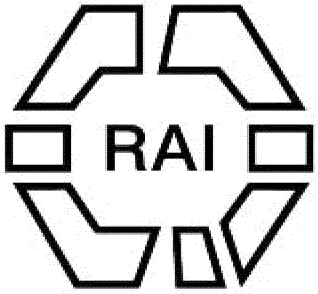

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS: PERFORMATIVE UTTERANCES AMONG THE LIMBA OF SIERRA LEONE

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The Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin has popularised the notion of 'performative utterances'. These are utterances in which using a certain form of words is not to describe or express, nor to make a true or false statement. Rather, their point is to *do* something. This can be made clear through some examples. If one says 'I do' (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife, as said in the course of the marriage ceremony), 'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother' (in a will), 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' (at the launching ceremony), or 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow', these utterances do not describe what is being done, nor state that it is being done—they actually *do* it. As Austin puts it: 'To name the ship *is* to say (in the appropriate circumstances) the words "I name etc." When I say, before the registrar or altar, etc., "I do", I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it' (Austin 1962: 6). Austin goes on to elaborate and analyse the idea of 'performative utterances', in particular to bring in the wider notion of the 'illocutionary force' of such speech acts (a concept to which I will return). But his basic concept of 'performative utterances' is the starting point of his whole exposition of the subject and can, likewise, serve to introduce the present discussion.

Austin is of course not the only writer to point out the 'active' aspect of language. This indeed is a point that has particularly interested social anthropologists.[1] Austin has, however, developed the concept of the 'performative' and 'illocutionary' aspect of language in a particularly systematic and consistent way. He has, further, presented it as a *general* interpretation of speech rather than as one arising specifically from the study of non-industrial societies or intended to explain distinctive forms such as ritual or 'magical' utterances. To follow Austin's analysis thus has the additional merit of taking a concept developed in an industrial context (and a concept, moreover, taken seriously by philosophers) and showing that it is also relevant in a non-industrial and non-literate community.

This article applies the concept of 'performative utterances' to the Limba. The Limba are a group of just under 200,000 people, mainly agriculturalists, living in the hills and swamps of northern Sierra Leone. The area has been one of the most remote and undeveloped of Sierra Leone and, till very recently, there were few schools and little or no opportunity for paid employment in the area. To a larger extent than most peoples in Sierra Leone the Limba still keep to what they consider their 'traditional' way of life based on rice farming, palmwine tapping and reverence for their local authorities, though they are now beginning to take part in politics and economic development on a national scale. It is illuminating to analyse some of their speech acts in terms of Austin's 'performative utterances'.

Although this concept was developed in an English context it applies also—perhaps even better—to the Limba use and view of speech.

Applying the concept of 'performative utterances' to the Limba turns out to be of wider interest than it might seem at first sight. It involves more than merely an analysis of the isolated idiomatic phrases of one small community, for, as should emerge, it throws light on its social relationships in general and on how they—quite deliberately—are maintained through verbal acts of commitment or contract. In addition, this approach makes a contribution to wider discussions about the kind of analysis one can make of certain utterances sometimes referred to as 'symbolic' or 'ritual', and to controversies about the nature of language and action in non-industrial (as well as industrial) societies.

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First I shall discuss a group of terms which in Limba are quite clearly used with the performative force Austin has described. These are:

'I accept (agree, approve)' (*yaŋ yɛrɔkɔi*)
'I announce (formally)' (*yaŋ tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*)
'I plead (entreat/apologise/pray/acknowledge a fault)' (*yaŋ theteke*).

All these terms are central to Limba day-to-day transactions and in particular to formal negotiations. They are used in making contracts, in the various stages of transactions and in formal law cases. Their force in the context of Limba social life can be illustrated by a brief discussion of each in turn.

1. The formalised acceptance of a gift, of an item of news, of an offer or move in a formal negotiation, or of a declaration of intention is performed by the Limba term *yɛrɔkɔ*, 'accept', agree, or approve. As will become clear, this phrase is not used to describe the facts or to express a feeling but, as Austin would put it, actually to *do* something—to perform the act of acceptance. As such, it must be uttered in public, or at any rate before the relevant audience—and, as Austin puts it, 'in the appropriate circumstances' (Austin 1962: 6).

The term has its most clearly formalised application in the conduct of a law case. The chief or elders trying to reconcile the disputants 'speak well between them', persuading the one to apologise (*theteke*), the other to 'accept' this. The aggrieved party may refuse his acceptance for some time, reiterating, for example, 'I will not agree' (*yaŋ sa me*) or 'I don't like that, I don't like that' (*yaŋ thimo ta wuŋ, yaŋ thimo ta wuŋ*). Finally, however, the case is normally brought to a close by his formal acceptance, 'It pleases me; it is good; I accept' (*wuŋ thime yama; wuŋ a ɓhɔ; yaŋ yɛrɔkɔi*) or simply 'I accept' (*yaŋ yɛrɔkɔi*). In this context the words have a legal or performative force: the verbal act formally marks the end of the dispute and the process is described in these terms by the Limba themselves.

