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Facts and Events

5.1. In J. L. Austin's "Unfair to Facts" we find the following lines:

Phenomena, events, situations, states of affairs are commonly supposed to be genuinely-in-the-world, and even Strawson admits events are so. Yet surely of all of these we can say that they *are facts*. The collapse of the Germans is an event and is a fact—was an event and was a fact. Strawson, however, seems to suppose that anything of which we can say ". . . is a fact" is, automatically, *not* something in the world.¹

I think Austin commits a mistake here, an important error in the sense that its correction leads one to a better understanding of a whole family of crucial concepts. As it is evident from the Austin-Strawson controversy, nothing less than the notion of truth and the relation of language and reality are tied up with this family. The same controversy reveals the extreme difficulty of the subject: Austin and Strawson would not continue disagreeing through "comments on comments, criticisms of criticisms" on obvious

¹ J. L. Austin, "Unfair to Facts," in *Philosophical Papers*, p. 104.

points.² I claim that the issues under discussion can be made reasonably clear by employing some recent results of linguistic theory which, at the time of the controversy, were not yet available to the protagonists. With these tools it will not be difficult to show that Austin's mistake is similar to the one committed in the following argument: "John's speech took place yesterday; John's speech was inconsistent; therefore, something inconsistent took place yesterday." Or, and this is closer: "John's death was painful; Mary denied John's death; therefore, Mary denied something painful." Sure enough, the collapse of the Germans was an event, and the collapse of the Germans is a fact. Yet it does not follow that some events are facts, or that some facts are events, nor that they must coexist in or out of this world. For one thing, those of us who followed the collapse of the Germans followed an event, but, surely, did not follow a fact. I do not imply that Austin was unaware of such differences: the very paper I quote displays his acute sense of language. What he lacks, however, is a framework into which the data can be fitted to form a pattern with clearly marked distinctions. Such a framework I want to propose.

Austin's mistake springs from the morphological identity of the subjects of sentences like

The collapse of the Germans was an event
The collapse of the Germans is a fact

or, to repeat,

John's speech took place yesterday
John's speech was inconsistent.

Yet, as is obvious in the second case, and as I hope to make obvious in the first, this morphological identity conceals

² *Ibid.*, p. 102.