

Memo by Bushra Mahmood

Topic of our ninth session was speech acts.

Actions carried out through language are called **Speech Acts**.

Austin distinguished between two types of utterances:

- 1.) Constatives: utterances that are true or false
- 2.) Performatives: verb denotes an action which means by using the verb in a performative utterance we actually perform it.

The performance of a speech act needs to be under certain appropriate circumstances to be recognized as such (felicitous conditions).

E.g.: „The accused Ted Bundy is pronounced guilty on all 8 counts of murder“ has to be said by a jury in a courtroom or the process of a wedding ceremony needs to be conducted correctly and completely by all parties.

Furthermore the performed utterance must be sincere and intended:

„I'll meet you on the moon“ this promise obviously cannot be held¹.

If conditions are violated a misfire or abuse takes place (infelicitous).

Locution: actual utterance that is produced is subdivided in

phonic: utterance of speech sound

phatic: utterance of words in a particular linguistic expression in a particular language

rhetic: stating something about something lexically or grammatically²

Illocution: intention which underlies the utterance of speaker in order to accomplish an action.

Perlocution: effect it may have on addressee thus the consequence of the utterance is unpredictable (whereas illocution can be predicted as it is under speaker's control)

There are four basic categories of felicity conditions (speech acts that are called appropriate):

Propositional conditions, Preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential condition.

Speech acts are classified into five types : representative, directives, commissives, expressives, declarations and the four dimensions: illocutionary point (speech act type), direction of fit³ (relationship to state of affairs, words-to-world: speaker makes his/her words fit the world, reporting certain affairs and world-to-word: world is fit to words, changing state of affairs) and expressed psychological state

1 Yes, note that we might even use this in a sincere way. The problem being here that it cannot possibly be fulfilled. This is what Searle means when he says, regarding the speech act of promising, Speaker must be able to do what he promises.

2 You *should* be able to distinguish between locution, illocution and perlocution, but you *don't* have to be able to reproduce the tripartite subdivisions in the locutionary act itself.

3 I would always first analyse the *direction of fit* and then classify the given speech act. Recall that all this is explicitly based on Searle.

Indirect speech acts:

basic sentence types :	declarative	interrogative	imperative
utterance type (mood):	statement	question	orders, request

A direct relationship between a sentence type and utterance type is a direct speech act and an indirect relationship states an indirect speech act.

E.g.: The interrogative „Can you pass the salt?“ is not only a question about the ability of hearer to pass the salt but functions as an indirect request (preparatory condition). The utterance operates as an indirect speech act **because the relevant felicity condition is fulfilled** (preparatory condition of request).

According to Searle's analysis the question „Can you pass the salt?“ is largely synonymous with 1.) Are you able to pass the salt? and 2.) Do you have the ability to pass the salt? and the addressee is able to recognize them as a request.

However both questions fail to fulfil the expectation to perform the indirect speech act of requesting. This is because there is a **certain degree of conventionality**.

Idiom model:

Conventionalized sentences like „Can you pass the salt?“ are simply identified as requests therefore literal interpretation is not taken into account or allowed. Nevertheless the question may, for instance, be answered with „yes, I can.“⁴

Indirect speech acts are considered to be more polite than direct speech acts. As we said they leave options for the hearer to react to speaker's request.

Brown and Levinson's theory of face saving model (public self image, individual's self-esteem):

There are two types of face saving acts:

positive face: the desire to be accepted and positive politeness is preserving face of others which basically means speaker and addressee cooperate with each other. On the other hand negative face refers to one's individual freedom to act and negative politeness maintains negative face of others consequently no imperatives are used but conventional indirectness.

However some types of speech acts threaten both positive and negative face (face-threatening acts) such as accusations, insults, criticism (positive face) or complaints, threatens (negative face).

⁴ See that if we answer like this, we communicatively break up the idiom and decompose it, in the sense that we take *literally* the question as to somebody's ability.

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The topic of our 9th session was speech acts.