In many other situations too, the acceptance in words marks a final stage in a transaction. In marriage negotiations, for example, after the formal announcements by the suitor, the parents, if they agree, declare: 'We accept' (*miŋ yɛrɔkɔi*). This commits them, and any going back on this agreement would be regarded as defaulting. Again, a quarrel is often concluded by one party admitting that he was in the wrong and making an apology—but the matter is not concluded until

the other formally accepts this by saying *yaŋ/miŋ yɛrɔkɔi*—'I/we have accepted [it].' Another situation occurs when an inferior brings a gift to someone considered superior to him—a child to an elder, a son to his father, or a subject to a chief. After long speeches of flattery and explanation by the giver the recipient must reply, and amid thanks and flattery on his side he must at some point or other (probably at several points) perform the verbal act of saying *yaŋ yɛrɔkɔi*, 'I accept'; otherwise he would be considered not only to have refused the gift and the accompanying speech, but also, just as important, to have refused to accept the obligations involved in an acceptance of the gift. A gift between putative equals may be treated in this way or even—though in an English context this sounds odd—a gift from superior to inferior. Here too the recipient makes a formal acknowledgement of the gift—'I accept'—and once again recognises not merely the gift itself but the social relationship involved.

Once these words have been publicly uttered in any transaction, they are regarded as a formal, even legal, commitment. As Austin has pointed out the commitment or action can still 'go wrong' in a variety of ways; but it is certainly agreed that something has been *done*, and not just said. By stating his agreement, the speaker is undertaking a certain responsibility.

2. Next we can consider the Limba phrase *tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*, to 'announce', declare a purpose, or tell important news. This is usually a very formal act. As such it also often involves giving a gift 'to make the words heavy', but the gift in itself without the accompanying words would not qualify and is not essential for the act to be termed *tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*. The stress is also less on the actual content of the communication, which may in fact often have been known to the participants before they were formally 'told', than on the set declaration made of the relevant facts in the required manner and situation.

This act of formal announcement occurs in a whole variety of contexts and is regarded as an essential part of many aspects of Limba life. It often involves the explicit statement of the official purpose of some visit or ceremony. When, for example, visitors come to a funeral celebration, one required stage in the proceedings is the interchange of formal speeches with the relations of the dead; they sit together in one of the verandahs and the visitors announce their purpose (*tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*) by saying that they have come in sympathy with their friends, relations or affines, and by giving the gifts they have brought with them. In a memorial ceremony too the visitors' formal presentation—'Here are 4 shillings' or 'Here are kolas'—is also called *tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*. Similarly, marriage negotiations contain several such formal announcements; a man going to declare his wish to marry a girl or to ask for his promised wife to be given to him takes a gift as 'notification' (*danthɛkɛ*), and when the girl is brought to her husband, her friends go specially to make a formal announcement of her presence; he too sends back a token gift to declare (*tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*) that he has accepted her. In a law case, the various stages of the procedure are often formally marked by an 'announcement' to the court of what has occurred, often with a gift. Another example is when the young boys are due to be initiated. Everyone in fact knows that the initiation is to take place that year, preparations have been going on for some months and the necessary large harvest has already been ensured by sowing extra rice. Yet it is also obligatory for the boys to join in a group to perform the ceremony of carrying in wood for the chief and

elders as an 'announcement' of their desire to be circumcised that year. One boy is chosen to express this on their behalf, and he sits with the elders so that speeches can be made on each side and he can formally declare their purpose (*tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*) and hear their acceptance.

These formal announcements are also used to recognise someone's authority or ownership. One of the marks of a chief's authority is that he should know everything that happens in his chiefdom in the sense of being formally 'told'—whether or not he in practice knows it already. When a visitor comes to the village, he or his host must go to 'announce' this to the local chief; or when a stranger wishes to settle in the locality, he must 'announce' his intention formally to the chief, saying, for example: 'I have come here; I wish to live here, by your grace'. With such words and the offer of a token gift, he declares his intention (*tɔŋ danthɛkɛ*) and in so doing accepts the chief's authority. Similarly any other important event in the chiefdom such as a death, the killing of big game, the imposition of a dangerous oath or ordeal, an initiation or an accident—all these must be formally announced, preferably with a gift, to the paramount or local chief; and he in turn accepts and approves.

The principle of announcing events or purposes also occurs in many other contexts. Sometimes the term used is not the highly formalised *tɔŋ danthɛkɛ* but the more ordinary 'tell' (*tepe*) or 'ask' (*thɔŋthɔŋɔŋ*). A child should ceremoniously tell his parents of his plans and his successes or failures, especially when he returns after a long absence; a husband should carefully tell the old women when his wife is pregnant; and an elder should be formally told of a dispute when his mediation is requested. A new wife, a new chief, a new chief's drum, or the initiation of a new phase of the farming year should all be shown and notified to those in authority, including those who are the most senior of all, the dead ancestors. In fact, to an observer one of the most striking characteristics of Limba life is precisely this constant stress on formal speaking and 'announcing'. Whatever the details, there is always some tinge of formality and of the recognition, through the announcement, of relationships between individuals or groups, relationships both accepted and further reinforced by the formal acceptance by the hearers.

3. The final term to be discussed in this group is the Limba *theteke*. This means to plead, entreat, apologise, pray, or acknowledge a fault. Someone 'pleads' by uttering one of the standard phrases which express request, entreaty or desire for forgiveness (*yandi*, *kuloho* or *ilɔho*), usually adding 'I am pleading with you' (*yaŋ theteke yina*). Sometimes this is followed by the pleader clapping, putting a hand on the other's ankle as a sign of humility, or, in extreme cases, lying prone on the ground. Another person may also be begged to intercede on the pleader's behalf and this is usually accompanied by a gift, or, in an important case, by a substantial payment. When someone pronounces the standard words in a prescribed situation, even without a gift, then the action is described as 'pleading'.

