



## **Part I**

# **From Philosophy of Language to Linguistic Pragmatics**







# Unit 1

## Austin's Speech Act Theory

- 1.1 Words and deeds
- 1.2 Properties of an explicit performative utterance
- 1.3 Locution, illocution, and perlocution
- 1.4 (Illocutionary) Speech acts classified

*...to say something is in the full normal sense to do something.*

—John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 1962: 77

### Pre-Class Reading

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**Speech Act Theory** (SAT for short) originated with J. L. Austin. The great Oxford philosopher gave a series of lectures first at Oxford University in 1952-1954 and then at Harvard University in 1955. In 1962, the William James lectures he gave at Harvard were published posthumously under the title of “How to Do Things with Words”. The theory expounded in these lectures challenged the so-called **descriptive fallacy**, a central doctrine of **logical positivism** developed by some philosophers and mathematicians in the 1930s who held that a sentence is not meaningful unless it can be verified, i.e., tested for its **truth** or **falsity**, at least in principle. Later, Austin's speech act theory was further developed by other scholars, particularly J. Searle, his American pupil at Oxford who later became a famous philosopher.

This unit is mainly concerned with J. Austin's thoughts on speech acts. The developments of the theory will be dealt with in the next unit.

## 1.1 Words and deeds

In English, we may hear people say “Actions speak louder than words” and “Easier said than done”. However, according to J. Austin, there seems to be no clear-cut boundary between speaking and acting. Rather, saying is sometimes (part of) acting. Or, to put it in another way, words are (part of) deeds. For example, when we congratulate someone by saying “Congratulations!” it means as much as giving him or her a pat on the back or the thumbs-up sign. In essence, in producing an utterance, we are performing an action. This action, however, needs to be performed in accordance with some social conventions and institutions. For instance, when we utter “Congratulations”, the circumstances must be appropriate (e.g. the addressee has just passed rather than failed in an exam, among other things).

Apparently, some utterances are of a different nature. For example, when we produce an utterance like “China has the biggest population in the world”, we seem to be merely describing a portion of some facts or states of affairs we know. Technically, such utterances are considered by Austin to be “**constative**”, in contrast with those mentioned above that are **performative**, i.e., the saying itself accomplishing a certain action (like “I promise I’ll come here tomorrow on time”) or affecting or changing the world in some way.

The term “**speech acts**” was initially invented to portray the actions accomplished via performative utterances. In its later broad sense, speech acts also cover actions performed by utterances that are not strictly performative. Now, speech acts are considered to be the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication.

## 1.2 Properties of an explicit performative utterance

A canonical or **explicit performative** is one like:

(1) *I promise I’ll come here tomorrow on time.*

Clearly, the utterance is characterized by the use of a first-person subject, the simple present tense, indicative mood, active voice and a **performative verb** (“promise”).

Moreover, an explicit performative utterance can be tested by the insertion of “hereby”. For (1), we can also say:



(1) *I hereby promise I'll come here tomorrow on time.*

By contrast, the following utterances are problematic:

(2) ? a. *She hereby thanks you.*

? b. *I've hereby apologized to you.*

? c. *I am hereby warned not to do that again.*

? d. *I'm hereby sorry.*

Some performative utterances, i.e. **implicit or primary performatives**, do not employ performative verbs, as exemplified below:

(3) *Send for a doctor immediately.*

(4) *Treat or trick!*

(5) *How about going by train?*

(6) *I'm sorry.*

Take (6) for example. When someone says "I'm sorry", he or she does succeed in signaling to the addressee that he or she feels sorrowful for something done improperly and, in normal cases, getting pardoned. Thus, a performative verb is not intrinsically necessary for an utterance to be performative.

### 1.3 Locution, illocution, and perlocution

Although the distinction between constatives and performatives seems a useful and ingenious hypothesis, later research shows that all utterances in communication are explicit or implicit performances of certain acts. Take "China has the biggest population in the world" for example. When the speaker makes the statement, he or she succeeds in informing the addressee of the fact. Thus, when language is put to use in context by a user, it turns into an instance of act rather than merely an instance of the abstract language. Language users, rather than language per se, perform acts, and they often do so via the use of language.

