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Speech Acts and Grammar

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Language as Action: Performatives vs Constatives

J. L. Austin (1962), in his posthumously published book *How to do things with words* was the first to introduce the idea of speech acts (SA), analyzing the relationships between utterances and performance. His first goal was to point out the limitations of truth conditional semantics, i.e., the (logical positivist) view of language that places truth conditions as central to language understanding. Austin was convinced that we do not just use language to **say** things (make statements), but also to **do** things (perform actions). He formalized this opposition in his so-called performative hypothesis (which he would later abandon) by contrasting two types of utterances: constative utterances, or constatives, and performative utterances, or performatives (see **Speech Acts**).

Constatives are essentially like the classical statements. Their function is to describe some event, process, or state of affairs. The proposition that is expressed can be either true or false. Some examples are given in (1). Note that actually, at the time of this writing, at least one of these utterances is false.

- (1) a. I'm driving a green car.
- b. I have four children.
- c. I am expecting a baby.

By contrast, performatives are utterances that have no truth conditions (see below), but this does not mean that they are meaningless, as illustrated by the examples in (2) (from Truckenbrodt, 2004).

- (2) a. I sentence you to 2 years in prison.
- b. I name this ship 'Liberté.'
- c. I accept your offer.
- d. I promise to pick you up at the airport.
- e. I warn you not to come to my house again.
- f. I advise you to stop smoking.

Formally, the utterances in (1) and (2) are alike. They are all declarative sentences, in the first person singular, and use the present tense. They do not, however, do the same job. While the utterances in (1) are statements, the utterances in (2) are used to perform an action, i.e., to do something (promising, warning, advising, etc.), rather than to say that something is or is not the case. To be successful, the performative must be issued in a situation that is appropriate, in all respects, for the act in question: if

the speaker does not meet the conditions required for its performance, then the utterance will be 'unhappy,' 'void,' or 'infelicitous' (Austin, 1975: 14).

The conditions of 'happiness' of performative utterances (later called felicity conditions, see below) state how and when utterances are valid, in a real situation. A performative can be unhappy in two ways:

- The circumstances and conditions in which the utterance is performed are not appropriate (incorrect uttering of the formula, the actors involved do not meet the conventional requirements, the speaker is joking, etc.), in which case the act in question is not successfully performed at all, i.e., it is not achieved; or
- The utterance is issued insincerely (such as when I say *I promise* and have no intention of keeping it), in which case the act is achieved but with abuse of the procedure (I have promised but will not follow my promise).

Summing up, performatives are different from constatives in at least two ways (see also Truckenbrodt, 2004). First, performatives are used to do something, they create new facts (other than the fact that someone has said that something is or is not the case). Thus, a judge saying (2a) under the right circumstances in court creates the fact that the hearer is sentenced to 2 years in prison. An authorized person saying (2b) in the right circumstances creates the fact that the ship now has a name. Likewise, by saying (2c) the speaker creates a fact of commitment to accept the offer. By promising, as in (2d), a promise has been made that has consequences. Similarly, in (2e), the listener has been warned; and in (2f), the listener has been given advice. These facts may seem to be relatively similar to the fact created by a statement (*viz.*, that someone has said that something is true). Nevertheless they are different. As Austin clearly indicated, for example, an explicit promise as in (2d) is not, and does not involve, the statement that one is promising. It is an act of a distinctive sort, the very sort named by this particular performative verb (*to promise*). Of course one can promise without doing so explicitly by using the performative verb *promise*, but if one does use it, one is, according to Austin, making explicit what one is doing but not stating that one is doing it.

The second way in which performatives are different from constatives is that performatives cannot be said to be true or false. If the utterances in (2) are performed under the appropriate circumstances, there is no issue of them being true or false. If they

are made under the right circumstances, and by the right person, they may be said to be automatically true, in a certain sense. But if they are not made under the appropriate circumstances, they do not become false; rather they become unhappy or void, as shown above. It is clear that this is different from a statement being false. Instead, the statement represents an attempt to perform an act of the relevant kind, but an attempt that does not work out.