Any quarrel should, ideally, be ended by 'pleading' on the one side and 'acceptance' on the other. A dispute between two women, for example, or between a husband and wife, may be finished by an agreed apology, usually with the offer of a token gift as the 'plea'. People also formally beg for forgiveness if they have failed to fulfil some obligation to someone in authority over them; secret society members, for instance, have to plead with their leader if they dance without

formal permission; and a sub-chief who is late in bringing the rice due to his paramount chief brings a gift to apologise formally for the delay: it passes from hand to hand among the chief's followers who thank the giver and finally goes to the chief himself who says 'I accept' (*yaŋ yɛrɔkɔi*). Asking friends or neighbours for help with some special task is also referred to as 'pleading'; a man goes round begging people to help him to build or thatch his house, or asking his friends to join him in a co-operative hoeing association. A chief's special requests to his people should also, ideally, be described as 'pleading'. Even if there is in practice no question of disobedience, he should always 'speak well to people', thank them for their work and 'plead well with them'. The normal word for praying is also *theteke*, and the words and actions of prayers are similar to those associated with other begging: people use the same terminology and show the same signs of humility (in extreme cases, for example, lying prone on a grave to beg a dead father's forgiveness). People plead with the ancestors for peace and harmony and a father intercedes with the dead for his child in the same kind of way that he would entreat a living chief. In sacrifice too the dead ancestors are 'pleaded with' and an animal is killed to give them honour in exactly the same way as a gift accompanies a plea to living people.

Many further instances of this kind of pleading could be given. Here is one, as described by a Limba, about the way a husband may have to 'plead' for his wife's return; the various means he adopts to beg successfully are all standard ones.

> If a husband has acted badly, the wife goes to her parents; the husband comes there for her and pleads for the wife to agree to return. The husband gives kola to the wife's people. Then they go and question her about what it was that made her go away, about why the husband is pleading. Sometimes the husband asks the wife's younger sister to plead for him with their mother. The sister goes to her mother, saying that the husband has confessed to doing evil, he is pleading. The husband must wait humbly. Even if they curse him and say bad words, he must not reply, he is ashamed, he can say nothing. Sometimes he goes to an old man and gives him kola and pleads, saying that he will not [act wrongly] again. So the old man goes to help the husband to plead with the wife's family. However much they say against him the husband must not reply. The old man may go in private into the room with the wife, and give her wine, and speak well with her to make her agree to return . . .

Besides these situations, 'pleading' is also common in the related but even more formal context of a law case. A man 'pleads' to make a formal admission of guilt and usually follows this up with a gift or payment. An accused witch, for example, must both 'plead' in words as an initial acknowledgement of guilt and also later 'plead' further with material property—money, rice, livestock. Similarly an adulterer must 'plead' with the husband by first admitting his guilt, often accompanying this by a token payment 'to confess', and then later paying the fine of £2 to £4. These are extreme cases, for both witchcraft and adultery are serious crimes. In other offences the amount of compensation or fine is usually considerably less and the emphasis is primarily on the verbal act constituting the acknowledgement of guilt. If a man 'pleads well' it is considered right and justifiable that he should be let off some of the fine, and the European refusal to be entreated in the Limba way causes misunderstandings on both sides. The main principle in the Limba cases is not so much the exact amount of the compensation paid as the performative utterance of 'pleading', thus acknowledging the culprit's fault and, very important, implicitly promising good intentions for the future; he also in this

way admits the authority of the arbitrating elders and recognises the part he should be playing in village life.

'Pleading', then, is used in personal quarrels, requests for aid or forgiveness and the formal apology or payment of compensation in a law case. When the 'plea' has been made, the matter is then ended and ratified by a formal acceptance of it in the phrase 'I accept' (*yaŋ yɛrɔkɔi*), or 'It is finished' (*wuŋ pati* or *huŋ pɛ*). The culprit or pleader is sometimes also thanked for his 'pleading' and told that he too has in that respect done well and shown honour to those he was begging. It is considered very wrong not to accede to someone's pleading without a strong cause.

> Pleading is a big thing among us Limbas. You will send a friend to the other saying 'Please, please', pleading for you, asking the other to cease [from his anger]. The other will agree when he is entreated—looking to *Kanu* [God]. It is bad not to accept when you are entreated. *Kanu* comes to us all. Looking to *Kanu*—that means listening to the one who pleads.

Even if in fact great amounts are sometimes exacted in compensation, the theory and very often the practice remains that people should 'plead' if they are guilty and they should then be forgiven or let off lightly.

By this public acknowledgement of guilt or the formal request for aid made through the Limba custom of 'pleading', something tantamount to a legal act is performed by the speaker. He sets himself in a certain recognised relationship to those he is addressing. In the case of a formal court action and apology, this utterance is an admission of guilt, withdrawal of his own claims, and formal acceptance of the elders' assessment and moral position; it is a necessary stage in the settlement of the case. By begging for help, the speaker is also formally acknowledging his dependence on another and showing him honour. The theme that runs through all the usages is that in uttering the words recognised as 'pleading' a man by saying something is also *doing* something.

