Each illocutionary act depends on a particular conventional force (Austin 1964: 108).

Austin divides illocutionary acts into five more general classes (Austin 1964: 150-151):

1. The verdictive illocutionary acts: These are based on the utterances related to decision by a jury, arbitrator, or umpire. An estimate and appraisal are instances of verdictive illocutionary act.
2. Exercitive illocutionary acts: These indicate the exercising of a power and an authority. Voting, ordering, and advising can be given as examples for exercitive illocutionary act.
3. Commissive illocutionary acts: These illocutionary acts are related to covenanting acts such as promising, placing a bet, taking an oath and so on.
4. Behabitive illocutionary acts: These illocutionary acts are words relative to attitude and social behaviours, like apologizing, congratulating, condoling with etc.
5. Expositive illocutionary acts: These illocutionary acts make explicit how we use the words. To exemplify, "I assume", "I am responding", "I am defending" and so on.

Fulfilling any of these illocutionary acts is based on those achievement conditions (Austin 1964: 115-116).

1. The listener should comprehend what someone intends with these utterances.
2. The illocutionary act should maintain its influence. For instance, I call this ship "Davut", with this utterance, the ship should be called "Davut", it should not be entitled "Mahmut".

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3. The illocutionary act should have a reactive formation on listener and this reaction should lead a second act. As an example, the illocutionary act of promising should be supported with the act of keeping that promise.

3. Perlocutionary act: Speaker's producing an effect on the listener is called perlocutionary act. This can be persuading, giving up, getting angry and so on (Austin 1964: 101). For example, "he enabled me to be nice to himself", this expression is this kind of speech acts.

We can conclude these results relevant to religious language and religious discourses in accordance with Austin's approaches on speech acts and performatives:

1. We can refer to the religious discourses as utterances.
2. These utterances are not constative; however, they are performatives. Because they do not indicate factivity and they do not have accurate or inaccurate value.
3. We can find the examples of primary performatives in the holy writings. The causes of these kinds of speech acts existing in these writings can be as follow: On one hand, these writings draw attentions of the naive people who use the shortest and simplest speech form, on the other hand, these writings were sent to a particular society. Each community has short idiocratical wording stated as speech saving, like metaphors and similes. *The Holy Quran* taking these two cases into consideration includes such primary performatives at the beginning of some suras. Some examples are given below to make the statement clear:

3.1. "*The great Calamity!*" (al-Qâria, CI/1).

3.2. "*The Reality!*" (al-Hâqqa, LXIX/1).

4. In the Holy writings, we confront with explicit performatives. Particularly, after the primary performatives, we witness in these writings which were included explicit performatives. For instance, in *The Holy Quran*, after the primary performatives above, there are those definitive expressions below:

4.1. "*The day wherein men will be as scattered moths, And the mountains will be as carded wool.*" (al-Qari'ah, CI/4-5).

4.2. "*So when the trumpet is blown with a single blast, And the earth and the mountains are borne away and crushed with one crash - On that day will the Event come to pass.*" (al-Haqqah, LXIX/13-15).

It can be asserted that the expressions in "4.1." and "4.2." clarify the expressions in "3.1." and "3.2."

5. Can we claim the phonetic acts regard to religious language? Undoubtfully, God speaks out through the holy writings. On that score, the answer of this question is also the answer of that question: Can we meet the phonetic acts in the holy writings? Either can we say that "God is the one who uses the phonetic act." in the religious language? Let us try to find out the answer of this question with reference to *The Holy Quran*. We encounter with some letters which they are located at the beginning of 29 suras of *The Holy Book*, and which do not make any reference. Because these letters are reading as (they) are and do not form

