

SPEECH ACT THEORY

Sometimes people use language to perform an action. Thus, the expression, “I’m sorry I said mean things to you,” is more than a reference to one’s state of mind. It is the performance of an action called *an apology*.

Speech Act Theory was developed by the Oxford philosopher J.L.Austin in the 1930s. It was expounded in a series of lectures which Austin gave at Harvard University in 1955. The lectures, twelve in all, were subsequently published in 1962 under the title *How To Do Things With Words*.

Conventionally speaking, a declarative sentence is always used to describe some state of affairs, some fact, which it must describe truly or falsely. According to Austin, this is the descriptive fallacy, a mistaken vision on language largely due to logical positivism, which sees language primarily as a means of describing the world and sentences as statements. Consequently, the primary task of linguists and philosophers was that of evaluating the truth or falsity of those statements, with the sad effect of eliding the complex relationship between language and reality.;

Austin said that there are many declarative sentences which **do not** describe, report, or state anything, but are, or are part of, the doing of some action:

I do, as uttered as part of a marriage ceremony;

I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth, as uttered by the appropriate person while smashing a bottle against the stem of the ship in question;

I give and bequeath my watch to my brother, as written in a will;

To utter such sentences in the appropriate circumstances is not to describe what you are doing: it *is* doing it, or part of doing it, and Austin calls such utterances **performatives** or **performative utterances**, distinguishing them from

constatives or **constative utterances** which are used to state a fact or describe a state of affairs.

Only constatives can be true or false; performatives are **happy** or **unhappy**.

The criterion for a happy, or **felicitous**, performative is that the circumstances in which it is uttered should be **appropriate**: (certain **felicity conditions** are needed).

If a performative is unhappy, or **infelicitous**, something has gone wrong in the connection between the utterance and the circumstances in which it is uttered.

FELICITY CONDITIONS:

- The context and roles of the participants must be recognized by all parties.
- The action must be carried out completely.
- The person must have the right intentions.

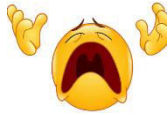
Austen begins to doubt the distinction true/false constatives - happy/unhappy performatives. It seems that not only performatives are subject to unhappiness: a sentence such as *All John's children are bald* as uttered when John has no children is just as unhappy as *I give and bequeath my watch to my brother* as written in the will of a person who does not possess a watch.

Instead of concentrating on the truth/falsity-happiness/ unhappiness distinction which is beginning to look unsound, perhaps we can decide whether something is or is not a performative **by testing whether 'saying so makes it so'**.

If I say *I promise*, I thereby promise, whereas if I say *I walk*, I do not thereby walk.

A possible **test for performatives** is therefore the **hereby-test**. In the case of performatives it is always possible to insert *hereby*: *I bequeath—I hereby bequeath; passengers are warned—passengers are hereby warned*. In a constative, it is not appropriate to insert *hereby*: *I walk—*I hereby walk; I am being watched—*I am hereby being watched*.

BUT, according to some linguists, this is also a flawed distinction.



Why? Because there are many performatives which do not contain these so-called **speech-act verbs** or **performative verbs**, and which are not even declarative sentences; in many cases, uttering words such as *dog*, *bull*, or *fire* constitutes an action of warning just as much as uttering *I warn you that there is a dog/bull/fire*, so we would want to say that these utterances, too, are performatives.

Any utterance is part of, or all of, the doing of some action, and the only distinction that now remains is between *performative* and *non-performative verbs*.

- performative verbs name actions that are performed, wholly or partly, by saying something (*state*, *promise*);
- non-performative verbs name other types of action, types of action which are independent of speech (*walk*, *sleep*).

Explicit performatives: I pronounce you husband and wife

Implicit performatives: I will be back (I promise that...., I warn you that)

There are too many performative verbs, therefore we need broad classes of speech act under which large numbers of more delicately distinguished speech acts might fall.

EVERY TIME WE DIRECT LANGUAGE AT SOME AUDIENCE, WE PERFORM THREE SIMULTANEOUS ACTS:

- a *locutionary* act,
- an *illocutionary* act, and
- a *perlocutionary* act.

MM I think I might go and have another bun.

AM I was going to get another one.

BM Could you get me a tuna and sweetcorn one please?

AM Me as well?

(Students at bun lunch 1996)

A. **the locution** (what is said): "I think I might go and have another bun."

The act of saying something is known as the **locutionary act**.

To perform a **locutionary act** is to say something in what Austin calls 'the full normal sense'. That means that the speaker composes a sentence in a specific context. The locution thereby is the grammatical structure of the utterance.

It includes:

1 The **phonic** act: uttering noises, **phones**.

2 The **phatic** act: uttering noises *as belonging to a certain vocabulary and conforming to a certain grammar*, that is, as being part of a certain language.

3 The **rhetic** act: using these noises with a certain sense and reference

The following examples show the different grammatical forms that an utterance can have:

- (1) Declarative: "You are generous."
- (2) Closed- interrogative: "Are you generous?"
- (3) Open- interrogative: "Who is generous?"
- (4) Imperative: "Be generous!"
- (5) Exclamative: "How generous you are!"