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So far I have taken certain Limba terms which are clear examples of Austin's 'performative' utterances and shown how they do indeed have not merely a descriptive or expressive force but, when publicly used in the appropriate context, are in fact a kind of action. The Limba regard the successful enactment of these quasi-legal utterances as not only performing some specific transaction or commitment on a particular occasion but as an act—not just a description—formally acknowledging a wide and often continuing social relationship.

This wider aspect comes out even more clearly in the second group of Limba utterances to be discussed. These instances cover the Limba terms for thanking, greeting and saying goodbye. At first sight they seem rather different from the first group in that it is not so easy to attach them to specific transactions as with Austin's first and famous examples from marriage, betting, making a will, giving a name, etc. Nevertheless there are clear analogies. Making these utterances is, for the Limba, essentially to perform an act of commitment—to acknowledge indebtedness or dependence as well as, on occasion, a particular transaction (thanking); to commit oneself to some relationship, either permanent or in relation to some

specific contract (greeting); and to announce a particular stage in some undertaking or recognise another's authority (saying goodbye). To the Limba as well as to the outside observer these are unmistakably parallel to the earlier apparently more specific performative utterances. Indeed Austin by the end of his book on the subject was prepared to widen his original examples to include such instances (Austin 1962: 150 sqq.).

1. 'Thanking' (*kalaŋaŋ*) is strikingly frequent among the Limba. The most usual terms are *ɣwali* or *wali* (plural *wali bena*), 'thank you', sometimes expanded to the fuller *yaŋ kalaŋaŋ ɣina*, 'I am thanking you' or *miŋ kalaŋaŋ ɣina*, 'we thank you'. In spite of the outward differences in form, all these phrases perform the same act. The phrases are usually repeated several times and a full thanking may also be accompanied by clapping (especially by women), by laying a hand on the other's ankle, or by a gift; but it is the *words* not the gestures that constitute the act. Sometimes blessings are also included, such as 'May *Kanu* give you a long life'; 'Through *Kanu* may you have peace'; or 'By *Kanu* may you meet with no bad thing'.

Such thanking terms are continually being used. A gift is formally thanked for as publicly as possible, seconded by the dependants or relations of the recipient. Thanking is the normal reception for those who come home from the farm after a day's work, thanks are due from a husband or guest to the wife who has cooked for them, and a speaker often thanks his audience for listening: 'Thanks to all of you, you who have come' or 'I give thanks to all you who are here'.

Thanking is used in a very formalised way to make an acknowledgement of interdependence between two sides. A husband, for example, must thank the officials who have initiated his future wife, and, later, the old women who have helped her in childbirth. He must also thank his wife for her contribution to the family farm, her cooking and, above all, her bearing of children. Any friends and relations who visit the new mother always thank or congratulate her—'Thank you for parenthood, thank you, thank you, thank you'—but it is the husband in particular who must speak well to her and bring her rice and palm wine 'to thank her' (*ba niŋ kaliŋina*). In the same way, a person should thank those on whose help he is dependent in performing some work or ceremony. A bereaved son temporarily stops the women's singing at a funeral in order to thank them with a token gift, and the owner of a farm formally thanks those who come to help him and also calls out excitedly as they progress up the rice field: 'Fine (*mbadeŋ*), fine, fine, fine, fine, fine; thanks (*ɣwali*), thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks'.

Thanks are particularly frequent between chief and people. Those who have received special help sometimes come to thank him formally, often with a gift; and those who arrive to announce some special event or success are in return thanked for their coming, for their news and for the efforts they made to achieve the success. This mutual thanking and honouring points to the reciprocal, even quasi-contractual, nature of authority among the Limba, where the relationship must be continually acknowledged on both sides, and the mutual responsibilities and interdependence constantly voiced in verbal interchanges.

An example will illustrate the Limba stress on the verbal acknowledgement of interdependence. This is a description by a Limba (and in typically Limba terms) of the apprenticing of a boy to a master smith.

When the boy is about seven years old, his father takes him to the smith. He talks to him about the child. He takes a red fowl; his people pound rice; they get oil, they get salt, they get a mat, and bring them. He goes to the smith and says: 'Here is a fowl; here is rice; here is oil; here is the child. We want you to teach him smithcraft.' The smith thanks him well. He says: 'It pleases me, I accept'. He takes the child. The child stays there for a long time, he teaches him. . . . His relations come and thank the master. They bring rice and a mat and a fowl and oil and money and cloth—everything. They come and thank, saying: 'Here they are. For the child we brought here—you taught him smithcraft; for us now—that pleases us. Here is a token gift to thank you; it pleases us. Here is a gift to thank you.' The master, if it pleases him, says: 'I accept'. They say goodbye, fully.

The whole transaction here, as so often, is enacted in terms of the interchange of formalised verbal utterances, in particular of thanking and accepting.

The most formal occasions of thanking are accompanied by a gift, sometimes a substantial one, and a mention of 'thanking' often implies that a gift has also been expected and given. But without the prescribed linguistic action—without, that is, the verbal utterance required on a set occasion between the appropriate people—the gift or payment would not in itself be sufficient to constitute the 'thanks', nor would it be described as 'thanking', whereas a mere verbal act of gratitude, even though in practice less acceptable if given 'with the mouth' only, would still be classed as 'thanking'.

