Unit 1
Speech/Pragmatic Act Theory

> *...to say something is in the full normal sense to do something.*
> —John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 1962: 94

Pre-Class Reading

Speech Act Theory (**SAT** for short) was introduced by J. L. Austin. This famous Oxford philosopher gave a series of lectures at Oxford University in 1952-1954 and then at Harvard University in 1955. In 1962, the William James lectures that 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 a number of philosophers and mathematicians in the 1930s who held that a sentence is meaningless 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, in particular J. Searle, an American who was one of Austin's pupils at Oxford and who later became a famous philosopher.

This unit is mainly concerned with Austin's and Searle's thoughts on speech acts. Some further developments of this theory are also dealt with in this unit.

1.1 Words and deeds

In English, we sometimes hear people say "Actions speak louder than words" and "Easier said than done". However, according to 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 the same as giving him/her a pat on the back or a 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 an exam, amongst other things).

It is apparent that some utterances are different in nature. For example, when we produce an utterance such as "China has the largest population in the world", we would appear to be merely describing a fact or a state of affairs that we know. Technically, such utterances are considered by Austin to be **constative**, in contrast to those mentioned above that are **performative**, i.e. the saying itself accomplishing a certain action (such as "I promise I'll come here tomorrow on time") or affecting or changing the world in some way.

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

A canonical or **explicit performative** is one like (1):

(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*.

In 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/she succeeds in signaling to the addressee that he/she is upset in that something has been done improperly and, in normal situations, results in being pardoned. Thus, a performative verb is not intrinsically necessary for an utterance to be performative.

1.2 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 largest population in the world" as an example. When the speaker makes this statement, he/she succeeds in informing the addressee of this fact. Thus, when language is used in context by a user, it becomes an 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 the utterance itself perform in the way which is indicated by the verb, as shown in (7):

(7) *Peter, Mary thanks you*.

Obviously here, the utterance is an act on the part of the speaker to

inform Peter that Mary has expressed her thanks to him, rather than an act that Mary is executing to thank Peter.

Owing to these and other problems, 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: a **locutionary act** (the act of verbally saying something), an **illocutionary act** (the intended act behind saying something) and a **perlocutionary act** (the effect/outcome of a locutionary 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 that Jane performs is speaking the English sentence; the illocutionary act that Jane performs is an implicit request for John to bring her some food; and the perlocutionary act performed via uttering this sentence is the effect or outcome, i.e. John gets some food for Jane.

The illocutionary acts that utterances are intended to perform, or speech acts in a broader sense, are the focus of this pragmatic study.

1.3 (Illocutionary) Speech acts classified

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

A. **Verdictives**

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

B. **Exercitives**

Exercitives involve the exercising of power, rights or influences. In this category we have appointing, voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning, etc.

C. **Commissives**

Commissives are essentially acts of promising or other undertakings that commit one to doing something. These also include declarations or announcements of intention and espousal such as taking sides with another person.

D. **Behabitives**

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

E. **Expositives**

Expositives refer to those speech acts used to expound one's views, conduct arguments, clarify usages and references, and suchlike.

Although John Austin's classification of speech acts helps us to see how such acts can vary, it is theoretically problematic and practically vague. According to John Searle, one has to first specify the criteria for distinguishing one (kind of) illocutionary act from another. The lack of such criteria inevitably leads to some overlapping (for instance, swearing can be categorized into two types). In addition, Austin's typology cannot cover all speech acts.

John Searle discussed twelve criteria according to which we can make the taxonomical effort, with the following being the most salient:

a. Illocutionary point (involves the purpose or intention of the speaker as opposed to that of the hearer).

b. Direction of fit between words and the world (whether the propositional content of the uttered words for some acts, like assertions, matches the world, or the opposite).

c. Propositional content.

d. Psychological state expressed or propositional attitude toward the propositional content.