B. **the illocution** (what is done in uttering words):

When making an utterance the speaker always has an intention behind it. The speaker makes an utterance to make either a statement about the world, to apologize or to explain something. This intended meaning behind the utterance is called *illocutionary force* and is internal to the locutionary act. The same locution can have different possible meanings depending on the context.

By looking at the example “It is cold in here.” the declarative can be stated either to make a statement about the current temperature but also to make the hearer do an action such as closing the window. This makes it obvious that in conversation it is not always clear what the intended meaning behind an utterance is. That shows that the same utterance can be ambiguous and can only be understood by looking at the context in which it is uttered.

In the dialogue above, we can identify at least two illocutionary acts:

Expressing intention: “I think I might go and have another bun.”

Requesting action: “Could you get me a tuna and sandwich one, please?”

!!! So please, remember: each time one performs a locutionary act, one is also thereby performing some **illocutionary act**, such as: stating, promising, warning, betting, inviting, apologising, ordering, etc.

If a hearer, through his or her knowledge of the conventions of the language, grasps what one is doing, there is **uptake** on his or her part of the **illocutionary force** of the utterance.

C. The Perlocution is the intended or unintended effect that the utterance can have on the hearer and is external to the locutionary act as the speaker cannot control the effect the utterance will have on the hearer.

The effect the illocutionary act has on the hearer is called the **perlocutionary act**, such as persuading, deterring, surprising, misleading, or convincing.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

As the example “It is cold in here” has shown, utterances can be used to make other people do something. The speaker can chose to make his intended meaning explicit or to state it indirectly.

- *Direct speech acts*

An utterance is seen as a direct speech act when there is a direct relationship between the structure and the communicative function of the utterance. The following examples show that the form correspondences with the function:

- A declarative is used to make a statement: “You wear a seat belt.”
- An interrogative is used to ask a question: “Do you wear a seat belt?”
- An imperative is used to make a command: “Wear a seat belt!”

!!!! Direct speech acts therefore explicitly illustrate the intended meaning the speaker has behind making that utterance.

- *Indirect speech acts*

Searle stated that an indirect speech is one that is “performed by means of another”. That means that there is an indirect relationship between the form and the function of the utterance. The following examples show that the form does not correspondence with the function:

- An interrogative is used to make a request: “Could you pass the salt?”
- A declarative is used to make a request: “You’re standing in front of the TV.”

The speaker does not explicitly state the intended meaning behind the utterance. **It is the hearer’s task to analyse the utterance to understand its meaning.**

According to Austen, there are five broad classes of speech acts

1. **Verdictives** typified by the giving of a verdict, estimate, reckoning or appraisal;
2. **Excersitives:** the exercising of powers, rights or influence, exemplified by voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning, etc.
3. **Commissives**, speech acts that the speakers use to commit themselves to some future action: promises, threats, refusals, pledges, declarations or announcements of intention.
4. **Behavitives**, which have to do with social behaviour and attitudes, for example apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, and challenging.

5. **Expositives**, which make it clear how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation—how we are using words. In a way, these might be classed as **metalinguistic**, as part of the language we are using about language. Examples are *I reply; I argue; I concede; I illustrate; I assume; I postulate*.

John Searle's classification of *speech acts*

1. **Declarations**: words and expressions that change the world by their very utterance: *I bet, I declare, I resign, I baptize this boy John Smith, This court sentences you to ten years imprisonment.*, etc.

2. **Representatives**: acts in which the speaker states what the speaker believes to be the case: describing, claiming, hypothesising, insisting, predicting

The fact that girls have been outstripping boys academically has been acknowledged for the past 12 years or so
(*Glasgow Herald*: 28 November 2000)

I came; I saw; I conquered
(Julius Caesar)

Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him
(Shakespeare: *Macbeth*)

3. **Commissives**: acts in which the words commit the speaker to future action: promising, offering, threatening, refusing, vowing, volunteering

'Ready when you are.'

'I'll make him an offer he can't refuse'
(Mario Puzo, *The Godfather*)

I'll love you, dear, I'll love you / Till China and Africa meet, / And the river jumps over the mountain / And the salmon sing in the street
(Auden)

4. **Directives:** acts in which the words are aimed at making the hearer do something such as: commanding, requesting, inviting, forbidding, suggesting, etc.

From ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties / And things that go bump in the night, / Good Lord, deliver us. (Scottish prayer)

Better remain silent and be thought a fool, than open your mouth and remove all possible doubt. (Ancient Chinese proverb)

Do not do unto others as you would they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same (Shaw)

5. **Expressives:** acts in which the words state what the speaker feels: apologising, praising, congratulating, deploring, regretting

A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle. (Steinem)

I've been poor and I've been rich – rich is better. (Tucker)

If I'd known I was gonna live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself. (Blake)