'Thanking', therefore, an institution of such great importance to the Limba, is not to be defined ultimately as the giving or interchange of gifts. Nor is it to be analysed principally in terms of an inner *feeling* of gratitude, for this need not enter into the situation at all. Though the Limba are clear that thanking is a source of satisfaction to both speaker and receiver, 'making your heart good', this is a result of the thanking rather than its cause or its essence. Rather, Limba thanking is an act of commitment: an institutionalised way of acknowledging some transaction or relationship between people.

2. 'Greeting' may at first sight seem different from the utterances discussed so far. In fact, the Limba 'I greet [you]' (*yaŋ maŋ*) or, the more common form, 'greeting' (*mande*, *ŋsɛkɛ*, etc.) which performs exactly the same act, are closely analogous to thanking. 'Greeting' is something which the Limba deliberately perform as a formal act; it is regarded by them as a kind of commitment and acknowledgement in just the same way as 'thanking'.

Greetings are given and expected in many situations.[2] In the first place, it is assumed to be a universal human obligation to exchange greetings with those you encounter in the village, farm or road. People who meet on the path between villages or farms greet each other (*manande*) and often stop to enquire about the other's home or affairs. In the village people greet each other in the morning before leaving for the farm. Husband and wife too should 'greet each other well' and a man must take special care to greet his wife's parents. Children greet their parents, especially their fathers, morning and evening. Friends and contemporaries are more informal, but even they greet each other when they meet; and when people come home from the farm in the evening they greet and are greeted by those who have spent the day in the village.

Even these minor everyday greetings are regarded as both an essential social obligation and an act in which a Limba will naturally take pleasure. So when a story is being told the exchange of greetings between the characters illustrates

their common humanity and is also much appreciated by the listeners, being sometimes repeated or filled in spontaneously by them. Someone wishing to set the scene in a narrative may rattle off a long list of greetings exchanged, with obvious enjoyment both to himself and others in this typically Limba behaviour; or he may describe with pride and affection the way in which he himself 'greeted someone very well' (*a maŋ wana wulɔhɔɔi*) or 'was greeted fully' (*mano na feu*). This interchange of greetings is among the pleasures of life; for one young Limba, for instance, the most idyllic occasion imaginable was to have a young girl smiling at him with her pointed teeth, bringing him food and greeting him: 'You meet, and say goodbye, and greet again throughout the day'. 'Greeting' is also an essential factor in marriage—if a husband can complain against his wife that 'You haven't greeted me' or that she did not allow his companions 'To come and greet me well' this is treated as a serious charge. Exchanging words of greeting is both an obligation and 'Makes a man's heart good'.

In addition to the regular greetings expected of everyone as a matter of course, there are also situations where greetings have a special meaning or where a man makes a special expedition to greet someone with extra formality. The same word (*maŋ*) is used here referring not only to the interchange of the salutations themselves, but also to the whole act of going to visit someone in order to greet him, the time spent there, and all the talk, and on occasion gifts, that accompany this. A minor example of this kind of greeting is when someone goes out of his way to visit within or beyond the village. A man or woman goes to someone else saying 'I have come to greet you' (*yaŋ se ba na mana*) or 'Your greeter has come' (*bamaŋ wo kɛnda se*). The honour brought by this visit should be answered by a full greeting in reply and, according to the relative status of the visitor, by appreciative attention, gifts, or hospitality. More important are the special efforts a man must make to go and greet his parents-in-law, specially his wife's mother. This is a very formal relationship and therefore one in which it is of great moment to greet very fully and carefully. Even before his wife has been given to him in marriage, the suitor must initiate or recognise the relationship by coming formally to greet his prospective parents-in-law.

Similarly an obligation to come to greet may be an understood requirement of a contract or formal relationship. If a man has gained permission to tap wine from a tree on another's land, it is assumed that about once a month he will come to 'greet' the owner; sometimes he brings a hen or some money as part of the 'greeting'; but in any case he must come to greet in words saying, for example, 'We thank you, we come to thank you'; the owner should reply 'It pleases us, we thank you, may you not fall from the tree'. In saying this the man acknowledges the other's authority and his own obligations to him.

This is particularly explicit in the case of chiefship. People's 'greeting' is an inherent part of a chief's authority. When he is first elected people come to see him 'to greet him', i.e. to acknowledge him as chief. His own dependants and members of his village go regularly to greet him, and sub-chiefs or relations in other villages are expected to come at times for this special purpose; in this way they show him honour and recognise his authority. Any stranger who comes to the village is expected to go to greet the chief and is received and welcomed by him. In addition the chief has many people who are in one way or another specially dependent on

him—to whom he has given a daughter in marriage, helped with money or food, or accepted into his household—and these people are especially scrupulous about bringing him full and frequent greetings. A chief or elder is important if he has 'many people'. By this the Limba are not speaking just of the people bound to work for him but of the numbers who can be seen crowding into his verandah to visit and acknowledge him, to 'greet him' (*ba niŋ mana*).

