

# **SPEECH ACTS: DOING THINGS WITH LANGUAGE**

**John Austin** in his book "**How to do things with words**" is the first to introduce the idea of **Speech Acts**, analysing the relationships between utterances and performance.

# A speech act is an action performed by means of language

**Ex.:**

**describing something** (*"It is snowing."*)

**asking a question** (*"Is it snowing?"*)

**making a request or order** (*"Could you pass the salt?"*, *"Drop your weapon or I'll shoot you!"*)

**making a promise** (*"I promise I'll give it back."*)

**We use language to do a wide range of things.**

Ex.:

**Conveying information:** *The PM is out of the country.*

**Requesting information:** *When and where is the lecture?*

**Giving orders:** *Stand up!*

**Making requests:** *Please, carry my bags.*

**Making threats:** *Do that again, and I'll send you to your room.*

**Giving warnings:** *There's a spider on your shoulder.*

**Giving advice:** *You ought to go to the lectures every week.*

and so on...

**People use language with communicative intentions.**

**Speech acts are acts of communication that express those intentions.**

# *Speech act theory* →

A speech act can be divided into three different smaller acts:



J.L. Austin

*locutionary act*

*illocutionary act*

*perlocutionary act*

# The locutionary act

The act of performing words into utterances that make sense in a language with correct grammar and pronunciation

**Locution:** A form of expression; a phrase, an expression  
Excerpted from Oxford Talking Dictionary. 1998

# The illocutionary act

**Intended communicative action by the speaker, bound to certain conventions (the illocutionary act can only be achieved if there is a convention in society that makes it possible)**

**Illocution:** An action performed by saying or writing something, e.g. ordering, warning, promising

Excerpted from Oxford Talking Dictionary. 1998

# The perlocutionary act

**The effect that an utterance has on the thoughts, feelings or attitudes of the listener.**

**Perlocution:** An act of speaking or writing which aims to effect an action but which in itself does not effect or constitute the action, as persuading, convincing.

**Excerpted from Oxford Talking Dictionary. 1998**



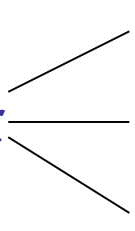
*locutionary act*

*illocutionary act*

*perlocutionary act*

**These are dimensions of a speech act, which means that they can't be performed separately. In an utterance you can always find these different aspects.**

**Often the same utterance can have different illocutionary force (intended function) in different contexts.**

Ex: *I'll see you later*  I predict that *I'll see you later*  
I promise you that *I'll see you later*  
I warn you that *I'll see you later*

## How can the *illocutionary force* (the intended function) be recognized?

1. Word order
2. Intonation
3. Stress
4. Performative verbs
5. Felicity condition (appropriateness) → context and role of the speaker

# PERFORMATIVE VERBS

- *I **assert** that | the Prime Minister is out of the country.*
- *I **ask** | when and where is the lecture?*
- *I **order** you to | stand up.*
- *I **request** that you | carry my bags.*
- *I **warn** you that if you | do that again, and I'll send you to your room.*
- *I **warn** you that | there's a spider on your shoulder.*
- *I **bet** you | fifty dollars that New Zealand will beat Australia in the Rugby World Cup.*
- *I **advise** you to | go to the lectures every week.*

**These sentences have verbs that state the speech act.**

**These sentences are explicit performatives.**

**These verbs are called performative verbs.**

**These verbs can be used to perform the acts they name.**

**Not every speech act has its own explicit performative verb.....**

## **The performative hypothesis**

**Ex.:**

***Clean up this mess!***

**This is an implicit performative (no performative verb is present)**

**How can I define its communicative intention / what kind of speech act is it?**

## The “hereby” test

One simple way to decide whether a speech act is a *performative* (an *implicit performative*) is to insert the word “**hereby**” between subject and verb. If the resulting utterance makes sense, then the speech act is probably a performative.

**Hereby:** As a result of this, by this means

**Ex:**

***Clean up this mess!***

*I hereby order you that you clean up this mess. (ordering)*

***Please, take out the garbage.***

*I hereby request you to take out the garbage. (making a request)*

# FELICITY CONDITIONS

The context and the situation that allow us to recognize a speech act as intended by the speaker.

**The conditions** that must be fulfilled for a speech act to be satisfactorily performed or realized

A sentence must not only be grammatically correct, it must also be felicitous , that is situationally appropriate.

# Types of felicity conditions.

## General condition

- participants share the same language, they are not acting, etc.

## Preparatory condition

- The person performing the speech act has the authority to do so.
- The participants are in the correct state to have that act performed on them.

## Content condition

- Correspondence between content and linguistic choices

## •Sincerity condition

- The participants must have the appropriate thoughts, feelings, and intentions

## Essential condition

- The speaker's intention to carry out the action expressed (the speech act creates an obligation).

What happens when some of these conditions are absent?