What About Grammar?

Performatives normally involve a first person subject (typically *I*) and a performative verb, as in (2) above (where the performative verbs are *promise*, *name*, etc.). Working with examples of everyday language to show how performances can happen, Austin (1975: 151) claimed five general classes of performative verbs (even though he admits that the distinction between various kinds of utterances is not always clear):

1. Verdictives, which give a finding or verdict by a jury, arbitrator, or umpire (sentencing, pleading, pronouncing, etc.).
2. Exercitives, which are the exercising of a power, right, or influence (appointing, voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning, etc.).
3. Commissives, which commit you to an action, including declarations or announcements of intention (promising, announcing, opening, declaring, etc.).
4. Behabitives, expressing attitudes about social behavior (apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, challenging, etc.).
5. Expositives, which make plain how utterances fit into conversations or arguments (I reply, I argue, I concede, I illustrate, I assume, etc.).

Performatives moreover tend to use the simple present tense and are indicative (*I promise I'll come tomorrow*). This is because they are pronounced for the purpose of acting on a real situation, and thus they usually cannot refer to past events. Nevertheless, performatives are also regularly found in the passive voice, as in (3) (from Austin, 1975: 57).

- (3) You are hereby authorized to pay.
 Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only.
 Notice is hereby given that trespassers will be prosecuted.

Noteworthy about these examples is that they contain the adverbial *hereby*. The insertion of this adverb is indeed often suggested as a test meant to distinguish performatives from constatives. All utterances in

(2) allow the presence of *hereby* (see [4]), while the constatives in (1) do not (see [5]).

- (4) a. I *hereby* sentence you to two years in prison.
 b. I *hereby* name this ship 'Liberté.'
 c. I *hereby* accept your offer.
 d. I *hereby* promise to pick you up at the airport.
 e. I *hereby* warn you not to come to my house again.
 f. I *hereby* advise you to stop smoking.
- (5) a. # I'm *hereby* driving a green car.
 b. # I *hereby* have four children.
 c. # I am *hereby* expecting a baby.

This difference between constatives and performatives is found across languages. In French *par la présente* works like English *hereby*, the German counterpart is *hiermit*, the Dutch one is *bij deze(n)*, the Spanish one is *por la presente*, etc.

As mentioned above, it is not absolutely necessary to actually pronounce the performative verb *to promise* to perform the action of promising. In principle, utterance (6a) will probably have a similar effect on the hearer as does utterance (2d), repeated here as (6b) for convenience.

- (6) a. I'll pick you up at the airport.
 b. I promise to pick you up at the airport.

Thus, in some sense, all verbs can be performatives. To account for this, Austin refined his classification: the utterances called performatives above are now called explicit performatives. These are distinguished from primary performatives, in which the performative part is implicit, as in (6a). Austin eventually realized that explicit constatives function in essentially the same way as performatives. After all, a statement can be made by uttering *I assert ...* or *I predict ...*, just as a promise or a request can be made with *I promise ...* or *I request ...*. In addition, the utterances in (7) illustrate that explicit constatives can co-occur with *hereby*, and that they are automatically true, which makes them totally identical to explicit performatives, whereas the corresponding primary performatives to (7) are statements, not actions (see [8]).

- (7) a. I (hereby) tell you that I am not traveling to the U.S. next week.
 b. I (hereby) assert that this president is the most stupid one we ever had.
- (8) a. I am not traveling to the U.S. next week.
 b. This president is the most stupid one we ever had.

As pointed out by Thomas (1995), Austin's performative hypothesis convincingly documented the fact that people do not use language just to make

statements about the world: they also use language to perform actions that affect the world in one way or another. However, the position that **only** performative verbs could be used to perform actions turned out to be untenable. Thomas (1995: 44–46) gives three different reasons for the collapse of Austin's performative hypothesis.