Another problem worthy of mention is that the presence of a performative verb does not necessarily make an utterance itself performative in the way indicated by the verb, as in:

(7) *Peter, Mary thanks you.*

Obviously, the utterance here is an act on the part of the speaker to inform Peter that Mary has expressed thanks to him, rather than an act that Mary is executing to thank Peter.

Owing to these problems and others, J. Austin rejected the distinction between constatives and performatives. Instead, he proposed a new and more general framework of speech act analysis, according to which every utterance performs a speech act and this act itself can be seen as performing three component acts at the same time: **locutionary act** (the act of verbally saying something), **illocutionary act** (the intended act behind saying something) and **perlocutionary act** (the effect/occurrence of an illocutionary act).

Suppose Jane says to John, “I’m hungry” and John, hearing that, leaves and comes back with some food for Jane. For the utterance “I’m hungry”, the locutionary act Jane performed is the saying of the English sentence; the illocutionary act Jane performed is an implicit request for John to bring her some food; and the perlocutionary act performed via the uttering of the sentence is the effect or outcome brought about, i.e. John gets some food for Jane.

Illocutionary acts that utterances are intended to perform, or speech acts in a loose sense, are the focus of the pragmatic study.

### 1.4 (Illocutionary) Speech acts classified

According to J. Austin, (illocutionary) speech acts fall into certain types in terms of their illocutionary force, as listed below:

#### a. verdictives

The verdictives point to the giving of a verdict, as the name suggests, by a jury, arbitrator, or umpire. They may be final decisions, or just an estimate, reckoning or appraisal.

#### b. exercitives

The exercitives involve the exercising of powers, rights, or influence. Under this category we have appointing, voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning, etc.

#### c. commissives

The commissives are essentially acts of promising or other undertaking that commit one to doing something. This type also includes declarations or announcements of intention and espousals like taking a side with somebody.



**d. behabitives**

The behabitives are characterized by the expression of attitudes and social behavior, covering such acts as apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, and challenging.

**e. expositives**

The expositives refer to those speech acts of expounding one's views, conducting arguments, clarifying usages and references, and the like.

**[Check your understanding]**

**Judge whether each of the following statements is TRUE or FALSE.**

1. According to Speech Act Theory, some utterances may perform acts.
2. A performative verb is a necessary part of a performative utterance.
3. Every locutionary act corresponds to an illocutionary act.
4. The speaker alone can determine the perlocutionary act to be performed.
5. Issuing a command is an instance of an exercitive act.

**In-Class Activities**

1. According to J. Austin's early formulation, "promise", "apologize", and "thank" are some typical performative verbs. However, not all verbs in English are performative in a strict sense. For instance, although the following utterances share most of the properties that define a typical performative utterance, they are not strictly performative, for the reason that neither "know" nor "believe" is performative in a strict sense.
  - a. *I know you are a linguist.*
  - b. *We believe in your words.*

**ASK:**

- (1) In what ways are non-performative "know" or "believe" different from performative "apologize" and "promise"? For instance, does the uttering of "I know X" bring about an immediate change in the speaker's knowledge about X?
- (2) Can you give more instances of each type?
- (3) Can Chinese verbs be categorized in a similar way?

2. On April 1, 2001, a US EP-3 collided midair with a Chinese F-8II, destroying the Chinese plane and killing the pilot. On 8 April, US Secretary of State Colin Powell used the word “sorry” for the first time, saying “We have expressed regrets and we have expressed our sorrow, and we are sorry that a life was lost.” In response to this, China demanded a full apology from the US, stating that “Sorry is nice, but not what China wants.”

**ASK:**

- (1) What does it mean by “a full apology”? Why do Powell’s words fail to count as a full apology?
- (2) China later accepted the wording of “sorry” as a kind of apology. However, according to *The Michigan Daily*, “The United States could say it didn’t apologize, and China could say it did.” Why can Powell’s words be interpreted in these two contradicting ways?

