




Speech Acts Discourse and Pragmatics



Chapter 3
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What is Pragmatics?

- ▶ **Pragmatics:** The study of meaning in relation to the context in which a person is speaking or writing.
- ▶ Pragmatics assumes that when people communicate with each other, they normally follow some kind of cooperative principle.



Interpreting Discourses

- ▶ Key aspects of contexts **crucial** to the production and interpretation of discourse
 1. **Situational context:** What people know about what they can see around them (physical, social, linguistic).
 2. **Co-textual context:** What people know about what they have been saying.
 3. **Background context:** What people know about each other and the world (cultural knowledge, interpersonal knowledge, knowledge about life, norms and expectations of particular discourse communities)



How is meaning produced?

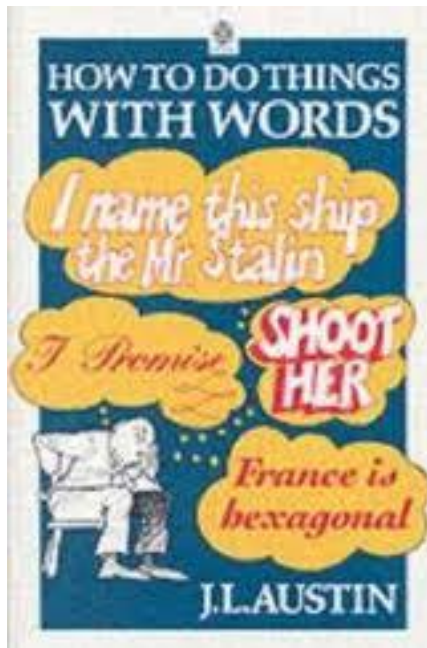
- ▶ Meaning is jointly accomplished by both the **speaker** and the **listener**, or the **writer** and the **reader**.
 - ▶ Meaning involves **social**, **psychological**, and **cognitive** factors.
- ▶ Discourse is a '**collaborative social action**' in which language users '**jointly collaborate** in the production of meanings and inferences.'



Two influential works in pragmatics

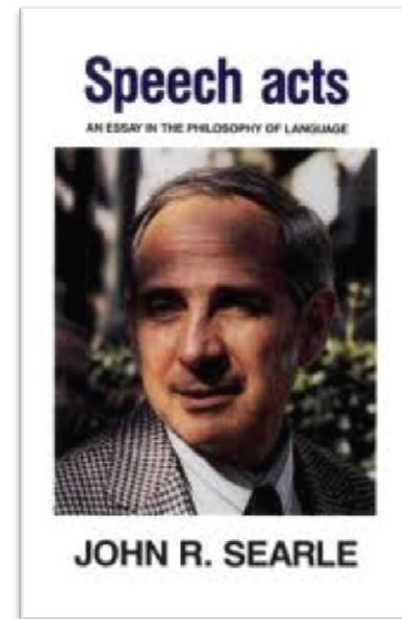
Austin's (1962)

How to Do Things with Words



Searle's (1969)

Speech Acts



Austin and Searle

- ▶ Their work appeared during the time when **logical positivism** prevailed, which stressed that:
 - ▶ Language is to describe a fact or a state of affairs
 - ▶ If a statement cannot be tested for truth or falsity, it is meaningless
- ▶ They argued that language is used to ‘**do things**’ other than refer to the truth or falseness of statements.
 - ▶ Language can go beyond literal meaning.
 - ▶ We perform ‘**acts**’ by using language - in the same way we perform physical acts.
 - ▶ We give **orders**, make **requests**, give **warnings**, give **advice...etc.**



Speech Acts

We use the term **speech acts** to describe actions such as:

- Asking questions
 - Making requests
 - Giving orders
 - Making promises
 - Giving advice
 - Making threats
- **Speech Acts: Action performed by a speaker with an utterance.**
 - i.e. we **do** things by language rather than just referring to the **truth** or **falsity** of a particular statement.



