

Speech act

For the U.S. law, see [SPEECH Act](#).

In the [philosophy of language](#) and [linguistics](#), a **speech act** is something expressed by an individual that not only presents information but performs an action as well.^[1] For example, the phrase "I would like the mashed potatoes; could you please pass them to me?" is considered a speech act as it expresses the speaker's desire to acquire the mashed potatoes, as well as presenting a request that someone pass the potatoes to them.

According to [Kent Bach](#), "almost any speech act is really the performance of several acts at once, distinguished by different aspects of the speaker's intention: there is the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, such as requesting or promising, and how one is trying to affect one's audience".^[2]

The contemporary use of the term "speech act" goes back to [J. L. Austin](#)'s development of [performative utterances](#) and his theory of [locutionary](#), [illocutionary](#), and [perlocutionary acts](#). Speech acts serve their function once they are said or communicated. These are commonly taken to include acts such as apologizing, promising, ordering, answering, requesting, complaining, warning, inviting, refusing, and congratulating.^[3]

History

For much of the history of the [positivist](#) philosophy of language, language was viewed primarily as a way of making factual [assertions](#), and the other uses of language tended to be ignored, as Austin states at the beginning of Lecture 1, "It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely."^{[1]:1}

[Wittgenstein](#) came up with the idea of "don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use," showing language as a new vehicle for social activity.^[4] Speech act theory hails from Wittgenstein's philosophical theories. Wittgenstein believed meaning derives from pragmatic tradition, demonstrating the importance of how language is used to accomplish objectives within specific situations. By following rules to accomplish a goal, communication becomes a set of [language games](#). Thus, utterances do more than reflect a meaning, they are words designed to get things done.^[5] The work of [J. L. Austin](#), particularly his *How to Do Things with Words*, led philosophers to pay more attention to the non-declarative uses of language. The terminology he introduced, especially the notions "[locutionary act](#)", "[illocutionary act](#)", and "[perlocutionary act](#)", occupied an important role in what was then to become the "study of speech acts". All of these three acts, but especially the "illocutionary act", are nowadays commonly classified as "speech acts".

Austin was by no means the first one to deal with what

one could call "speech acts" in a wider sense. The term 'social act' and some of the theory of this type of linguistic action are to be found in the fifth of [Thomas Reid](#)'s *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (1788, chapter VI, Of the Nature of a Contract).^[6]

[Adolf Reinach](#) (1883–1917)^[7] and [Stanislav Škrabec](#) (1844–1918)^[8] have been both independently credited with a fairly comprehensive account of social acts as performative utterances dating to 1913, long before Austin and [Searle](#).

The term "Speech Act" had also been already used by [Karl Bühler](#).^{[9][10]}

Overview

Main articles: [locutionary act](#), [illocutionary act](#), [perlocutionary act](#), and [metalocutionary act](#)

Speech acts can be analysed on multiple levels:

1. A **locutionary act**: the performance of an [utterance](#): the actual utterance and its apparent meaning, comprising any and all of its verbal, social, and rhetorical meanings, all of which correspond to the verbal, syntactic and semantic aspects of any meaningful utterance;
2. an **illocutionary act**: the active result of the implied request or meaning presented by the locutionary act. For example, if the locutionary act in an interaction is

the question "Is there any salt?" the implied illocutionary request is "Please pass the salt to me." or at least "I wish to add salt to my meal.";

3. and under certain conditions a further **perlocutionary act**: the actual effect of the locutionary and illocutionary acts, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something, whether intended or not.^[1]
4. Additionally, a **metallocutionary act** categorizes speech acts that refer to the forms and functions of the discourse itself rather than continuing the substantive development of the discourse, or to the configurational functions of [prosody](#) and [punctuation](#).^{[11]:88–93}

Illocutionary acts

The concept of an [illocutionary act](#) is central to the concept of a speech act. Although there are several scholarly opinions regarding how to define 'illocutionary acts', there are some kinds of acts that are widely accepted as illocutionary. Examples of these widely accepted acts are commands or promises.

The first of these opinions is the one held by [John L. Austin](#) who coined the term "speech act" in his book [How to Do Things with Words](#) published posthumously in 1962.^[1] According to Austin's preliminary informal description, the idea of an "illocutionary act" can be

captured by emphasizing that "by saying something, we *do* something", as when someone issues an order to someone to go by saying "Go!", or when a minister joins two people in marriage saying, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." (Austin would eventually define the "illocutionary act" in a more exact manner.)