whatever word, they are called as "mukatta" letters. Sometimes, this articulations consist of only one letter. For instance, "Sâd! ..." (Sad, XXXVIII/1), "Kâf! ..." (Qaf, L/1), "Nûn! ..." (Al-Qalam, LXVIII/1) are of this nature of phonetic act. Apart from these, there are also phonetic acts composing of two, three, four or five letters. To exemplify, "Tâ, hâ!" (Ta Ha, XX/1), "Tâ, sîn! ..." (an-Naml, XXVII/1), "Yâ, sîn!" (Ya Sin, XXXVI/1), "Hâ, mîm!" (al-Mumin, XL/1; Fussilat, XLI/1; al-Zukhruf, XLIII/1; al-Dukhân, XLIV/1; al-Ghashiyah, XLV/1; al-Ahqaf, XLVI/1), "Elif, lâm, mîm!" (al-Baqarah, II/1; al-Ankabut, XXIX/1; ar-Rum, XXX/1; Luqman, XXXI/1; al-Sajdah, XXXII/1), "Elif, lâm, râ!" (Yunus, X/1; al-Hud, XI/1; Yusuf, XII/1; Ibrahim, XIV/1; al-Hijr, XV/1), "Tâ, sîn, mîm!" (al-Shuara, XXVI/1; al-Qasas, XXVIII/1), "Elif, lâm, mîm, sâd!" (al-Araf, VII/1), "Elif, lâm, mîm, râ! ..." (ar-Rad, XIII/1), "Kâf, hâ, yâ, ayn, sâd!" (al-Maryam, XIX/1), "Hâ, mîm! Ayn, sîn, kâf!" (ash-Shura, XLII/1-2). When taking these acts into consideration, we can assert that "God is the one who does the phonetic act."

6. In the holy writings, especially in the narration of parables, it encounters with phatic acts quite often. It is explained with some samples making the suggestion clear:

6.1. "But the chiefs of his people who disbelieved said: We see thee not but a mortal like us, and we see not that any follow thee but those who are the meanest of us at first thought. Nor do we see in you any superiority over us; nay, we deem you liars" (al-Hud, XI/27).

6.2. "He said: O my son, relate not thy dream to thy brethren, lest they devise a plan against thee. The devil indeed is an open enemy to man." (Yusuf, XII/5).

6.3. "He said: Did I not say to thee that thou couldst not have patience with me?" (al-Kahf, XVIII/75).

6.4. "They said: Call on thy Lord for our sake to make it clear to us what her colour is. (Moses) said: He says, She is a yellow cow; her colour is intensely yellow delighting the beholders." (al-Baqarah, II/69).

In the direction of these examples, it can be concluded that "God is the one who does the phonetic act."

7. The given instances above form as the rhetic act in following way:

7.1. "The chiefs of those disbelievers said that they saw him as they were."

7.2. "His father said to him not to tell his dream to his brothers because they could set a trap for him."

7.3. "The other said him that he could not have patience with him."

7.4. "They said to him to pray his Allah to make it colour to them what her colour is."

As seen, when it is considered with regards to the holy writings, he is the God who has the potential to realize the phonetic act and phatic act via angel Gabriel. However, individuals are the ones experiencing rhetic act and trying to comprehend the celestial discourses. The phatic act and the rhetic act are two different processes

completing each other. As the God orders something to be interpreted, human-being explains the meaning of something informed by the God.

8. In religious language, from time to time, the God is mentioned with characterizations such as warning, announcing good news, promising, threatening, commanding, questioning, forgiving, prohibiting, challenging, damning, greeting, condemning, swearing, and so on. Someone talking about God makes an attempt on these characteristics through illocutionary acts in the holy writings. These illocutionary acts are exemplified from *The Holy Quran*.

8.1. Illocutionary act notifying warn

"...be on your guard against the fire whose fuel is men and stones; it is prepared for the disbelievers." (al-Baqarah, II/24).

"And guard yourselves against a day when no soul will avail another in the least, neither will intercession be accepted on its behalf, nor will compensation be taken from it, nor will they be helped." (al-Baqarah, II/48).

"O you who believe, if you obey a party from among those who have been given the Book, they will turn you back as disbelievers after your belief." (al-Imran III/100).

"And whoever kills a believer intentionally, his punishment is hell, abiding therein; and Allah is wroth with him and He has cursed him and prepared for him a grievous chastisement." (an-Nisa, IV/93).