Types of Acts

- ▶ **Austin refers to three types of acts that occur in everything we say:**
 - 1. Locutionary act:** The literal meaning of the actual words.
 - i.e. the **basic** act of utterance
 - 2. Illocutionary act:** The intention of the speaker when uttering those words.
 - Normally we don't just produce well-formed utterances with no **purpose**. We form an utterance with some kinds of function in mind.
 - We might utter "*I've just made some coffee*" to make a statement, an offer, or an explanation or any other communicative purpose.
 - 3. Perlocutionary act:** The effect the utterance has upon the thoughts of the listener.
 - We do not simply create an utterance with a function without intending it to have an **effect**.
 - Depending on the circumstances, you will utter "*I've just made some coffee*" on the assumption that the hearer will recognise the effect you intended (for example, to get the hearer to drink coffee).
- The term '**speech act**' is generally interpreted quite narrowly to mean only the **illocutionary force** of an utterance.



Example 1

Book, P: 56:

Bus driver: *This bus won't move until you boys move in out of the doorway.*

- ▶ **Locutionary act:** Driver is saying she won't start the bus with people standing in the doorway.
- ▶ **Illocutionary act:** An order (directive) to clear the doorway.
- ▶ **Perlocutionary act:** The boys moving inside the bus.

Remember:

Locutionary Act	Illocutionary Force	Perlocutionary Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Literal meaning of the actual words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speaker's intention in uttering the words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The effect this utterance has on the thoughts or actions of the other person



Example 2

Uttered by a woman in a waiting room:

“It is hot in here.”

Locutionary Act	Illocutionary Force	Perlocutionary Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Referring to the temperature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Request for someone to turn on the air conditioning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Someone getting up and turning on the air conditioning.



EXERCISES

▶ May I borrow your laptop?

- ▶ **Locutionary act:**
- ▶ **Illocutionary act:**
- ▶ **Perlocutionary act:**

▶ You are fired.

- ▶ **Locutionary act:**
- ▶ **Locutionary act:**
- ▶ **Perlocutionary act:**



Categories of Speech Acts: Illocutionary Acts

- ▶ According to **Searle**, these speech acts are:
 1. **Representatives**
 2. **Directives**
 3. **Questions**
 4. **Commissives**
 5. **Expressives**
 6. **Declarations**



Speech Acts

I. Representatives: Utterances used to describe some state of affairs.

▶ Stating, informing, predicting, notifying.

▪ **Examples:**

- The earth is round.
- The weather will be cold tomorrow.



Speech Acts

2. Directives: Utterances used to get the hearer to do (or not do) something.

- They express what the **speaker wants**.
 - Requesting, ordering, forbidding, advising, suggesting, insisting, recommending.
 - They can be positive or negative
- **Examples:**
 - Give me a cup of coffee. Make it black. (**Positive**)
 - Don't touch that. (**Negative**)



Speech Acts

3. **Questions:** Utterances used to get the hearer to provide information.

- ▶ They are not restricted to the form of a question.
 - **Asking and inquiring.**

- **Example:**

- What is your name?
- Were you absent yesterday?



Speech Acts

4. **Commissives:** Utterances used to commit the **SPEAKER** to do some act.

- They express what the **speaker** **intends**.
 - They can be performed by the speaker alone, or by the speaker as a member of the group.
 - **Promising, threatening, volunteering, offering, guaranteeing, refusals, and pledges.**
 - **Examples:**
 - I'll be back.
 - We will not do that.
 - I'm going to get it right next time.
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Speech Acts

5. Expressives: Utterances used to express the emotional state of the speaker.

- They express **psychological** states and can be statements of **pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes** or **sorrow**.
- They can be caused by something the speaker does or the hearer does, but they are **about the speaker's experience**.
 - **Apologising, thanking, congratulating, condoling, welcoming.**
- **Examples:**
 - I'm really sorry.
 - Congratulations!