Table 1-1 presents Searle's taxonomy of speech acts based on the criteria that he discussed:

Table 1-1: Searle's taxonomy of speech acts

Speech-act categories	Explanation	Illocutionary acts	Relationship between "the words" and "the world"	Who is responsible for the relationship
Representatives	Represent some state of affairs	Assertions, claims, descriptions	The words fit the ("outside") world	Speaker

<div align="right">(To be continued)</div>

(Continued)

Speech-act categories	Explanation	Illocutionary acts	Relationship between "the words" and "the world"	Who is responsible for the relationship
Commissives	Commit the speaker to some future course of action	Promises, threats, vows	The world will fit the words	Speaker
Directives	Get the addressee to carry out some action	Commands, requests, dares, entreaties	The world will fit the words	Hearer
Declarations	Bring about a state of affairs	Marrying, naming, blessing, arresting	The words change the world	Speaker
Expressives	Indicate the speaker's psychological state or mental attitude	Greeting, congratulating, thanking, apologizing	The words fit the ("psychological") world	Speaker

It is worth mentioning that some criteria can be used to differentiate between sub-acts in the categories. For example, according to Searle, some acts in the "directives" category differ in the force or strength with which the illocutionary point is presented. For instance, suggesting and insisting vary in strength or force. Similarly, claiming and guessing differ in strength or commitment. In addition, some acts in the "directives" category can be differentiated according to the status or position of the speaker and hearer. Thus, a person who is in a superior position is generally supposed to issue commands or orders, whereas a person in an inferior or equal position would generally make requests or suggestions.

1.4 Felicity conditions

According to the classic Speech Act Theory, not all statements are subject to truth-falsity judgment. Performative utterances are such an exception. Thus, an utterance such as "I apologize for disappointing you"

is successful, happy, non-defective or, technically speaking, "felicitous" if it meets certain conditions, i.e. **felicity conditions**, under which words can be used to properly perform actions. According to Austin, there are three types of felicity conditions:

a. 1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.

2) The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure.

b. The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely.

c. Often

1) the person must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure, and

2) if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must do so.

These conditions, however complete, are vague. Dissatisfied with this, Searle redefined felicity conditions as the conditions that a performative must meet if it is to be appropriate or successful. He also put forward a more explicit version of the felicity conditions, as stated below:

a. **General conditions**: refer to the conditions in which interlocutors can understand the language being used and they are not play-acting or being nonsensical.

b. **Propositional content condition** (or **propositional rule**): concerns the state of affairs portrayed in an utterance; e.g. an expressive that performs the act of congratulating must point to a past act of the hearer.

c. **Preparatory conditions** (or **preparatory rules**): refer to those existing prior to the utterance; e.g. for a directive statement to have the force of an order, the speaker must have authority over the hearer and that hearer must recognize that authority.

d. **Sincerity condition** (or **sincerity rule**): relates to the speaker's state of mind; e.g. for a commissive statement to be taken as a promise, the speaker must intend to do X.

e. **Essential condition** (or **essential rule**): means that the utterance

must be recognizable as an instance of a particular illocutionary act.

Now, we can exemplify these conditions by using the act of promise that was previously stated, "I promise I'll arrive at ten tomorrow morning". The analysis is as follows:

    i. I have said something about a future act of my arriving at ten tomorrow morning. (propositional content condition)

    ii. You'd prefer my arriving at ten tomorrow morning to my not arriving at ten, and I believe so; I wouldn't arrive at ten tomorrow morning in the normal course of events. (preparatory conditions)

    iii. I actually intend to arrive at ten tomorrow morning. (sincerity condition)

    iv. We both understand that my saying that I'll arrive at ten tomorrow morning counts as an obligation on my part to do so. (essential condition)

1.5 Indirect speech acts

Another development of Speech Act Theory is the study of indirect speech acts by John Searle. These can be simply defined as the type of speech act in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another illocutionary act. An indirect speech act can be seen to consist of a primary illocutionary act (indirect force) and a secondary illocutionary act (literal force). For instance, in the sentence "Can you pass the salt?" the primary illocutionary force is to make a request for the hearer to pass the salt, whereas the secondary illocutionary act is an inquiry about the hearer's ability to pass the salt. Some indirect speech acts are highly conventional, whereas others are not. For instance, when we request others to do us a favor, we have the following options:

    (8) a. *Can you open the door?* (asking about one's ability)

        b. *Will you open the door?* (asking about one's willingness)

        c. *It's hot here.*

        d. *Someone's knocking at the door.*

In this example, whereas (8a) and (8b) are conventionally indirect, (8c) and (8d) are not.