[John R. Searle](#) gave an alternative to Austin's explanation of the illocutionary act saying, a "speech act" is often meant to refer to exactly the same thing as the term illocutionary act. Searle's work on speech acts is understood to further refine Austin's conception. However, some philosophers have pointed out a significant difference between the two conceptions: whereas Austin emphasized the conventional interpretation of speech acts, Searle emphasized a psychological interpretation (based on beliefs, intentions, etc.).^[12]

Perlocutionary acts

While illocutionary acts relate more to the speaker, [perlocutionary acts](#) are centered around the listener. Perlocutionary acts always have a 'perlocutionary effect', which is the effect a speech act has on a listener. This could affect the listener's thoughts, emotions or even their physical actions.^[13] An example of this could be if someone uttered the sentence "I'm hungry." The perlocutionary effect on the listener could be the effect of being persuaded by the utterance. For example, after

hearing the utterance, the listener could be persuaded to make a sandwich for the speaker.

Performative speech acts

An interesting type of illocutionary speech act is that performed in the utterance of what Austin calls [performative utterances](#), typical instances of which are "I nominate John to be President", "I sentence you to ten years' imprisonment", or "I promise to pay you back." In these typical, rather explicit cases of performative sentences, the action that the sentence describes (nominating, sentencing, promising) is performed by the utterance of the sentence itself. J.L. Austin claimed that performative sentences could be "happy or unhappy". They were only happy if the speaker does the actions he or she talks about. They were unhappy if this did not happen. Performative speech acts also use explicit verbs instead of implicit ones. For example, stating "I intend to go." does convey information, but it does not really mean that you are [e.g.] *promising* to go; so it does not count as "performing" an action ("such as" the action of promising to go). Therefore, it [the word "intend"] is an implicit verb; i.e., a verb that would not be suitable for use in performative speech acts.^[14]

Indirect speech acts

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In the course of performing speech acts people communicate with each other. The content of communication may be identical, or almost identical, with the content intended to be communicated, as when a stranger asks, "What is your name?" However, the meaning of the linguistic means used may also be different from the content intended to be communicated. One may, in appropriate circumstances, request Peter to do the dishes by just saying, "Peter ...!", or one can promise to do the dishes by saying, "Me!"^{[[citation needed](#)]}

One common way of performing speech acts is to use an expression, which indicates one speech act, and indeed performs this act, but also performs a further speech act, which is indirect. One may, for instance, say, "Peter, can you close the window?", thereby asking Peter whether he will be able to close the window, but also requesting that he does so. Since the request is performed indirectly, by means of (directly) performing a question, it counts as an [indirect speech act](#).^{[[citation needed](#)]}

An even more indirect way of making such a request would be to say, in Peter's presence in the room with the open window, "I'm cold." The speaker of this request must rely upon Peter's understanding of several items of information that is not explicit: that the window is open

and is the cause of them being cold, that being cold is an uncomfortable sensation and they wish it to be taken care of, and that Peter cares to rectify this situation by closing the window. This, of course, depends much on the relationship between the requester and Peter—he might understand the request differently if they were his boss at work than if they were his girlfriend or boyfriend at home. The more presumed information pertaining to the request, the more indirect the speech act may be considered to be. [\[citation needed\]](#)

Indirect speech acts are commonly used to reject proposals and to make requests. For example, if a speaker asks, "Would you like to meet me for coffee?" and the other replies, "I have class", the second speaker has used an indirect speech act to reject the proposal. This is indirect because the literal meaning of "I have class" does not entail any sort of rejection. [\[citation needed\]](#)

This poses a problem for [linguists](#), as it is confusing to see how the person who made the proposal can understand that his proposal was rejected. In 1975 John Searle suggested that the illocutionary force of indirect speech acts can be derived by means of a [Gricean](#) reasoning process;^[15] however, the process he proposes does not seem to accurately solve the problem [\[citation needed\]](#).