A chief or 'big man' must accept and acknowledge these greetings by 'replying' (*me*) and himself greeting in his turn. This is part of the duty expected of any important man: he must speak well to people. One of the highest compliments that a Limba can pay to anyone is to say 'He knows how to greet you', and this is specially important for a chief. Someone who 'knows how to greet you' is said to be more likely to be elected chief, while an effective accusation against a rival candidate is to say 'He does not speak well with people; he does not greet them'. A chief should go to the farm to 'greet' and 'thank' people, by this acknowledging the work they are doing and making 'their hearts feel good'. Because of this, one of the reasons why the Limba are sometimes puzzled by the Europeans and Creoles they encounter in positions of authority is that, in Limba terms, they seem unwilling to acknowledge their responsibility to the people under them by returning or offering protracted greetings. On the other hand, Limba were correspondingly delighted to follow out their own picture of authority, as involving greeting and kind words as well as dignity, on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's visit to northern Sierra Leone in 1961; Limba visitors came back overjoyed that she had acted in the way they had hoped of a chief: 'In spite of her fine gown and all the honour she was not proud; she came down to greet the old chiefs who could not walk'. Similarly a well-known Limba of chiefly family who had been to school was praised enthusiastically in another chiefdom many miles away because, although literate, he was not aloof: 'If you met him you would not think he was one who could read—he greets you well and eats with you'. 'Greeting', in the Limba sense of the word, is a necessary part of the relations between an important man and the rest of the people.

Their custom of greeting, therefore, is one way in which the Limba mark and recognise various relationships. Great stress is laid on the importance of explicitly greeting people, whether superiors, equals or inferiors, and in this greeting the position of the other is accepted. This is particularly evident in the recognised reciprocity of the relationship between chief and people. He is responsible to and for them, just as they are to him, and this is made explicit in the constant series of greetings between them. The theme that seems to run through all these various usages of the Limba term for greeting, whether the quick exchange of a word or the formal visit with gift to greet a superior, is the idea that to greet someone *is* to honour him, to acknowledge a relationship with him and, very often, to commit oneself to accepting his authority. What is exchanged in these greetings is both a recognition of the other's position and, as the Limba continually stress, 'honour'.

3. Much the same account could be given of the Limba term for 'saying goodbye'. This, like thanking, is related to greeting in meaning and use, being in some ways merely a special form of salutation. 'Saying goodbye' (*saŋkalaŋ*) is often a required and formal stage in a ceremony or transaction. For several weeks before their initiation, for example, young boys must travel round all their friends

and relatives in their various villages; they come 'to say goodbye' (*ba saŋkalina*). When a girl is told the date when she must finally leave her own home for her husband's, she goes round all her relatives to say goodbye: 'I have been given; I am coming to say goodbye to you'. A man intending to leave home to seek his fortune down country should—in theory—say a formal farewell with a token gift to the chief, and the occasion may be further formalised by speeches of thanks and blessings from the chief and elders of the village. Similarly, a man should also say a careful farewell to his father, his father's brother and, if a smith or hunter, to his master in that craft—to all those, in fact, with special authority over him. In saying goodbye, he is formally requesting permission for his new venture and acknowledging that what he is doing is only 'by your grace' (*thɔkɔ ba kɛnda*). The formal act of 'saying goodbye' occurs constantly as a way of formalising the movement from one status to another, or the ending of some stage, and often makes an explicit recognition of the authority of others over the speaker.

The Limba therefore use what at first sight may seem mere idiomatic and trivial phrases—greetings, thanks and farewells—actually to do something, something which they themselves consider important in their social life. The set words are recognised as effective not just as verbal formulae but as actual commitments undertaken in public and in circumstances recognised as appropriate. Such utterances not only acknowledge particular commitments (as with the first group considered) but are also understood as having wider implications for the smooth running of social relations generally. They are an explicit way in which individuals acknowledge relationships, undertake social commitments and formally recognise the general social situation. In uttering these forms of words the Limba are doing and not 'merely saying' something, and they themselves are quite clearly aware of the performative force involved.

* * * * *

The concept of 'performative utterances' thus applies remarkably well to the Limba. This might in fact have been something of a surprise to Austin. He himself surmised that the emergence of explicit performative utterances was probably a late development in the evolution of language.

> Explicitly distinguishing the different *forces* that [an] utterance might have is a later achievement of language, and a considerable one; primitive or primary forms of utterance will preserve the 'ambiguity' or 'equivocation' or 'vagueness' of primitive language in this respect; they will not make explicit the precise [performative] force of the utterance (Austin 1962: 72).

This passage may be referring merely to the speculative history of early language. But if Austin is using 'primitive language' in the more popular (and misleading) sense which would cover present-day African languages, then his point does not hold of Limba at least.

In some ways I might even suggest that the performative force of the utterances I have been discussing is more strikingly explicit in Limba than in English. This in fact ties up with a number of other characteristics of Limba culture. First, the Limba, being non-literate, do not make use of written documents or certificates in their transactions. The spoken element thus becomes all the more

important. In the example of 'I give and bequeath . . .', for instance, the legal force in English can be achieved either through a spoken utterance or—more commonly—through a written document; similarly there is a real sense in which the legality of, say, a marriage, a lease, or other contract resides in a document. In Limba this legal commitment must consist of spoken words and the Limba are thus all the more aware of the legalising and performative force of certain spoken utterances. The absence of written documentation also makes an audience essential on these occasions to act as both witnesses and assessors, and this too brings out the importance of the actual speaking. Again, the Limba do not make much use of expressions referring to inner feelings (though they can speak of these if they wish by referring to the 'heart' (*huthukuma*)) and thus there is not the same temptation in Limba as, say, in English to confuse a performative utterance with one merely describing feelings.[3]

The Limba then would not provide evidence of a 'primitive language' that had not yet developed explicit performative forms. Austin's point here is in fact more a suggestion thrown out at random than an important stage in his argument and counter examples on this particular point hardly affect his general theory. Nevertheless it is of interest to note that, with Limba at least, the opposite of his hypothesis seems true: the Limba are apparently even more aware than English speakers of the performative force of spoken words.