The Speech act theory was set up by John L. Austin and was later developed further by John R. Searle. In his initial Speech Act theory Austin made the distinction between **Performatives** and **Constatives**. Performatives are basic for the Speech Act theory. They are the kind of utterances that perform the action they denote. Their use constitutes (part of) an action. Performative utterances which contain a performative verb and therefore make explicit what kind of act is being performed are called **explicit Performatives**. Such performative utterances are often part of a conventional or ritual behavior supported by institutional facts (e.g. pronounce sb. man and wife). The performative verb is therefore essential for the action to occur and can't be omitted. Austin estimated that there exist around 1,000 – 10,000 performative verbs. **Implicit Performatives**, on the other hand, do not contain a performative verb that makes explicit what act is being performed. An example would be to make a promise without the verb "to promise", e.g. "I'll drive you to Berlin". (vs. "I promise to drive you to Berlin"= explicit Performative).⁵

Constatives - the second category of utterances - are employed to make **assertions or statements**. They are interested in providing assertions about states of affairs in the external world which can be evaluated as true or false.⁶

A second step was to establish the conditions under which speech acts can work. Austin called these conditions **Felicity Conditions on Performatives**. Altogether he distinguished three types of felicity conditions. If either the procedure does not follow its conventional form, the participants are not appropriate to perform the speech act, or the procedure is not executed correctly and completely Austin called it **Misfire**. The third Felicity Condition requires requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions of the persons involved in the Speech Act and – if necessary – consequent conduct. If one of these conditions remains unattained Austin calls it **Abuse**. In class we came to the conclusion that the speech act still works in that case. If someone makes a promise and already knows that he won't keep it, the Speech Act still works. However, such cases are not considered desirable. If Misfire occurs, the whole Speech Act fails.⁷

Austin revised his distinction between Performatives and Constatives in favour of a general theory of Speech Acts, of which Performatives and Constatives are only sub – categories.⁸ In this later development of the Speech Act theory Austin divides Speech Acts into three dimensions. The **Locutionary Act** is the basic act of speaking. It is responsible for performing words into sentences. The **Illocutionary Act** is the intended action by the speaker; the purpose he has in mind by saying something. An Illocutionary Act has an **Illocutionary Force**, which is its characteristic aim. The same Locutionary Act can produce various Speech Acts, depending on its **Illocutionary Act Potential**. The **Perlocutionary Act** is the effect of the Illocution on the addressee, e.g. psychological consequences like

5 We see here that very early *indirectness of messages conveyed* plays some role.

6 The classic case of truth-conditional semantics.

7 Good, *Abuses* are still full-fledged speech acts, only very insincere ones. *Misfires* do not even get to being a speech act.

8 To be exact: *Constatives* are a subcategory of *Performatives*.

thoughts or feelings. **The Perlocutionary Act can't be completely controlled by the speaker because the effect on the speaker is not always predictable, which might be a problem.**

The **Felicity Conditions** are relevant for both Austin and **Searle**. According to Searle, four conditions are to be required for a successful Speech Act. He calls them **Propositional Content Condition** (appropriate propositional content is necessary, e.g. one can only promise what is in the future), **Preparatory Condition** (certain prerequisites for the speech act are necessary, e.g. a conventionally recognized context), **Sincerity Condition** (speaker must not be insincere in uttering something) and **Essential Condition** (utterance must count as Speech Act).

Searle categorized Speech Acts into five types. In a **Representative** the speaker states what he believes to be true. This may happen by assertions, claims or reports. **Directives** commit the addressee to action. The commitment can be either weak (suggestion) or strong (command). **Commissives** commit the speaker himself to action, for example when he makes a promise. **Expressives** state how the speaker feels about the situation (e.g. by an apology or a complaint). Finally, a marriage is consummated by a **Declarative**, which brings about the state of affairs it names. However, in class we had the experience that it is not always clear how to classify the Speech Acts. **As an example, recommending can be regarded as a Directive, Expressive and also as a Representative.**⁹

Another feature of Speech Acts is the **Direction of fit**. Either the world must change to fit the propositional content of the utterance (world-to-word), or the propositional content of an utterance fits an independently existing state of affairs in the world (word-to-world). Directives and Commissives want the world to change, whereas Representatives make statements about state of affairs in the world. However, Expressives do not appear to have any Direction of fit (maybe **word-to-feelings?** (possible, why not)); Declaratives have both world-to-word and word-to-world Direction of fit.

In everyday speech we tend to use **indirect Speech Acts** because it is much more polite to ask "can you give me the salt?" than to use a command: "Give me the salt". However, the problem with the question is its semantic ambiguity.

How do we recognize indirect Speech Acts? There are three different Sentence Types: Declaratives, Interrogatives and Imperatives. In case of direct Speech Acts Declaratives are typically accompanied by statements as utterance type, Interrogatives by questions and Imperatives by orders/requests. In Addition, explicit performatives in the declarative form are considered as direct Speech Acts. In all other cases it is about indirect Speech Acts. A typical example is to make a request with an Interrogative: "Can you give me the salt?"

⁹ Yes, a big problem to my mind. I hope this point got through clearly in the seminar. In analogy, just like the Gricean maxims proved to be interrelated and partially overlapping, so it is here.