3. Apart from the problems mentioned in the text, a further fault found with the constative-performative distinction is that an utterance with one performative verb may be performing the type of act suggested by another performative verb. Consider an utterance by a kidnapper: *I advise you to give me all in your pocket.*

**ASK:**

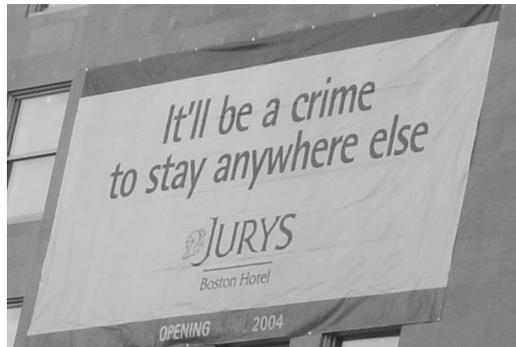
- (1) What does the kidnapper intend to perform here?
- (2) Why do you think the kidnapper uses the word “advise”?

4. Language used in public places is generally meant to do things. Consider the following posters.



**ASK:**

- (1) What are the locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act respectively in each case?
  - (2) What direct locutions are there in English for each of the corresponding illocutionary acts? Why do you think the two locutions are particularly chosen here?
5. Austin classified speech acts into five categories, namely verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. Now, consider the following poster:

**ASK:**

- (1) Is this an instance of a verdictive? Why or why not?
- (2) Why do you think the hotel proprietor put up a promotional poster like this?

## **Exercises**

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**Task 1: Focus on definitions**

Find in the literature at least two definitions for the following terms:

- a. **illocutionary force**
- b. performative verb

**Task 2: Focus on a pragmatician**

Find in the library or on the Internet some bio-data about John Austin.

**Task 3: Study questions**

1. Study the following uses of English. Are they constatives or performatives? Also, how can they be analyzed in terms of locution, illocution, and perlocution?



2. In what sense can the trichotomous framework of Speech Act Theory be considered a development of the earlier dichotomy? Why can we say it is a “more general framework of speech act analysis”? Do you agree the perlocutionary act should correspond to some intended effect of the illocutionary act, although the actual effect may differ? Use an example to support your answer.
3. In each of the following groups, only the *a*-utterances are performative in Austin’s terms. Think why the *b*-utterances and *c*-utterances are not performative.
- (1) a. *I admit I was wrong.*  
       b. *I know I was wrong.*  
       c. *I think I was wrong.*
  - (2) a. *I apologize to you.*  
       b. *I amuse you.*  
       c. *I flatter you.*
  - (3) a. *We promise to leave.*  
       b. *He admits he was wrong.*  
       c. *I warned you to stop.*
4. How are verdictives similar to and different from exercitives? How about the pair of commissives and verdictives?



5. Performatives do not have to be always used with the first person, in the active voice, or in the simple present tense. Look at the following examples (Thomas, 1993: 45). Discuss why they are performative. Can you find similar examples?

(1) *The court finds the accused not guilty.*

(2) *Your employment is hereby terminated with immediate effect.*

(3) A: *Are you denying that the Government has interfered?*

B: *I am denying that.*

#### Task 4: Mini-projects

1. In every language, there are a variety of ways for forbidding or prohibiting people from doing something. Go to the streets, parks or other public places and collect public notices that are used as tokens of prohibition. Study your data carefully and classify them in some way.

2. Find an occasion on which a ceremony like a wedding is being held. Collect data about the use of explicit and implicit performatives.

## Recommended Readings

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1. J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: OUP, 1962.
2. S. Levinson, *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: CUP, 1983, pp. 226-283.
3. Yan Huang, *Pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP, 2007, pp. 93-127.
4. Yueguo Gu, The impasse of perlocution, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1999, 20(5): 405-432.
5. 陈新仁, 论语用的真实性, 外语与外语教学, 2007 (6).
6. 何自然、陈新仁, 当代语用学, 北京: 外语教学与研究出版社, 2004, pp. 56-80.
7. 何自然、冉永平, 语用学概论 (修订本), 长沙: 湖南教育出版社, 2002, pp. 170-208.