In examining the Limba examples discussed, it became clear that they correspond well with the instances of performative utterances which Austin gives at the outset of his discussion: verbal acts by which some transaction is actually performed, some commitment undertaken or some contract recognised. It is also clear that the Limba instances often do something more than this. They can also ratify some general situation. Finally, they also serve to confirm and maintain recognised social relationships.

This may seem to be stretching the term 'performative utterance' far beyond what Austin originally intended. After all, the ratifying of a specific transaction of some kind is not the same as the general recognition of a total situation or continuing relationship. But this kind of analysis is not in fact so far from Austin's final position. He too goes further in the end than just distinguishing performative from other utterances, and points to a general 'illocutionary' force in many kinds of utterances. By 'illocutionary' here he means 'the performance of an act in saying something', 'doing something as opposed to just saying something' (Austin 1962: 99, 133). In this sense even an ordinary statement can have an illocutionary force when one takes into account the occasion on which it is used, the general context and the intention of the actual utterance by the speaker. This is distinguished from the 'locutionary' force of an utterance, which is to do with the 'mere' stating of something rather than the performance of an act. Austin uses this wider concept of 'illocutionary' force to apply to a number of different types of utterances, many of which are close to the Limba examples discussed here: 'verdictives' (e.g. 'acquit', 'convict', 'diagnose'); 'exercitives' (e.g. 'appoint', 'announce', 'pray'); 'commissives' (e.g. 'promise', 'contract', 'agree'); 'behabitives' (e.g. 'apologise', 'thank', 'greet'); 'expositives' (e.g. 'accept', 'inform', 'affirm') (Austin 1962: 152 sqq.). Though Austin does not specifically say so, the enlargement of his list and the introduction of a more general theory of 'illocutionary'

forces in fact encourages one to see the functions of such utterances as involving not just specific and isolated acts but as the recognition of wider situations and relationships. By taking into consideration the whole speech context involved (the occasion, audience, intention) one is led to the kind of analysis that I have made here about the functions actually performed by illocutionary acts among the Limba. For when we look at how they use spoken utterances (in particular the group of utterances considered here) we need to be concerned as much with what they *do* as with what they *say*.

This very obvious conclusion is perhaps more important than it seems. In the first place, this sort of approach to certain linguistic acts enables us to see them in the frame of action rather than as 'mere words', and in their functions of creating and maintaining social relationships and social situations. From one point of view this recalls Mauss's famous analysis of gifts as a way of recognising certain relations and situations (Mauss 1954). Just as gifts can be seen as having a kind of 'active' force to bind people together, so too can words. The utterance or interchange of 'illocutionary acts' is in many ways analogous to the act of giving or receiving a gift.[4]

Secondly, the present discussion is relevant for various theories put forward by social anthropologists and others about language among so-called 'primitive' peoples. We have for instance Lévi-Strauss's celebrated emphasis on the 'poetic' nature of expression among primitives, Cassirer on 'mythical' thinking, or writers like Calame-Griaule on the essentially symbolic nature of speech among the most famous people of French ethnography, the Dogon (Lévi-Strauss 1966; Cassirer 1954: 97 sqq.; Calame-Griaule 1965). In fact as far as the Limba are concerned these approaches turn out to bear little fruit. Austin's theory both of 'performative utterances' and of the wider concept of 'illocutionary acts' in fact fits much better both with their actual practice and with the whole Limba theory of speech.[5] It could well be that there are in fact many other peoples whose linguistic acts might be more susceptible to analysis along these Austinian lines than according to the theoretical framework of Lévi-Strauss and similar writers. Indeed Austin's approach has the advantage over even those other writers who have also stressed the 'active' side of language in that it is potentially of wider application. It does not set non-industrial societies apart from others in respect of their linguistic behaviour by speaking, for instance, of speech in 'primitive languages' (Malinowski 1923) or of the special character of 'magical' utterances (Tambiah 1968). Rather, Austin draws to our attention an aspect of language and action which, it seems possible, may well be found in all types of community. In other words, his analysis can explain so-called 'primitive' activities by what is often the most illuminating method—that of classifying them ultimately with those of more familiar peoples.

This leads on to a third and important point. The kind of analysis offered by Austin and followed here solves certain difficulties raised by those sociologists, philosophers and others who have analysed speech in terms of a basic distinction expressed variously as that between descriptive and expressive or descriptive and symbolic.[6] This kind of distinction has been used in analysing the language and thought of both 'primitive' and other peoples. If we have to use these two categories, it would be hard indeed to analyse Limba utterances like 'I accept', 'I announce', or 'I thank'. Clearly they need to be regarded as something more than

straightforward descriptive statements. At the same time to say that they are 'expressive' or even 'symbolic' is somehow not quite right and misses the point of these utterances. Austin's introduction of the notion of the 'performative', however, gives us a way to analyse both the words themselves and the acts that Limba perform—and intend to perform—in uttering them.