1.6 Extended speech acts

Both Austin and Searle developed their theories primarily on the basis of single isolated speech acts like promising. Later, Searle remarked that:

> The speech act scenario is enacted by its two great heroes, "S" and "H"; and it works as follows: S goes up to H and cuts loose with an acoustic blast; if all goes well, if all the appropriate conditions are satisfied, if S's noise is infused with intentionality, and if all kinds of rules come into play, then the speech act is successful and nondefective. After that, there is silence; nothing else happens. The speech act is concluded and S and H go their separate ways. Traditional speech act theory is thus largely confined to single speech acts. (Searle, 1992: 7)

Speech acts are not always performed in isolation. Rather, they may occur in internally organized sequences that have a different status in the flow of the speaker's action. Consider (9):

(9) a. *Shut the windows, please.*

 b. *It's cold in here.*

In this sequence, (9a) expresses a dominant point and can stand alone, whereas (9b) is only appropriate when it is considered to be subordinate to (9a). Various types of dominance have been found, including justification, expansion and explanation. To describe the property of embedded speech acts like (9b), Ferrara (1980a, 1980b) raised the notion of "**relative appropriateness**", as opposed to the type of appropriateness used for either isolated or main speech acts like (9a).

The understanding of speech act sequences requires the reconstruction of the speaker's plan, a kind of "intentional construct", consisting basically of goals and instrumental actions. Ferrara (1980b) proposed the following three principles to reveal the action structures of speech act sequences:

Principle 1: for each hypothetically identified single speech act to be confirmed as a single and distinct act, we must find at least one goal, besides its inherent illocutionary point, which can conceivably motivate its performance.

Principle 2: the hierarchical status of a speech act in a sequence

corresponds to the hierarchical status of the extra-illocutionary goal that it is meant to achieve.

Principle 3: the goals which, relative to a given context, require fewer other goals to be intended for the speaker's plan to be acceptable or simply understandable, rank highest.

1.7 Pragmatic Act Theory

The Pragmatic Act Theory (PAT) was proposed by Mey (1993, 2001, 2010) as a response to some of the problems which are inherent in SAT. These problems include at least the following:

a. SAT fails to accommodate the fact that communicative acts can be accomplished in (the form of) writing and the fact that verbal acts are generally accompanied by non-verbal behavior. Unless we admit that language use, either spoken or written, is doing things, we are not in a position to apply SAT in the analysis of written discourse. In addition, unless we recognize the fact that language use simultaneously involves verbal and non-verbal codes, we will fail to recognize the role of the latter in the performance and interpretation of speech acts. Take apologizing for example. The serious tone used by the speaker is an important cue that the hearer cannot afford to ignore in the interpretation of the communicative act. For these reasons, "speech act" is "something of a misnomer" (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014: 182).

b. SAT fails to recognize that the (un)successful performance of a speech act does not fully rest upon the speaker. Rather, the hearer, as the interpreter, also plays a key role, as evidenced by Gu's (1993) discussion of perlocution.

c. SAT fails to take into account the role that context plays in the recognition of speech acts. For example, when two Chinese colleagues meet each other during the morning for the first time, they may say "吃早饭了吗?" (Have you had your breakfast?). In this context, the interrogative question tends to be interpreted as a form of greeting, rather than a serious query.

d. SAT fails to take proper account of the indeterminacy of a speech act. A crucial fact is that the mere words used by the speaker to

perform a certain speech act cannot determine the type of act actually being performed, inasmuch as an expression of politeness such as "thank you" does not necessarily signal politeness in any specific context.

Let's consider the following example from Leech (1983: 24).

(10) *If I were you, I'd leave town straight away*.

Depending on the context, the utterance in (10) can be interpreted as advice, a warning or even a threat. If the hearer assumes that the speaker has a friendly motive, it could be interpreted as advice; otherwise it could be interpreted as a threat. In this interpretive process, the speaker's tone, to which the hearer has access, also plays a role in judging the utterance.