In other words, this means that one does not need to say the words apologize, pledge, or praise in order to show they are doing the action. All the examples above show

how the actions and indirect words make something happen rather than coming out straightforward with specific words and saying it.^[16]

Examples

Speech Acts are commonplace in everyday interactions and are important for communication, as well as present in many different contexts. Examples of these include:

- "You're fired!" expresses both the employment status of the individual in question, as well as the action by which said person's employment is ended.^[17]
- "I hereby appoint you as chairman" expresses both the status of the individual as chairman, and the action that promotes the individual to this position.^[18]
- "We ask that you extinguish your cigarettes at this time, and bring your tray tables and seatbacks to an upright position." This statement describes the requirements of the current location, such as an aeroplane, while also issuing the command to stop smoking and to sit up straight.
- "Would it be too much trouble for me to ask you to hand me that wrench?" functions to simultaneously ask two questions. The first is to ask the listener if they are capable of passing the wrench, while the second is an actual request.
- "Well, would you listen to that?" acts as a question, requesting that a listener heed what is being said by

the speaker, but also as an exclamation of disbelief or shock.^[19]

In language development

In 1975 John Dore proposed that children's utterances were realizations of one of nine primitive speech acts:^[20]

1. labelling
2. repeating
3. answering
4. requesting (action)
5. requesting (answer)
6. calling
7. greeting
8. protesting
9. practicing

Formalization

There is no agreed formalization of Speech Act theory. In 1985, [John Searle](#) and D. Vandervecken attempted to give some grounds of an illocutionary logic.^[21] Other attempts have been proposed by [Per Martin-Löf](#) for a treatment of the concept of assertion inside [intuitionistic type theory](#), and by [Carlo Dalla Pozza](#), with a proposal of a formal [pragmatics](#) connecting propositional content (given with [classical](#) semantics) and illocutionary force (given by [intuitionistic](#) semantics). Up to now the main basic formal applications of speech act theory are to be found in the

field of [human–computer interaction](#) in chatboxes and other tools. Recent work in [artificial intelligence](#) proposes a [Bayesian](#) approach to formalize speech acts ^[22]

In computer science

In 1991, computational speech act models of [human–computer conversation](#) were developed, ^[23] and in 2004 speech act theory has been used to model [conversations](#) for automated classification and retrieval. ^[24]

Conversation for action

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Another highly-influential view of Speech Acts has been in the *conversation for action* developed by [Terry Winograd](#) and [Fernando Flores](#) in their 1986 text "Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design". ^[25] Arguably the most important part of their analysis lies in a state-transition diagram in Chapter 5, that Winograd and Flores claim underlies the significant illocutionary (speech act) claims of two parties attempting to coordinate action with one another, no matter whether the agents involved might be human–human, human–computer, or computer–computer.

A key part of this analysis is the contention that one dimension of the social domain-tracking the illocutionary status of the transaction (whether individual participants claim that their interests have been met, or not) is very readily conferred to a computer process, regardless of whether the computer has the means to adequately represent the real world issues underlying that claim. Thus a computer instantiating the conversation for action has the useful ability to model the status of the current social reality independent of any external reality on which social claims may be based.

This transactional view of speech acts has significant applications in many areas in which (human) individuals have had different roles, for instance, a patient and a physician might meet in an encounter in which the patient makes a request for treatment, the physician responds with a counter-offer involving a treatment they feel is appropriate, and the patient might respond, etc. Such a conversation for action can describe a situation in which an external observer (such as a computer or health information system) may be able to track the *illocutionary* (or speech act) *status* of negotiations between the patient and physician participants even in the absence of any adequate model of the illness or proposed treatments. The key insight provided by Winograd and Flores is that the state-transition diagram representing the *social* (Illocutionary) negotiation of the two parties involved is generally much, much simpler than any model

representing the world in which those parties are making claims; in short, the system tracking the status of the conversation for action need not be concerned with modeling all of the realities of the external world. A conversation for action is critically dependent upon certain stereotypical *claims* about the status of the world made by the two parties. Thus a conversation for action can be readily tracked and facilitated by a device with little or no ability to model circumstances in the real world other than the ability to register claims by specific agents about a domain.

Rules

In the past, philosophy has discussed rules for when expressions are used. The two rules are *constitutive* and *regulative rules*.^[26]

The concept of [constitutive rules](#) finds its origin in [Wittgenstein](#) and [John Rawls](#),^[27] and has been elaborated by [G.C.J. Midgley](#),^[28] [Max Black](#),^[29] [G.H. von Wright](#),^[30] [David Shwayder](#),^[31] and [John Searle](#).^[32]

Whereas *regulative rules* are prescriptions that regulate a pre-existing activity (whose existence is logically independent of the rules), *constitutive rules* constitute an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules.