Speech Acts

6. Declarations: Utterances used to change the state of some entity.

- ▶ The status of the entity changes by the mere uttering of the words.
 - In order to perform a declaration properly, the speaker has to have a special institutional role (**power**) in a specific **context**,
 - Naming, appointing, resigning, firing, marrying, divorcing.
- **Examples:**
 - Priest: I now pronounce you husband and wife.
 - Referee: You're out!



Direct & Indirect Speech Acts

Whenever there is a direct relationship between a structure and a function, we have a **direct speech act**.
Whenever there is an indirect relationship between a structure and a function, we have an **indirect speech act**.

Function	Structure	Utterance
Question	Interrogative	Did you eat the pizza?
Command (or request)	Imperative	Eat the pizza (please)!
Statement	Declarative	You ate the pizza.



Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

Structure (direct for each)	Illocutionary Act
Declarative	Representative
interrogative	Questions
Imperative	Directives
Declarative	Commissives
Exclamatory - Declarative	Expressives
Declarative	Declaration

Example:

It's cold outside.

{I am telling you that it is cold outside.} Statement (*direct speech act*)

OR

{I am asking you to close the door.}

Request (*indirect speech*

act)

EXERCISES



Behavior of Illocutionary Acts in Discourse

A. It is not always easy to identify the illocutionary act of what is being said:

- It may depend on the stage of the discourse: Where in the discourse the utterance occurs.

- **Example:** The utterance “**O.K**” can have many interpretations.

A: Let's grab lunch tomorrow

B: **OK**

Compared to:

Teacher enters into the room, students are still talking

Teacher: **OK**

So “**OK**” can mean:

- ▶ An expression of agreement
- ▶ A ‘continuer’ in a conversation with no agreement
- ▶ A ‘pre-closing’ word signaling the end of a conversation



Behavior of Illocutionary Acts in Discourse

B. One utterance may express more than one illocutionary act at one time:

- **Example:** Uttered by the chair o committee to the members:

Chair: *We have a meeting tomorrow at 9 in my office.*

Speech acts: Representative + Directive



Behavior of Illocutionary Acts in Discourse

C. No complete one-to-one correspondence between syntactic forms and illocutionary acts: (Direct or indirect illocutionary act)

▶ **Examples:**

▶ Waiter: What can I get you?

IA: Commissive - Offer

Syntactic Form: Interrogative

▶ Customer: Can I have one hamburger with fries?

IA: Directive – Request

Syntactic Form: Interrogative

▶ The room needs to be cleaned.

IA: Directive: -Request

Syntactic Form: Declarative



An illocutionary act (e.g., a **request**) may be spread over more than one utterance

A: Hello, welcome to Hungry Jack's.
Can I take your order please?

B: Can I have a Whopper with eggs?

A: Would you like cheese with that?

B: Yes please ... and a junior Whopper with cheese ... and large fries please.

A: Would you like any drinks or dessert with that?

B: No thank you.

A: OK ... that's a Whopper with cheese and eggs, a Whopper junior with cheese and large fries.

B: Yes. Thank you.

A: OK ... Please drive through.



Someone might have more than a single illocutionary act in mind

‘What are you doing tonight?’

Illocutionary Forces

- A question.
- An invitation.

‘I still haven’t finished my homework.’

Illocutionary Forces

- Answers the question.
- declines invitation.

‘Nothing special. What do you feel like doing?’

Illocutionary Forces

- Answers the question.
- Accepts invitation.



Austin's Felicity Conditions



▶ **Austin:** *For speech acts to 'work' they must meet certain felicity conditions.*

1. There must be a **generally accepted procedure** for a successful speech act (e.g., wedding invitation)
2. The **circumstances** must be **appropriate** for the use of the speech act (e.g., someone must be getting married)
3. The **person** who uses the speech act must be the **appropriate person** to use it in the **particular context** (e.g., bride or groom's family)
4. The person **performing** the speech act must be **empowered** (i.e. have the required thoughts, feelings, and intentions for the speech act to be 'felicitous')

Otherwise, the speech act will **'misfire'** or be **'abused'**



Searle's Felicity Conditions



General conditions for ALL speech acts:

1. The **hearer** must **hear** and **understand** the language.
2. The **speaker** must not be pretending or play-acting.
(**Seriousness**)

Conditions specific to declarations and directives:

1. The **speaker** must believe that it is **possible** to carry out the action.
 2. The **speaker** is performing the act in the **hearer's best interests**
 3. The **speaker** is **sincere** about wanting to do it.
 4. The **words** count as the **acts**.
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Application of Austin's felicity conditions

Sarah: I think I might go and have another sandwich.

