

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
Anglistisches Seminar
PS I Pragmatics: The many faces of language use
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Speech Acts

Speech Act Theory: Basic concept of Speech Act Theory is “Saying is part of doing” or “Words are connected to actions”. Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin is foremost attributed to developing this theory. Austin formulated his ideas on speech act theory in the 1930’s and lectured on them at both Oxford and Harvard in the first half of the 1950’s. After Austin’s death one of his former students, John R. Searle, took many of Austin’s ideas and concepts on speech act theory and further elaborated and refined them.

Performatives vs. Constatives

In Austins initial work with speech act theory he divided utterances into two types, Performatives and Constatives.

Performatives: Utterances that are used to do things or perform acts.

1. **I pronounce** you man and wife.
2. **I sentence** you to 50 years in prison.
3. **I promise** to drive you to Berlin.

Austin initially also believes that Performatives can not be verified as true or false.

Constatives: Utterances that can be verified as true or false. These utterances were typically in the form of assertions or statements. “The Neckar River sometimes freezes over”.

Performative Verbs: Many performative utterances also contain performative verbs. The performative verb is one that **names the action while performing it. I pronounce, I sentence** etc. These verbs are essential for the action to occur. A priest in a catholic wedding could not for example say “You are man and wife”. In place of “I pronounce you man and wife”.

Not every sentence needs a performative verb in order for the action to be carried out. If we leave out the performative verb **I promise** in the sentence “**I promise** to drive you to Berlin”, the sentence will still perform the intended action. “I’ll drive you to Berlin”. Performative verbs are usually essential when they are used in the context of **ritual behaviors supported by cultural institutions**.

Explicit Performative: Sentence that contains a performative verb that makes explicit what kind of act is being performed.

1. The court hereby **forbids** you to enter your former wife’s house.

Implicit Performatives: Sentence that does not contain a verb that makes explicit what act is being performed.

1. Is there a bank nearby?

Austin's Felicity Conditions on Performatives

Felicity Conditions: Conditions under which words can be used properly to perform actions.

Austin noticed that a performative utterance needed to meet certain conditions that would help guarantee their success in conveying their intended action. He named these conditions "Felicity Conditions", which were later refined and broadened by John R. Searle.

Austin distinguished three different types of felicity conditions.

- 1.a) There must be a **conventional** procedure having a **conventional** effect.
- 1.b) The circumstances and persons must be appropriate as specified by the procedure

> The accused, *Ted Bundy* is pronounced guilty on all 8 counts of murder.

In order for this sentence to be felicitous it should be said in a court of law and said by the proper person accordant to court procedure.

- 2.) The procedure must be executed **correctly** and **completely**.

Priest: "Do you Jane Doe take John Doe as your lawfully wedded husband?"

Jane: "I do".

Bride Jane Doe must say the correct words that are required for a marriage ceremony.

- 3.a) The persons must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and **intentions**, as specified in the procedure.
 - > If one makes a promise than one must intend to follow through.
- 3.b) If consequent conduct is specified then the relevant parties must so do.

Misfire occurs when conditions in 1. or 2. are not observed and Abuse when conditions in 3. are not observed.

Misfire for 1.b would be if Ted Bundy was pronounced guilty on all counts of murder by the janitor cleaning the floors outside of the court room. **Misfire for 2.** Would be if Jane Doe said "I could really go for a pizza right now" instead of "I do". **Abuse for 3.a** would be if a cosmetic surgeon congratulates his patient for losing so much weight after liposuction of 30lbs of fat. This would be insincere.

Locutionary, Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Speech Acts

Austin's development of speech acts can be broken down into 3 facets

Locutionary Act: Is the basic act of speaking, made up of three sub acts.

Phonic – utterance inscription, noises. Phoneme /s/

Phatic – act of comprising linguistic expression. Intentionally produced words in a syntactic order. /sta:p/

Rhetic – act of contextualizing the utterance inscription. Syntactic arrangement of words with certain intentions in certain contexts in certain messages.

Illocutionary Act: Is the speaker's intention. What is said has a purpose in mind. An utterance either verbal or written with the purpose in mind to **fulfill an intention or accomplish an action**. Performing an Illocutionary act means issuing an utterance that carries an **illocutionary force/point**. Examples of illocutionary forces would be *accusing, promising, naming, ordering*. The meaning of a locutionary utterance has a potential of different illocutionary forces.

> The gun is loaded.

This statement could have the intention of creating threat, or be a warning or simply be an explanation. This is called the **Illocutionary Act Potential**.

Perlocutionary Act: act by which the illocution produces a certain effect in or exerts a certain influence on the addressee. The perlocutionary act represents a consequence of the speaker's utterance. The speaker does not have full control over the **perlocutionary effect** though (!). The actual influence that is realized is not always predictable. A speaker may have control over illocutionary force in the utterance "open the safe now or else!" but the speaker can not control what the perlocutionary effect will be. The addressee could open the safe or the addressee could have a heart attack.

Searle's felicity conditions on speech acts

Felicity conditions are the constitutive rules of speech acts. On Searle's view, to perform a speech act is to obey to certain conventional rules.