- There is no formal (grammatical) way of distinguishing performative verbs from other sorts of verbs. Like all other verbs, performatives can be plural as well as singular, they can be written and spoken, they do not have to be in the first person, nor is it essential that they be in the active mood.
- The presence of a performative verb does not guarantee that the specified action is performed. One can indeed use the verb *to promise* to actually perform a threat, rather than a promise, as in *I promise things will go wrong for you if you don't go to bed immediately!*
- There are ways of doing things with words that do not involve using performative verbs. Indeed, for a great many very common acts such as offering, boasting, expressing an opinion, hinting, insulting, etc., it would be most odd to use a performative verb. In addition, there are also acts for which the language does not even have a performative verb, such as letting the cat out of the bag, putting one's foot in it, pulling someone's leg, etc.

As a consequence, Austin completely abandoned his original distinction between constative and performative utterances; instead, he distinguished between the truth conditions of statement and those of the action it performs. In other words, the proper distinction is that between locutionary and illocutionary acts.

Locution, Illocution, Perlocution

In addition to providing the insight that utterances are used to perform actions, speech act theory assumes that speakers are simultaneously involved in three different speech acts when uttering a sentence:

1. a locutionary act: the act of using words to form sentences, those wordings making sense in a language with correct grammar and pronunciation.
2. an illocutionary act: the intended action by the speaker, the force or intention behind the words, within the framework of certain conventions.
3. a perlocutionary act: the effect that an utterance has on the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or actions of the hearer.

These acts are not parts, but dimensions of a speech act, which means that they cannot be performed in

isolation. Any utterance will always exhibit all of these different dimensions. Thus, in order to have a speech act one needs a meaningful linguistic expression (locution), that is produced, one, with some kind of function or communicative purpose in the speaker's mind, such as making a statement, an offer, an explanation, a threat, etc., (illocution), and two, with some intended effect on the hearer, such as to get the hearer to perform some action, or to have her/him understand a problem, etc., (perlocution). Bach (2003) illustrates this with the example given in (9):

(9) The bar will be closed in five minutes.

In uttering (9), a bartender would be performing the *locutionary* act of saying that the bar (i.e., the one he is tending) will be closed in 5 minutes (from the time of utterance). In saying this, the bartender is performing the illocutionary act of informing the patrons of the bar's imminent closing (and perhaps also, and not unimportantly, the act of urging them to order a last drink). Finally, the bartender also intends his utterance to produce further effects, by performing the perlocutionary acts of causing the patrons to believe that the bar is about to close and of actually getting (and not just urging) them to order one last drink. He is performing all these speech acts, at all three levels, just by uttering the above words.

Of these three dimensions, the one most discussed is the illocutionary act (also referred to as the illocutionary force). The term 'speech act' has indeed come to refer exclusively to this kind of act, which thus corresponds most closely to the notion of performative described above, as they can (but need not) be performed by means of a performative formula.

What About Grammar?

Generally speaking, there is a close and predictable connection between locution and illocution of an utterance. That is, all competent (adult) speakers of a language can mostly predict or interpret the intended illocutionary force of an utterance with reasonable accuracy. As pointed out by Thomas (1995: 50), "human beings simply could not operate if they had no idea at all how their interlocutor would react (...)." Most typically, the sentential moods declarative, interrogative, and imperative (*see Mood and Modality in Grammar*) are used with the functions shown in [Table 1](#) (based on Truckenbrodt, 2004).

However, this relation between form and function only works in the typical cases (and it remains questionable whether these cases are the most frequent ones). Clearly, we cannot say: a declarative has by

Table 1 Relationship between form and function of speech acts

<i>Syntactic form</i>	<i>Illocutionary act</i>	<i>Illocutionary force</i>
Declarative	Statement	Speaker commits to content
Interrogative	Question	Request for information
Imperative	Command	Attempt to get listener to do something

definition the function of a statement, or an interrogative has by definition the function of a question (see below). This means that sometimes things can go wrong, mostly because the same locutionary act can have different illocutionary forces. For instance, depending on the context of utterance, (10) – a declarative – could count as a prediction, a promise, or a warning.

(10) I'll be back.