Soha: I was going to get another one.

Lama: Could you get me a tuna and cheese one please?

Soha: Me as well?

Directive speech act of 'requesting'

Followed Austin's felicity conditions:

1. Lama used a generally accepted **procedure** for requesting by asking a her friend to bring her a sandwich.
2. The **circumstances** are appropriate for requesting; it is an appropriate place to talk about sandwiches and about wanting another one.
3. The person making the request, Lama, is an appropriate **person**; the students are equals, and it is not a great imposition.
4. The person, Lama, has the right **intentions** of making a request.



Application of Searle's felicity conditions

Sarah: I think I might go and have another sandwich.

Soha: I was going to get another one.

Lama: Could you get me a tuna and cheese one please?

Soha: Me as well?

Directive speech act of 'requesting'

Followed Searle's felicity conditions:

1. Soha and Lama seem to believe that it is possible for Sarah to get them sandwiches. She has functional legs and the sandwiches are not too far away.
 2. They are not performing the act in Sarah's best interest. They are performing it in their own interests. However, they are not making the request to burden or impose on Sarah.
 3. They genuinely want the sandwiches to eat; they are sincere.
 4. Their words count as a request.
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Example of a **Non-felicitous** Declaratation Speech Act

- ▶ A man and woman discovered one month before their wedding that their paperwork was incomplete and that it would not be ready in time. They decided to go ahead with the wedding ceremony and sign the papers later because all the preparations were in place. Thus, the priest's words "I now pronounce you man and wife" did not marry them.
- ▶ Legally, the papers were missing
- ▶ Pragmatically, not all the felicity conditions were met
 - ▶ The context and roles of the participants were recognized, the priest was saying the words in the **couple's best interests**, **but** the speech act 'marrying' was not successful, because they were '**putting on a show**' for the benefit of the guests. The action was not carried out completely, and the priest did not believe that it was possible to carry out the action, did not have the intention to carry out the action, and was **not sincere** about wanting to do it.



MORE EXERCISES



- ❖ **May I borrow a pen?** (Student to a classmate)
 - The speech act is a directive and it functions as a request. It is an indirect directive as the syntactic structure used is the interrogative one. The direct one would be “give me a pen” (imperative). We express directives indirectly for politeness reasons.
 - Sometimes, expressing the illocutionary act is only appropriate if we use the direct expression such as the case with cooking books and exam instructions.
 - **Could you please choose the correct answer from the following?** → Wrong because the speech act has to be a direct one.
 - ❖ **Can I take your order?** (Waiter to customer) Indirect commissive offer, interrogative.
 - ❖ **Can I have a slice of Pizza?** (Customer to waiter) Indirect directive request, interrogative.
 - ❖ **I'm going to finish reading this book tonight.** (Friend to friend) Direct commissive promise, declarative.
 - ❖ **Listen carefully, please.** (Wife to husband) Direct directive request, imperative.
 - ❖ **Are you going to leave the door wide open?** (Teacher to student) Indirect directive order, interrogative.
 - ❖ **My pen isn't working.** (student to classmates) Indirect directive request, declarative.
 - ❖ **Clear your desk by the end of the day.** (Boss to secretary) Indirect declaration, firing, imperative.
 - ❖ **How beautiful you look today!** (Husband to wife) Direct expressive, praising, exclamatory.
 - ❖ **You didn't study last night?** (friend to friend) Indirect question, inquiring, declarative.
 - ❖ **I quit.** (employee to manager) Direct declaration, quitting, declarative.
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