Thus, according to Mey, what makes a particular pragmatic act recognizable is a set of conditions or "affordances":

> …for any activity to be successful, it has to be "expected", not just in the sense that somebody is waiting for the act to be performed, but rather in a general sense: this particular kind of act is apposite in this particular discursive interaction. (Mey, 2010: 445)

These conditions or affordances help to define what Mey called a "**pragmeme**", a type of "general situational prototype, capable of being executed in the situation" (2001: 221). As a kind of activity-text mapping, it can be instantiated in a particular situated context, and become an "instantiated, individual pragmatic" act, or a "**pract**" (ibid). Take requesting for example. Searle (1969: 66) proposed the following felicity conditions for a request (Table 1-2):

Table 1-2: Felicity conditions for requesting

Felicity conditions	Exemplification
Propositional content	Future act A of H.
Preparatory	1. H is able to do A. S believes H is able to do A. 2. It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord.
Sincerity	S wants H to do A.
Essential	Counts as an attempt to get H to do A.

However, from the perspective of PAT, the above felicity conditions, as listed by Searle, may fail to include all the features which are relevant to a prototypical request. Instead, we can identify at least the following pragmatic features that define a prototypical request in Table 1-3:

Table 1-3: Pragmatic features of a prototypical request
(cf. Culpeper & Haugh, 2014: 184)

Formal features
- Particular conventionalized pragmalinguistic strategies (or IFIDs).
- A future action is specified in some proposition.

Contextual beliefs
- It is not obvious that the future action will be performed by the target in the normal course of events.
- It is not obvious that the target is obliged to perform the future action or the speaker is obliged to ask for the future action to be performed in the normal course of events.
- The target is able to undertake the future action.
- The target is willing to undertake the future action.
- The source of the speech act wants the target to do the future act.
- The target takes the source's desire for the future act as the reason to act.

Interpersonal beliefs
- The future action represents benefit for the source but cost for the target.
- The speaker is likely to be of relatively high status.

Co-textual features
- Author: pre-request.
- Target: unmarked compliance/marked non-compliance.

Outcomes (i.e. perlocutionary effects)
- Target performs the action specified in the earlier speech act.

Note: IFID stands for illocutionary force indicating device.

In addition to the above schema-theoretic approach, Culpeper and Haugh (2014) also proposed an interactional approach to pragmatic acts. In this approach, pragmatic acts are considered to be jointly constructed by both the speaker and the recipient(s). As a result, they are developed sequentially, instead of being completed in one go. Take the following as an example:

(11) (Early in the morning, B makes a call to A.)

A: *What time is it now?*
B: *Sorry I've woken you up.*
A: *No, no. I've got class this morning. I'm worried I might be late.*
B: *It's 7:30.*

Literally, A's first question is to solicit information regarding what time it is. However, B interprets this to be blame, considering the early hour of his call and the shared knowledge that asking a question about time can be an indirect act of complaint or urging. After rejecting B's apology, A clarifies that he is indeed asking for information about the time. B's final supply of information helps to complete the performance of A's request.

[Check your understanding]

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

1. A performative verb is a necessary part of a performative utterance.
2. Every locutionary act corresponds to an illocutionary act.
3. The speaker alone can determine the perlocutionary act to be performed.
4. The speaker is chiefly responsible for the "fitting" relationship between "the words" and "the world" invoked by directives.
5. The understanding of indirect speech acts requires inference to a certain degree.

In-Class Activities

1. According to Austin's early formulation, "promise", "apologize" and "thank" are 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 the non-performative verbs "know" and "believe" different from the performative verbs "apologize" and "promise"? For

instance, does the uttering of "I know X" bring about an immediate change in the speaker's knowledge of X?

(2) Can you give more examples of each type?

(3) Can Chinese verbs be categorized in a similar way?

2. Apart from the problems mentioned in the text, a further fault that has been found with the constative-performative distinction is that an utterance with one performative verb may be performing the type of act which is suggested by another performative verb. Consider this utterance made by a kidnapper.

I would advise you to give me everything that is in your pocket.

ASK:

(1) What is the kidnapper intending to perform here?

(2) Why do you think the kidnapper uses the word "advise"?

3. Language used in public places is generally meant to do something. Consider the following notice.
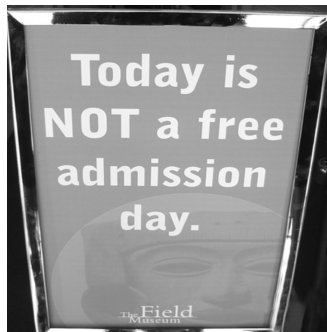

ASK:

(1) In what sense can the notice be interpreted as performing an indirect speech act?

(2) How might the notice be read differently by readers with different goals or expectations?

