

SPEECH ACT THEORY

We look at inferences about what speakers are trying to accomplish with their utterances and introduce speech-act theory.

Austin pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, there is often no clear distinction between the two. He was one of the first modern scholars to recognize that 'words' are in themselves actions and that these SPEECH ACTS can and should be systematically studied.

Austin pointed out that in analysing a speech act, we need to make a distinction between the LOCUTION and the ILLOCUTION. The locution is the actual form of words used by the speaker and their semantic meaning. The illocution (or ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE) is what the speaker is doing by uttering those words: commanding, offering, promising, threatening, thanking, etc. Below is an example of how this two-way analysis can work for Mike's utterance to Annie: Give me some cash.

LOCUTION: Mike uttered the words Give me some cash which can be semantically paraphrased as: 'Hand some money over to me', with me referring to Mike.

ILLOCUTION: Mike performed the act of requesting Annie to give him some cash. We need to distinguish between the illocution and the locution because, as we saw in Exercise 6.3, different locutions can have the same illocutionary force. Similarly, the same locution can have different illocutionary forces depending on the context. For example, It's cold in here could either be a request to close the window or an offer to close the window.

Austin also distinguished a third part of a speech act, the PERLOCUTION. This is the actual result of the locution. It may or may not be what the speaker wants to happen but it is nevertheless caused by the locution. For example, Mike's utterance could have any of the following perlocutions: 'Mike persuaded Annie to give him money'; 'Annie refused to give him the money'; 'Annie was offended', etc. As you can see, the perlocution is defined by the hearer's reaction.

Austin made an interesting observation. Some utterances not only perform a speech act over and above simple assertion, they also simultaneously describe the speech act itself. He called these PERFORMATIVE utterances. They contrast with other utterances which may be performing the same act but do not contain a PERFORMATIVE VERB that explicitly describes the intended speech act. Rather, the hearer is left to infer the speaker's intention. Austin called these CONSTATIVE utterances.

However, the fact that an utterance contains a performative verb does not necessarily make the utterance itself performative, as we will see in the next exercise.

To be performative sentences must describe an action that can be performed by speaking.

The verb must describe an action which is under the control of the speaker. The subject of the verb must be the speaker: *I* or *we*. The verb must be in the simple present tense not the past tense.

SUMMARY

- Utterances can be analysed as speech acts, a framework originally proposed by J.L. Austin.
- Speech acts can be analysed on three levels: the locution (the words the speaker uses); the illocution, or illocutionary force (what the speaker is doing by using those words); the perlocution (the effect of those words on the hearer).

- Austin proposed that utterances can be classified as performative or constative. Performatives like I apologize simultaneously state and perform the illocution. Constatives can also be used to perform an illocution but, unlike performatives, they do not explicitly name the intended illocutionary act.

FELICITY CONDITIONS

The speaker must not be acting nonsensically or pretending to be someone else and the hearer must be capable of understanding the locution. Searle called these GENERAL CONDITIONS because they apply to all types of illocutions.

PREPARATORY CONDITIONS: in the case of a promise it has to be about something that would not ordinarily happen. And it must be about an act that would be beneficial to the hearer.

CONTENT CONDITIONS: Different illocutions will have different content conditions. Related to the preparatory conditions is the SINCERITY CONDITION. That is, the speaker must be sincere. In the case of a promise, the speaker must genuinely intend to carry out the act mentioned.

Of course, not every utterance includes a performative verb like promise. Yet we normally manage to infer what the speaker intends. To start tackling this problem, Searle proposed that speech acts could be grouped into general categories based not on performative verbs but on the relationship between 'the words' and 'the world' and on who is responsible for making that relationship work. Within each category there can be a variety of different illocutions, but the members of each group share a similar relationship of 'fit' between the words and the world.

Table 1 The relation between 'words' and 'the world'

Speech-act category	Relation between 'the words' and 'the world'	Who is responsible for the relation
Declarations	the words change the world	speaker
Representatives	the words fit the world ('outside' world)	speaker
Expressives	the words fit the world ('psychological' world)	speaker
Rogatives	the words fit the world	hearer
Commissives	the world will fit the words	speaker
Directives	the world will fit the words	hearer

Table 2 Typical linguistic expressions of speech acts

Speech-act category	Typical expression	Example
Declarations	declarative structure with speaker as subject and a performative verb in simple present tense	We find the defendant guilty.
Representatives	declarative structure	I resign. Tom's eating grapes. Bill was an accountant.
Expressives	declarative structure with words referring to feelings	I'm sorry to hear that.
Directives	imperative sentence	This beer is disgusting. Sit down! Fasten your seat belts.
Rogatives	interrogative structure	Where did he go? Is she leaving?
Commissives	declarative structure with speaker subject and future time expressed	I'll call you tonight. We're going to turn you in.

This led Searle to a further distinction between speech acts. In DIRECT SPEECH ACTS there is a direct relationship between their linguistic structure and the work they are doing. In INDIRECT SPEECH Acts the speech act is performed indirectly through the performance of another speech act. So, how do hearers know what the 'real' illocutionary force is when presented with an indirect speech act? This is where felicity conditions can be quite useful.

Searle observed that in an indirect speech act, even though the surface form looks like a particular direct speech act, one (or more) of the felicity conditions for that act have been obviously violated. At the same time, one (or more) of the felicity conditions for the 'real', underlying, and therefore indirect speech act have been questioned or mentioned by the locution, giving a hint as to the true illocutionary force. If the remaining felicity conditions for the 'real' speech act are fulfilled, then the speaker will interpret the locution as such.

SUMMARY

- Speech acts can be grouped into general categories which are based on the relationship between 'the words' and 'the world' and on who is responsible for bringing about the relationship.
- Speech acts can also be classified as direct or indirect. In a direct speech act there is a direct relationship between its linguistic structure and the work it is doing. In indirect speech acts the speech act is performed indirectly through the performance of another speech act.
- Felicity conditions are sets of necessary conditions for an illocution to 'count'.
- The true illocutionary force of an indirect speech act can be inferred from the fact that one or more of the felicity conditions of the 'surface' speech act have been obviously violated, while at the same time one or more of the felicity conditions for the indirect speech act have been mentioned or questioned.

See Cutting, Kreidler and Traugott and Pratt.