8.2. Illocutionary act related to heralding

"And those who eschew the worship of the idols and turn to Allah, for them is good news. So give good news to My servants." (az- Zumar, XXXIX/17).

"For them is good news in this world's life and in the Hereafter. There is no changing the words of Allah. That is the mighty achievement." (Yunus, X/64).

8.3. Illocutionary act notifying command

"Say: We believe in Allah and (in) that which has been revealed to us, and (in) that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and (in) that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and (in) that which was given to the prophets from their Lord, we do not make any distinction between any of them and to Him do we submit." (al-Baqarah, II/136).

"O men, eat the lawful and good things from what is in the earth, and follow not the footsteps of the devil. Surely he is an open enemy to you." (al-Baqarah, II/168).

"O you who believe, be maintainers of justice, bearers of witness for Allah, even though it be against your own selves or (your) parents or near relatives — whether he be rich or poor, Allah has a better right over them both. So follow not (your) low desires, lest you deviate. And if you distort or turn away from (truth), surely Allah is ever Aware of what you do." (an-Nisa, IV/135).

"And give full measure when you measure out, and weigh with a true balance. This is fair and better in the end." (Bani Israil, XVII/35).

"And We have enjoined on man goodness to his parents. But if they contend with thee to associate (others) with Me, of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not. To Me is your return, so I will inform you of what you did." (al-Ankabut, XXIX/8).

8.4. Illocutionary act notifying promising

"Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they have their reward with their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve." (al-Baqarah, II/62).

"And those who believe and do good deeds, these are the owners of the Garden; therein they abide." (al-Baqarah, II/82).

"And those who believe and do good, We shall make them enter Gardens in which rivers flow, to abide therein for ever. It is Allah's promise, in truth. And who is more truthful in word than Allah?" (an-Nisa, IV/122).

"And whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, and he (or she) is a believer — these will enter the Garden, and they will not be dealt with a whit unjustly." (an-Nisa, IV/124).

8.5. Illocutionary act indicating threatening

"... And there is an abasing chastisement for the disbelievers." (al-Baqarah, II/90).

"....And as for those who disbelieve, for them is a drink of hot water and a painful chastisement because they disbelieved." (Yunus, X/4).

8.6. Illocutionary act notifying question

"...and that besides Allah you have not any friend or helper?" (al-Baqarah, II/107).

"And when it is said to them, Follow what Allah has revealed, they say: Nay, we follow that wherein we found our fathers. What! Even though their fathers had no sense at all, nor did they follow the right way?" (al-Baqarah, II/170).

"Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, We believe, and will not be tried?" (al-Ankabut XXIX/2).

"...Are those who know and those who know not alike?..." (az-Zumar XXXIX/9).

8.7. Illocutionary act related to forgiving

"Except those who repent and amend and make manifest (the truth), these it is to whom I turn (mercifully); and I am the Oft-returning (to mercy)..." (al-Baqarah, II/160).

8.8. Illocutionary act related to prohibiting

"And swallow not up your property among yourselves by false means, nor seek to gain access thereby to the judges, so that you may swallow up a part of the property of men wrongfully while you know..." (al-Baqarah, II/188).

"And go not about in the land exultingly, for thou canst not rend the earth, nor reach the mountains in height." (Bani Israil XVII/37).

"And follow not that of which thou hast no knowledge..." (Bani Israil XVII/36).

8.9. Illocutionary act related to challenging

"Then bring a chapter like it, and invite whom you can besides Allah, if you are truthful."(al-Yunus, X/38; al-Hud, XI/13).

8.10. Illocutionary act related to damning

"... so away with the unjust people!" (al-Mu'minun, XXIII/41).

"...So away with a people who believe not!" (al-Mu'minun, XXIII/44).

"Cursed be the liars!" (al-Dhariyat, LI/10).

"...May Allah destroy them!..." (al-Munafikun, LXIII/4).

"Abu Lahab's hands will perish and he will perish!" (al-Lahab, CXI/1).