For example: traffic rules are *regulative rules* that

prescribe certain behaviour in order to regulate the traffic. Without these rules however, the traffic would not cease to be. In contrast: the rules of chess are *constitutive rules* that constitute the game. Without these rules chess would not exist, since the game is logically dependent on the rules.^[33]

In multiagent universes

[Multi-agent systems](#) sometimes use speech act labels to express the intent of an agent when it sends a message to another agent. For example, the intent "inform" in the message "inform(content)" may be interpreted as a request that the receiving agent adds the item "content" to its knowledge-base; this is in contrast to the message "query(content)", which may be interpreted (depending on the semantics employed) as a request to see if the item content is currently in the receiving agents knowledge base. There are at least two standardisations of speech act labelled messaging [KQML](#) and [FIPA](#).

KQML and FIPA are based on the Searlian, that is, psychological semantics of speech acts. [Munindar P. Singh](#) has long advocated moving away from the psychological to a social semantics of speech acts—one that would be in tune with Austin's conception.^[34] Andrew Jones^[35] has also been a critic of the psychological conception. A recent collection of manifestos by researchers in agent communication reflects a growing recognition in the multiagent systems community of the

benefits of a social semantics.^[36]

Other uses in technology

- An office can be seen as a system of speech acts. The abbreviation SAMPO stands for **S**peech-**A**ct-based office **M**odeling **a**pproach, which "studies office activities as a series of speech acts creating, maintaining, modifying, reporting, and terminating commitments".^[37]
- Speech act profiling has been used to detect deception in synchronous [computer-mediated communication](#).^[38]

In political science

In political science, the [Copenhagen School](#) adopts speech act as a form of felicitous speech act (or simply 'facilitating conditions'), whereby the speaker, often politicians or players, act in accordance to the truth but in preparation for the audience to take action in the directions of the player that are driven or incited by the act. This forms an observable framework under a specified subject matter from the player, and the audience who are 'under-theorised [would] remain outside of the framework itself, and would benefit from being both brought in and drawn out.'^[39] It is because the audience would not be informed of the intentions of the player, except to focus on the display of the speech act itself. Therefore, in the perspective of the player, the truth of the

subject matter is irrelevant except the result produced via the audience.^[40]

The study of speech acts is prevalent in legal theory since laws themselves can be interpreted as speech acts. Laws issue out a command to their constituents, which can be realized as an action. When forming a legal contract, speech acts can be made when people are making or accepting an offer.^[41] Considering the theory of freedom of speech, some speech acts may not be legally protected. For example, a death threat is a type of speech act and is considered to exist outside of the protection of freedom of speech as it is treated as a criminal act.

In economic sociology

In a sociological perspective, Nicolas Brisset adopts the concept of speech act in order to understand how economic models participate in the making and the spreading of representations inside and outside of the scientific field. Brisset argues that models perform actions in different fields (scientific, academic, practical, and political). This multiplicity of fields induces a variety of felicity conditions and types of performed actions. This perspective is a criticism of the essentialism of philosophical modelling studies.^[42] This approach is largely inspired by the work of [Pierre Bourdieu](#)^[43] and [Quentin Skinner](#).

In finance, it is possible to understand mathematical

models as speech acts: in 2016 the notion of "financial Logos" was defined as the speech act of [mathematical modelling](#) of [financial risks](#). The action of the financial Logos on financial practices is the framing of financial decision-making by risk modelling.^[44]

See also

- [Analogy](#)
- [Cooperative principle](#)
- [Dialog act](#)
- [Direction of fit](#)
- [Discourse-completion task](#)
- [Entailment \(pragmatics\)](#)
- [Implicature](#)
- [Metaphor](#)
- [Phatic expression](#)
- [Presupposition](#)
- [Politeness theory](#)
- [Relevance theory#Speech acts](#)

Notes

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exist, and be complete, without being expressed, without being known to any other person. But, in the social operations, the expression is essential. They cannot exist without being expressed by words or signs, and known to the other party." Cf. [Mulligan, K. *Promisings and other social acts – their constituents and structure*](#). in Mulligan, K., editor *Speech Act and Sachverhalt: Reinach and the Foundations of Realist Phenomenology*. Nijhoff, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster 1987. Quote from Reid 1969, 437–438).

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- [Foundation for Intelligent Physical Agents](#)
- [Strategies for Learning Speech Acts in Japanese](#) by Noriko Ishihara

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Works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cratylus (n.d.) • Port-Royal Grammar (1660) • De Arte Combinatoria (1666) • An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language (1668) • Alciphron (1732) • "On Denoting" (1905) • Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921) • Language, Truth, and Logic (1936) • Two Dogmas of Empiricism (1951) • Philosophical Investigations (1953) • Of Grammatology (1967) • Naming and Necessity (1980) • Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language (1982) • Limited Inc (1988)
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