4. 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? Give a reason for your answer.

(2) Why do you think that the hotel proprietor has displayed such a promotional poster?

5. We generally use "谢谢" ("Thank you") after someone has done us a favor. However, sometimes we thank others before receiving any help or favors from them, as in "谢谢合作" ("Thank you for your cooperation"). In English, "thanks" is used in a similar way. Consider the following pictures.
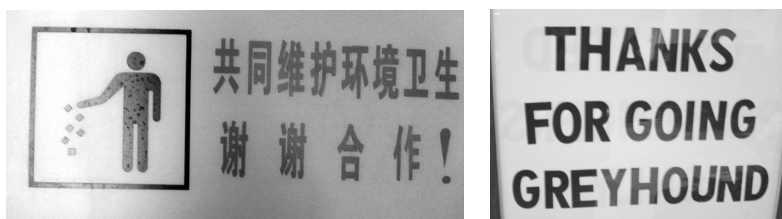
(Let's protect the environment together!
Thank you for your cooperation.)

ASK:

(1) Do the utterances in the above pictures fall into the category of expressives?

(2) Can you provide more examples of this kind of utterance?

(3) Why do we thank others before receiving any help or favors from them?

6. Indirect speech acts abound in daily conversation. Look at the following well-known joke.

Customer: Waiter! There's a fly in my soup.

   Waiter: Don't worry. There's no extra charge.

ASK:

(1) Which person performs an indirect speech act in this example, the customer or the waiter?

(2) Does the waiter really fail to understand the customer? What does the exchange suggest about the role of the speaker's intention and that of the hearer's intention in the fulfillment of a speech act?

(3) According to Jenny Thomas (1995: 119), "indirectness is costly and risky". Do you agree with her? Use the above dialogue to support your answer.

7. In daily communication, we often explain the reason for making a certain request or refusal. This results in what we call extended speech acts. Look at the following dialogue.

Andy: Jack, we'll play chess tonight. Are you coming?

   Jack: I'm afraid not. <u>A friend of mine is coming to see me</u>.

ASK:

(1) What is the role of the underlined part of Jack's utterance? Do you think it has to be true in order for the refusal to be properly performed?

(2) Now consider the use of language in the following pictures. What is the illocutionary point of each? Why is some "irrelevant" information used?

(Water is the source of life.
Please save water!)

■ **Presentation Topics:**
   a. Giving and Responding to Thanks in English and Chinese
   b. Giving and Responding to Compliments in English and Chinese

Exercises

Task 1: Focus on definitions

Find in the literature definitions for the following terms.

a. illocutionary force

b. performative verb

c. illocutionary point

d. indirect speech acts

Task 2: Focus on pragmaticians

Find in the library or on the Internet some biographical information about John Austin and John Searle.

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 each of the following groups, only Utterance a is performative according to Austin's terms. Explain why Utterance b and Utterance c are not performative in each group.

   (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.

3. Performatives do not always have to be used with the first person, in the active voice or in the simple present tense. Look at the following examples (Thomas, 1995: 45). Discuss why they are performative. Can you find similar examples?

  a. The court finds the accused not guilty.

  b. Your employment is hereby terminated with immediate effect.

  c. A: Are you denying that the Government has interfered?

    B: I am denying that.

4. Study the following uses of English. Which category of speech acts does each belong to?

  a. (Priest): I now pronounce you husband and wife.

  b. I love this game.

  c. It was a warm sunny day.

  d. Why not have some more fish?

  e. Congratulations!

  f. I'll pay you back tomorrow.

  g. Could you lend me a pen, please?

  h. We will not do that.

  i. We find the defendant guilty.

5. How do "Excuse me" and "(I'm) Sorry" differ in their usage? Discuss any differences in terms of felicity conditions.

6. Do you feel that John Searle's classification of (illocutionary) speech acts is an ideal one? Try to make some improvements where you think necessary.

7. According to Levinson (1983: 226), Speech Act Theory has aroused immense interest in many areas. Think about some possible ways in which the theory can be applied to the study of Second Language Acquisition or other areas.

Task 4: Mini-projects

1. Collect at least 20 public signs and then sort them out according to Searle's classification of speech acts.

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

Recommended Readings

1. J. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962[北京：外语教学与研究出版社，2002].
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