8.11. Illocutionary act related to greeting

"And peace on him the day he was born and the day he died, and the day he is raised to life!" (al-Maryam, XIX/15).

"...and peace to him who follows the guidance!" (Ta Ha, XX/47).

"Peace be to Elias!" (al-Saffat, XXXVII/130).

"And peace be to those sent!" (al-Saffat, XXXVII/181).

8.12. Illocutionary act related to condemning

"Woe to the cheaters! Who, when they take the measure (of their dues) from men, take it fully, And when they measure out to others or weigh out for them, they give less than is due." (al-Tatfif, LXXXIII/1-3).

"Woe to every slanderer, defamer!" (al-Humazah, CIV/1).

8.13. Illocutionary act related to swearing

"By those ranging in ranks!" (al-Saffat, XXXVII/1).

"By the Book that makes manifest!" (az-Zukhruf, XLIII/2; Dukhan, XLIV/2).

"...Almighty (God)! By the glorious Quran!" (Qaf, L/1).

"By those scattering broadcast!" (al-Dhariyat, LI/1).

"By the heaven full of paths!" (al-Dhariyat, LI/7).

"By the Mountain!" (at-Tur, LII/1).

"By the time! —" (al-Asr, CIII/1).

"By the heaven and the Comer by night!" (at-Tariq, LXXXVI/1).

Besides these, in holy writings, there are illocutionary acts like praise, glorifying, honour etc. In The Holy Quran, these illocutionary acts are exemplified as done below:

8.14. Illocutionary act related to glorifying

"Glory to Him Who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Remote Mosque, whose precincts We blessed, that We might show him of Our signs! Surely He is the Hearing, the Seeing." (Bani Israil, XVII/1).

8.15. Illocutionary act related to honour

"Blessed be the name of thy Lord, the Lord of Glory and Honour!" (ar-Rahman, LV/78).

"Blessed is He Who sent down the Discrimination upon His servant that he might be a warner to the nations —" (al-Furqan, XXV/1).

"Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Kingdom..." (al-Mulk, LXVII/1).

8.16. Illocutionary act related to praising

"So the roots of the people who did wrong were cut off. And praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds." (al-Anam, VI/45).

"And praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds!" (al-Saffat, XXXVII/ 182).

"Praise be to Allah! Who revealed the Book to His servant, and allowed not therein any crookedness." (al-Kahf, XVIII/1).

9. In the holy writings, the perlocutionary acts can be exemplified. These verse of the Quran can be considered as the examples:

"Then He directed Himself to the heaven and it was a vapour, so He said to it and to the earth: Come both, willingly or unwillingly. They both said: We come willingly." (Ha Mim, XLI/11).

"And it was said: O earth, swallow thy water, and O cloud, clear away. And the water was made to abate, and the affair was decided ..." (al-Hud, XI/44).

"And when We said to the angels, Be submissive to Adam, they submitted, but Iblis (did not)..." (al-Baqarah, II/34).

"So when I have made him complete and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down making obeisance to him. So the angels made obeisance, all of them together." (al-Hijr, XV/29–30).

Austin's approach of speech acts can be objected in two points of view:

1. Austin bases a particular illocutionary act on a particular utterance's conventional force. Hereunder, on the nail, conventional force whether should have a particular grammar or a particular vocabulary. However, for example, when it is said *"There is a cow in the field!"*, the listener or the listeners understand *"I warn you, there is a cow in the field!"* with reference to neither a certain grammar nor a particular vocabulary (Allwood 1977). As it is seen, Austin's speech acts have no relation with context. To him, the context includes a measurement except for conventional force of utterances. In reality, the context and utterance can not be separated. The context is a frame gaining the content to the utterance. However, Austin ignores the context.
2. Austin's differentiation of success or unsuccess can not be applied to the religious utterances. Such a distinction can not be done in terms of philosophy of religion. When disbelievers or religionists not performing the religious norms, do not carry out what they are expected to perform by reading the utterances in the holy writings, these utterances can not be called as failure. Thus, it can be said that the *speech acts theory* of language includes a particular restriction applying to the religious utterances.

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