Four basic categories of felicity conditions:

1. **propositional content:** concerned with what the speech act is about (the "core" of the utterance)
2. **preparatory condition:** real-world prerequisites for the speech act
3. **sincerity condition:** must be satisfied if the act is to be performed sincerely (If it is not satisfied, the act is still performed, but there is an abuse.)
4. **essential condition:** speaker's intention that his utterance will count as the identifiable act and that this intention is recognized by the addressee

Searle's typology of speech acts

Searle grouped speech acts into five types.

<u>Illocutionary point</u>	<u>Direction of point/fit</u>	<u>Expressed psychological state</u>
Representative	words-to-world	belief (speaker)
Directives	world-to-words	desire (addressee)
Commissives	world-to-words	intention (speaker)
Expressives	none	variable (speaker)
Declarations	both	none (speaker)

Additional dimension: propositional content

Examples

Representative: "Chinese characters were borrowed to write other languages, notably Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese."

Directives: "Turn the TV down."

Commissives: "I'll be back in five minutes."

Expressives: "Wow, great!"

Declarations: Jury foreman: "We find the defendant not guilty."

Indirect speech acts

Definition

In most languages, we have three basic sentence types: **declarative, interrogative and imperative**.

If there is no direct relationship between a sentence type and an illocutionary force, the speech act is indirect. If there is a direct match, it is a direct speech act.

Examples:

1. "Pass the salt!" Imperative is used to make a request > **direct speech act**
2. "Can you pass the salt?" Interrogative is used to make a request > **indirect speech act**

Analysis of an indirect speech act

Searle's approach:

- assume the existence of a **dual illocutionary force**: the non-literal/indirect force is primary, the literal/direct force is secondary
- Whether an utterance operates as an indirect speech act or not has to do with the relevant felicity conditions.
- Some kind of **inference** is necessary when an addressee understands an indirect speech act that a speaker performs.
- Apart from inference, there is a **certain degree of conventionality** about speech acts

Gordon and Lakoff's approach:

- similar to Searle's approach
- inference rules called conversational postulates ⊗ reduce the amount of inference that is needed to interpret an indirect speech act (a kind of conventionality of indirect speech acts)
- ⊗ major similarity: interpretation of indirect speech acts involves **both inference and conventionality**
- ⊗ major difference: **question of balance** (how much work in computing an indirect speech act is inferential, how much is conventional)

Idiom model:

- sentences like „Can you pass the salt?“ are **semantically ambiguous**
- No inference at all necessary, because it is simply recognized as a request with no question being received.
- Problem: An interpretation that takes the literal meaning or the direct illocutionary force of an indirect speech act into account is not allowed.

The example: A: „Can you pass the salt?“ B: „Yes, I can. (Here it is.)“ remains unexplained.

Remarks on politeness

Indirect speech acts are more polite than their direct counterparts. The more indirect a speech act is, the more polite it is.

The most influential model of politeness is **Brown and Levinson's face-saving-model**.

Face is the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself.

Positive face: individual's desire to be accepted and liked by others

Positive politeness orients to preserving the positive face of others. ⊗ speech strategies that emphasize solidarity with the addressee, e.g. claiming common ground, conveying that speaker and addressee are co-operators

Negative face: individual's right of freedom of actions.

Negative politeness orients to maintaining the negative face of others. © Speaker tends to choose the speech strategies that emphasize his deference to the addressee.

As rational agents, conversational participants will ideally try to preserve both their own face and the other's in a verbal interaction.

Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are speech acts that intrinsically threaten face, for example complaints, disagreements and requests. FTAs can threaten positive face (e.g. accusations, insults, criticism), negative face (e.g. orders, suggestions, requests) or both positive and negative face (e.g. complaints, threats)

Brown and Levinson's set of FTA avoiding strategies

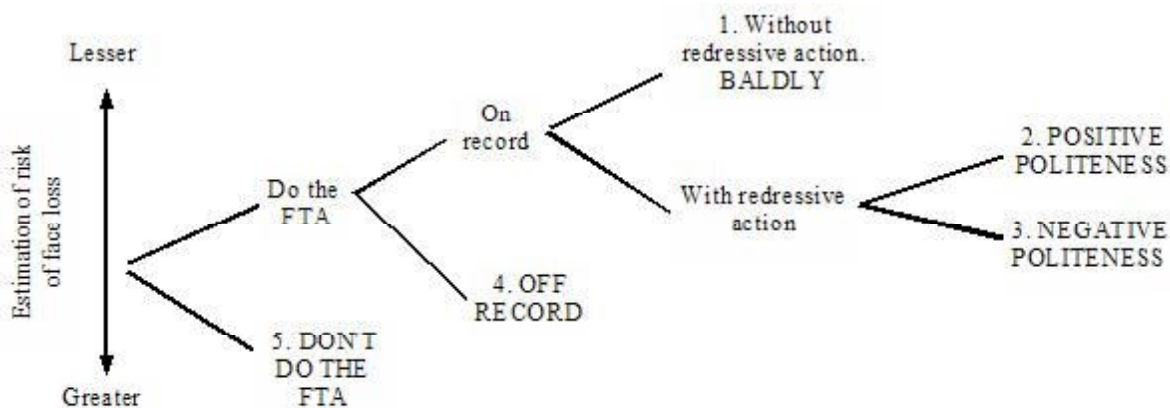


Chart taken from Karen's Linguistic Issues: <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/tags>

References:

Huang, Yan (2007): *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.