The most obvious way to help the hearer recognize the intended illocutionary force of an utterance is by using an explicit illocutionary act. Explicit acts contain a so-called IFID or illocutionary force indicating device, i.e., an expression naming the act. In most cases, this is a performative verb that explicitly names the illocutionary act being performed (*I warn you that, I predict that, I promise that, etc.*). While speakers do not always make their speech acts this explicit, still the context may force them to identify the speech act being performed. This is illustrated in the (constructed) telephone conversation in (11) (from Yule, 1996: 49–50).

(11) Him: Can I talk to Mary?
 Her: No, she's not here.
 Him: I'm asking you – can I talk to her?
 Her: And I'm telling you – SHE'S NOT HERE!

In this scenario, each speaker describes the illocutionary force of their utterances. Most of the time, however, no performative verbs are mentioned. Yule (1996) mentions some further IFIDs that can draw the attention to the illocutionary force being employed, such as word order, stress, intonation, changes in voice quality, etc.

Of course, to be recognized, the utterance should also be produced under certain (conventional) conditions for it to count as having the intended illocutionary force; that is, it should meet a number of felicity conditions, a notion that was developed by Searle (1969), building on Austin's original work. In addition to the general conditions on the participants (such as that they understand the language being used and that they are not play-acting or uttering nonsense), Searle distinguishes preparatory, propositional, sincerity, and essential conditions, differing as

to the function of the speech act at hand. Example (12) illustrates the conditions for the act of *promising* (Searle, 1969: 62ff; as cited in Saeed, 2003: 229):

- (12) Conditions for promising
 [where S = Speaker, H = Hearer, A = the future action, P = the proposition expressed in the speech act, *e* = the linguistic expression]
- Preparatory 1: H would prefer S's doing A to his not doing A and S believes H would prefer S's doing A to not doing A.
 - Preparatory 2: It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.
 - Propositional: In expressing that P, S predicates a future act of S.
 - Sincerity: S intends to do A.
 - Essential: the utterance *e* counts as an undertaking to do A.

Thus, the preparatory conditions for a promise should guarantee that when I promise to do something, the event will have a beneficial effect on the hearer, and second, it will not happen by itself. So, telling one's spouse *I'll be home at six* when leaving for work might not be considered a typical promise, unless I usually come home at seven or eight and my spouse would like me to come home earlier. The propositional condition reflects the fact that the content of the utterance has to concern a future event – I cannot promise something that already has happened – and that the future event will be an act of the speaker – I cannot promise my family that our neighbor will do the dishes tonight. Related to these conditions is the sincerity condition: when I promise to do something, I really must intend to carry out the future action – I cannot genuinely promise that I will be home at six if I already know that I have a meeting starting at six! Finally, the essential condition covers the fact that by uttering my promise, I commit myself to the obligation of carrying out the future action.

According to Searle, the conditions related to the speech act of promising are of general applicability and thus it should be possible to establish rules of this type for every speech act. Searle does so for some eight additional speech acts: requesting, asserting, questioning, thanking, advising, warning, greeting, and congratulating. Thomas (1995: 95ff), however, criticizes Searle's endeavor and raises four interrelated sets of problems with respect to these rules:

- It is not always possible to distinguish fully between one speech act and another (partly because the conditions specified by Searle only tend to cover the central or most typical usage of a speech act verb).

- If we attempt to plug all the gaps in Searle's rules, we end up with a hopelessly complex collection of *ad hoc* conditions.
- The conditions specified by Searle may exclude perfectly normal instances of speech act, while they would permit anomalous uses.
- The same speech act verb may cover a range of slightly different phenomena and some speech acts do indeed overlap; Searle's rules do no account for this.

Categorizing Speech Acts

Any language has probably several hundred verbs that can be used to describe a kind of action that can be performed with an explicit or an implicit speech act. Is there a plausible way of grouping all these different speech acts into categories? In contrast to Austin's (1962: 109ff) first, very tentative classification, based on actual performative verbs (a classification which he did not consider definitive), Searle's (1976) categorization of speech acts into five types, each with their general function, has become a classic, and is still often referred to today. Its main improvement with respect to Austin's is probably that it clearly separates the notion of speech act from that of speech act verb. In other words, "the existence or nonexistence of [a speech act verb (or performative verb)] cannot be a criterion for the existence or nonexistence of a particular speech act" (Mey, 2001: 117) (see **Speech Acts: Definition and Classification**).