I would further suggest that the fruitfulness of this approach comes out in yet another and even more controversial field—that of religion. Religious utterances and acts are often in fact interpreted as 'expressive' or 'symbolic' (e.g. Beattie 1964: 71 sqq.; 1966: 60, 65; Langer 1951: 49 sqq.; cf. Malinowski 1948: 52), a characterisation that yet again often leaves us feeling we have missed something, and also raises its own difficulties. A different approach might again be to stress the 'illocutionary' aspect. In the case of the Limba, for instance, we have seen that the normal word for 'to pray' (*theteke*) is exactly the same as the word for 'plead'. Furthermore, it is used in a precisely analogous way. Even if the audience addressed (the dead) is necessarily somewhat different, in other respects when a Limba prays to the ancestors he is performing just the same kind of act as when a man entreats a chief: he is making a formal acknowledgement of his inferiority and dependence and/or a request for aid or forgiveness; at the same time he is expecting that the one(s) addressed will recognise their side of the relationship, 'accept' the plea and answer it; and he is also asserting a continuing relationship between speaker and audience, living and dead. The token gift that accompanies a plea performs the same function whether it is to the dead (the 'sacrifice') or to the living: it helps to 'make the words heavy'; but the act itself consists in the *words* not in the gift. In other words prayer and sacrifice need not be explained (or explained away) as being merely 'expressive' or 'symbolic' and thus very different from most everyday speech acts; rather they can be brought under the same general heading as such acts as 'announcing', 'saying goodbye' or 'greeting' (terms also, incidentally, used to describe Limba prayer to the dead). Again, blessing, cursing and oath-taking among the Limba would be susceptible to a similar analysis in terms of their illocutionary force rather than as either descriptive or expressive (or symbolic) utterances.

Whatever the case about the controversial sphere of religion, however, it seems clear that Austin's analysis helps us out of the dilemma of having to allocate all speech utterances into just one or other of two categories: expressive (or symbolic or evaluative) and descriptive.

This in turn raises a whole series of subsequent questions. If, as appears, the Limba lay even more stress on the performative aspects of words than do the English, is this something that can be generalised more widely? In other words, is this special emphasis on the 'illocutionary' aspect of language a characteristic of non-literate or non-industrial societies generally as opposed to modern industrial society? Is there evidence from other groups in, say, Africa to suggest that the same point may be valid there? And is this, perhaps, the truth that lies behind the old and, as I think, often naïve assumptions about the supposed savage reliance on the 'magical power of words'?[7] On the other hand, might it not equally well be argued that the distinction between 'primitive' and 'civilised' is an illusory one here in that it is only in our *own* society that we lack the perspective to see the basic but often unrecognised performative side of language? Is the result of Austin's insight in fact

to lead us to a greater awareness of the similarities rather than the contrasts between otherwise very different societies?

These questions are perhaps not susceptible to a simple or a uniform answer. But they certainly demand to be raised. The concept of the 'illocutionary' force of language may thus turn out to provide a stimulus and challenge for the analysis and comparison of many different types of society.

The general conclusion is clear. This is that the 'illocutionary' or 'active' force of linguistic utterances is an aspect worth taking into consideration more often than it is. In one sense this aspect of language is perhaps relevant to *all* utterance and all societies. But at least it is certain that there are types of utterances in which this force is of particular importance. To analyse this in any given case it is necessary to look not just at the isolated linguistic forms, but also at the context, the locally accepted procedures, and the relationships and whole social situation involved. An awareness of this aspect is relevant for both philosophical analysis and sociological research.

NOTES

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[1] See Malinowski's insistence on regarding language as a mode of action rather than a countersign of thought (1923: 312 sqq.; 1935: vol. 2, 9, 49 etc.; cf. Firth 1957: 93 sqq.); also the recent discussion of anthropological approaches to language in Tambiah 1968.

[2] It is impossible to give a list here of the many different greeting forms in Limba. They vary not only from dialect to dialect, but according to the time of day, the occupation and status of greeter and greeted, and the general social situation. For a summary list of terms in two dialects, see Finnegan 1963: 325–6. The form is usually 'greetings' etc. rather than 'I greet' and thus may seem not to fit, formally, with the typical performative utterances given at the beginning ('I name ...' 'I will', etc.) characterised by the first person singular pronoun. However as Austin himself points out of greeting terms (1962: 70), exactly the same act is being performed whether one says 'I salute you' or 'Salaam.'

[3] A point discussed in Austin (1962: 9–11); with the English 'I apologise', for instance, it is easy to slip into the idea that this is a description of feeling sorry rather than a performative utterance.

[4] A somewhat similar point is made by Lévi-Strauss when he speaks of the exchange of words as analogous to the exchange of women, goods or services (Lévi-Strauss 1949).

[5] On the Limba awareness of the function of speaking and their theory of speech generally, see Finnegan in press.

[6] See, for instance, the English logical positivists (e.g. Ayer 1946: esp. 107 sqq.) and Black's comments on Parsons (Black 1961: 278).

[7] For a more sophisticated but still, it seems to me, somewhat misleading discussion of this supposed idea, see Horton 1967: 157 sqq.

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