Speech acts are situationally inappropriate and are considered **infelicitous / inappropriate** → **they do not fulfill the communicative intention.**



Associated with each speech act is a set of felicity conditions that must be satisfied if that speech act is to be correctly (and honestly) performed.

### A. Felicity Conditions for Questioning

Speaker (S) questions Hearer (H) about x:

1. S does not know the truth about x.
2. S wants to know the truth about x.
3. S believes that H may be able to supply the information about x that s/he wants.

In classrooms, for example, one reason that children may resent teachers' questions is that they know that there is a violation of **A.1**: the teacher already knows the answer.

### B. Felicity Conditions for Requesting

S requests H to do x:

1. S believes x has not yet been done.
2. S believes that H is able to do x.
3. S believes that H is willing to do x-type things for S.
4. S wants x to be done.

## C. Felicity Conditions for Promising

S promises H to do x:

1. S believes H wants x done
2. S is able to do x.
3. S is willing to do x.
4. x has not already been done.
5. H will benefit from x.

## D. Felicity Conditions for Threatening

S threatens H to do x:

1. S believes H does not want x to be carried out.
2. S is able to carry out x.
3. S is willing to carry out x.
4. S believes that H is aware of 2 & 3.
5. x has not already been carried out.

## E. Felicity Conditions for Advising

S advises H to do x:

1. S believes H has not yet done x (or has not yet tried to do x).
2. S believes H might be willing to try x (or be persuaded to try x). [Otherwise why bother advising someone to do something?]
3. S believes H is able to do x.
4. S believes x will be in the best interest of H (i.e. that x will work).

**Classification of Speech acts, according to the functions performed:**

*representatives*

*directives*

*commissives*

*expressives*

*declarations*

## **Representatives:**

**the speaker asserts a proposition to be true, using such verbs as: *affirm, believe, conclude, deny, report.***

## Directives:

**the speaker tries to make the hearer do something, with such words as: *ask, beg, challenge, command, dare, invite, insist, request.***

## **Commissives:**

**the speaker commits himself (or herself) to a (future) course of action, with verbs such as:**  
*guarantee, pledge, promise, swear, vow, undertake, warrant.*

## **Expressives:**

**the speaker expresses an attitude to or about a state of affairs, using such verbs as: *apologize, appreciate, congratulate, deplore, detest, regret, thank, welcome.***



## Declarations

the speaker alters the external status or condition of an object or situation, solely by making the utterance: *I now pronounce you man and wife, I name this ship...*

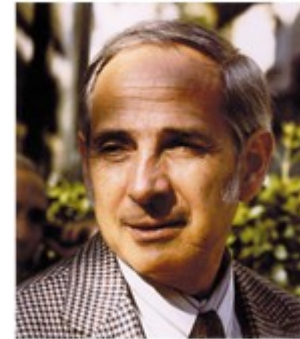
# Direct and indirect speech Acts

Another type of classification of speech acts according to their structure:

- 1) Declarative
- 2) Interrogative
- 3) Imperative

Expression and meaning

STUDIES IN THE THEORY OF SPEECH ACTS



JOHN R. SEARLE

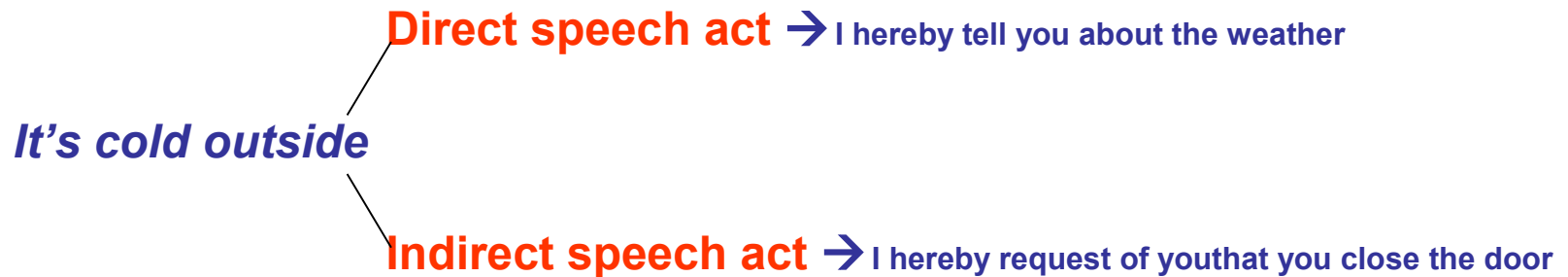
**Direct speech acts** (direct relationship structure and function)

**Indirect speech act** (indirect relationship structure and function)

## IDENTIFYING INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

Indirect speech acts are not direct literal statements of various acts the speaker wants to be performed.

Rather, what the speaker actually means is different from what s/he literally expresses.



## **Speech event**

**A set of utterances performed by the participants who interact in order to arrive at an outcome (Ex: requesting, complaining, making a proposal, etc.)**