1. Representatives commit the speaker to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition, typically statements, assertions, conclusions, descriptions, etc., such as *The earth is flat; It's cold here; Chomsky didn't like butterflies.*
2. Directives are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. They express what the speaker wants; typical representatives are commands, orders, requests, suggestions, etc., such as *I warn you to stay away from my house!; Mum, can I have a cookie, two please?*
3. Commissives commit the speaker to some future course of action. They express what the speaker intends: typically, promises, threats, refusals, offerings, etc., such as *I promise that I'll be home at six; I'll be back; I will not marry you.*
4. Expressives are used to express the psychological state of the speaker. They state what the speaker feels and can be statements of joy, pain, sorrow etc., but also expressions of thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating, etc., such as *I congratulate you on winning the race; I'm really sorry; YESSS!*

5. Declarations effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs, i.e., they change the world via the utterance. The speaker has to have a special institutional role, in a specific context, in order to be able to perform a declaration appropriately; typical examples include excommunicating, declaring war, marrying, firing from employment, nominating, etc.

Searle uses a mix of criteria to establish these different types; these include the act's illocutionary point, its fit with the world, the psychological state of the speaker, and the content of the act (cf. Saeed, 2001: 228–229; Mey, 2001: 119–126). The illocutionary point is the purpose or aim of the act; it corresponds most closely to the definition of the speech act types given above. The fit concerns the direction of the relationship between language and the world: should the words conform to the world (representatives, expressives) or is it the world that should conform to the words (directives, commissives), or be changed by the words (declaratives)? The psychological state relates to the speaker's state of mind or attitude toward events: e.g., does the speaker believe what is uttered in the speech act, or not? Finally, the content is directly related to the propositional felicity condition described above.

What About Grammar?

An alternative way of classifying speech acts is to take their structure as a point of departure. In their cross-linguistic analysis of speech acts, Sadock and Zwicky (1985: 160) note "that most languages are similar in presenting three basic sentence types with similar functions and often strikingly similar forms." These three basic sentence types are the declarative, the interrogative, and the imperative. Roughly, they can be described as follows: The declarative is used for making announcements or declarations, stating conclusions, making claims, telling stories, and so on. The interrogative is used to gain information; it asks for a verbal response from the addressee. The imperative is used for making requests, giving orders or advice, making suggestions, and the like; its use is meant to influence the course of (future) events. While there are many differences in detail between individual languages, there seems to be "an easily recognized relationship between the three structural forms (declarative, interrogative, imperative) and the three general communicative functions (statement, question, command/request)" (Yule, 1996: 54), as illustrated in (13):

- (13) a. She eats an apple. declarative/statement
- b. Does she eat an apple? interrogative/question
- c. Give me her apple! imperative/command

Whenever there is such a direct relationship between the sentence type and its communicative function, we are faced with a direct speech act. Whenever the relationship between structure and function is indirect, we are dealing with an indirect speech act. Thus, an interrogative used to ask a question is a direct speech act (as in 13b), but an interrogative used to inquire about a capability (*could*, *can*) or willingness (*would*) in order to elicit information (14a) or to make a request (14b, 14c) represents an indirect speech act (see **Speech Acts, Literal and Nonliteral**).

- (14) a. Could you tell me whether she's eating an apple?
 b. Can you give me the salt, please?
 c. Would you give me your suitcase, Madam?

The examples in (14) actually display “a typical pattern in English whereby asking a question about the hearer's assumed ability (*Can you?*, *Could you?*) or future likelihood with regard to doing something (*Will you?*, *Would you?*) normally counts as a request to actually do that something” (Yule, 1996: 56). The same goes for other languages (such as Dutch, French, German, Spanish, and so on) where similar patterns are displayed.

