



PRAGMATICS AND SPEECH ACT THEORY: ANALYZING LANGUAGE IN USE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the core principles of pragmatics with a specific focus on Speech Act Theory, exploring how language functions as a form of action in social contexts. It traces the theoretical development from Austin's initial categorization of speech acts to Searle's systematic taxonomy and subsequent refinements, addressing both direct and indirect speech acts. The discussion incorporates cross-cultural and contextual analyses of how speech acts operate in various communicative settings, including their role in digital communication. Findings demonstrate that successful communication depends heavily on recognizing the action-oriented nature of language beyond its literal meaning, with implications for linguistic research, language teaching, and intercultural communication.

Introduction

Language represents more than a system for encoding literal meaning; it serves as a dynamic tool for performing actions within social contexts. Pragmatics, as the study of language in use, investigates how contextual factors influence meaning interpretation, while Speech Act Theory specifically addresses how utterances function as actions. First systematized by J.L. Austin in his 1962 work "How to Do Things with Words," and later refined by John Searle, Speech Act Theory has become a cornerstone of pragmatic research. This article explores the theoretical foundations of Speech Act Theory, its methodological applications, and its significance in understanding how speakers achieve communicative goals through both direct and indirect language use. The analysis demonstrates that linguistic meaning extends far beyond semantic content to encompass social action, intention recognition, and contextual interpretation.

Literature Methodology

This research employs a qualitative analytical approach, synthesizing foundational texts in pragmatics and Speech Act Theory with contemporary applications. The methodological framework includes:

Theoretical Analysis: Critical examination of Austin's performative hypothesis and Searle's taxonomy of speech acts

Comparative Taxonomy: Systematic classification of speech acts across communicative contexts

Contextual Analysis: Investigation of how situational, cultural, and social factors influence speech act interpretation

Cross-cultural Comparison: Examination of speech act realization across different languages and cultures

Discourse Analysis: Application of speech act theory to authentic written and spoken communication

These methodological approaches enable a comprehensive understanding of how speech acts function across various dimensions of human interaction, from face-to-face conversation to digital communication.

Discussion and Results

Austin's revolutionary insight was that some utterances ("performatives") accomplish actions rather than merely describing states of affairs. Examples include promising, apologizing, or declaring, where the utterance itself constitutes the action. Austin distinguished three simultaneous acts within a single utterance: **Illocutionary Act:** The intended function or force (e.g., requesting, warning) **Perlocutionary Act:** The effect on the listener (e.g., persuading, frightening)

Searle (1969) further systematized this framework by classifying illocutionary acts into five categories:

Representatives: Committing the speaker to something's truth (asserting, concluding)

Directives: Attempting to get the hearer to do something (requesting, questioning)

Commissives: Committing the speaker to future action (promising, pledging)

Expressives: Expressing psychological states (thanking, apologizing, congratulating)

Declarations: Bringing about changes in institutional reality (declaring, appointing)

A crucial development in Speech Act Theory concerns the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. While direct speech acts perform their function explicitly ("Pass the salt"), indirect speech acts convey meaning through implication ("Could you pass the salt?"). The interpretation of indirect speech acts depends heavily on shared contextual knowledge and Grice's cooperative principle, which assumes that communicators generally adhere to conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner.

The successful interpretation of indirect requests relies on hearers recognizing the violation of these maxims. For instance, the question "Do you know what time it is?" typically functions not as an inquiry about knowledge but as a request for information about the current time.

Speech acts require specific contextual conditions—termed "felicity conditions" by Austin—to be successful. These include:

Preparatory Conditions: Appropriate circumstances for the act (e.g., having the authority to perform a declaration)

Sincerity Conditions: Required psychological state (e.g., intention to keep a promise)

Essential Conditions: Commitment to the act's conventional force

Cross-cultural research reveals significant variation in how these conditions apply across languages. For example, the realization of apologies or requests differs markedly between cultures with different politeness norms, demonstrating that speech act interpretation is culturally embedded rather than universal.

Contemporary research has expanded Speech Act Theory to digital contexts, where the absence of paralinguistic cues creates new interpretive challenges. In digital environments, speech acts often require explicit markers (e.g., "I hereby declare..." or emoji) to clarify illocutionary force. Studies of computer-mediated communication reveal both adaptation of conventional speech act patterns and emergence of new digital genres with distinct pragmatic conventions.

Conclusion

Speech Act Theory provides a powerful framework for understanding language as social action rather than mere representation. By examining how utterances accomplish goals through conventionalized patterns within specific contexts, pragmatics reveals the intricate relationship between linguistic form, communicative function, and social interpretation. The theory's continued relevance is evident in its applications to cross-cultural communication, language pedagogy, and digital interaction analysis. Future research should further explore the realization of speech acts in emerging communication technologies and across diverse cultural contexts, particularly examining how pragmatic competence develops in second language acquisition and how speech acts evolve in response to changing social norms.

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