From a more general point of view, indirectness is a universal phenomenon (Thomas, 1995: 119). It can be used to make one's language more or less interesting; to increase the force of one's message, to reach competing goals; and to be more polite or to save one's face (see Thomas, 1995: 143–146) (see **Face**). Indirect speech acts, in particular, are generally associated with greater politeness than are direct speech acts. However, it is not possible to assess politeness out of context. The linguistic form, as well as the context of utterance, and the relationship between speaker and hearer, all play a role in rendering a speech act more or less polite (or impolite; see Thomas, 1995: 155–157) (see also **Politeness; Pragmatics: Overview; Pragmatic Acts**).

See also: Mood and Modality in Grammar; Politeness; Pragmatic Acts; Pragmatics: Overview; Speech Acts; Speech Acts: Definition and Classification; Speech Acts, Literal and Nonliteral.

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Speech Acts, Literal and Nonliteral

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There has been a long and fierce battle between the communication-oriented philosophers of language and the formal linguistics theoreticians regarding the priority of language as a means of expressing thought over a vision of language as an instrument of communication. The philosopher Dummett, in a conciliatory tone, has attempted to demonstrate that both positions – in their radical assumption that the other view is misguided – are wrong and that the two ideas about language are compatible. According to Dummett (2003), the idea that language is used to communicate presupposes the view that language is a way of expressing (or articulating) thoughts. The idea that language is merely an instrument of the expression of thought, in his view, collapses when we consider solipsistic uses of speech acts (a person's writing a reminder to himself and hanging it on a kitchen wall, or a person's trying to find an answer to his own question). Such solipsistic uses still presuppose a derived idea of communication.

In this article, we grant that language is primarily an instrument of thought (enabling the articulation of thought); however, we also think that language is an instrument of social action. An utterance U expressing the thought X performs an action A if, by the expression of X, a certain configuration of elements (roles, rights, duties) is changed from state S to state S' (A) (S' being a function of A) not as a result of the indirect consequences of the thought X but as a result of the socially recognized effects of vocalizing it, brought about by the recognition of the thought X and of the official position that the speaker of U has taken by publicly vocalizing such a thought. A speech act is not brought into effect unless a thought X expressed by an utterance associated with X is recognized as having been in the mind as well as in the mouth of a speaker. Suppose I have the ability to decipher Sally's intentions by reading her mind, and her thoughts

contain a sentence S conventionally associated with a speech act A; nevertheless, the silent utterance (her thought) has no social effect, as its vocalization has not been heard in public.

Speech acts have their effects not only because certain persons have appropriate thoughts, but mainly because these thoughts have been publicly expressed by means of utterances, that are socially noticeable events, bound to have certain conventional social consequences. A speech act A is normally brought into effect by means of a device that indicates illocutionary force, essentially some linguistic means conventionally adopted to vocalize a certain thought that, once it is vocalized in public, becomes associated with an action A. There has been a long controversy as to whether moods are in some ways associated with certain illocutionary forces, resulting in the abandoning of the respectable and reasonable orthodoxy that declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, and imperatives are normally associated with certain actions, such as expressing thoughts, asking questions, and modifying other people's behavior (Levinson, 1983). Very luckily, a number of linguists, including Geis (1995) and Capone (2003), have returned to the orthodoxy. It would be unreasonable to suppose that distinctions of mood have no semantic counterparts, as that would require admitting the vacuity of certain fundamental linguistic distinctions. If there are linguistic distinctions, these must have semantic work to do, and it is reasonable to expect them to be related to illocutionary forces, at least of basic types (very generically specified). This article follows Geis in distinguishing between the *literal speech act* performed in virtue of uttering a sentence having a certain mood and the *full, context-dependent cognate speech act*. The full, context-dependent speech act, in this author's opinion, is still a function of the corresponding literal speech act, context playing a role in further determining the illocutionary force of the utterance. The role pragmatics plays in fully determining the content of a speech act in context is to add features of meaning to the underdetermined speech act; thus, it is always possible