

## **Kent Bach, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry**

### **SPEECH ACTS**

Making a statement may be the paradigmatic use of language, but there are all sorts of other things we can do with words. We can make requests, ask questions, give orders, make promises, give thanks, offer apologies, and so on. Moreover, 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.

The theory of speech acts is partly taxonomic and partly explanatory. It must systematically classify types of speech acts and the ways in which they can succeed or fail. It must reckon with the fact that the relationship between the words being used and the force of their utterance is often oblique. For example, the sentence 'This is a pig sty' might be used nonliterally to state that a certain room is messy and filthy and, further, to demand indirectly that it be straightened out and cleaned up. Even when this sentence is used literally and directly, say to describe a certain area of a barnyard, the content of its utterance is not fully determined by its linguistic meaning--in particular, the meaning of the word 'this' does not determine which area is being referred to. A major task for the theory of speech acts is to account for how speakers can succeed in what they do despite the various ways in which linguistic meaning underdetermines use.

In general, speech acts are acts of communication. To communicate is to express a certain attitude, and the type of speech act being performed corresponds to the type of attitude being expressed. For example, a statement expresses a belief, a request expresses a desire, and an apology expresses a regret. As an act of communication, a speech act succeeds if the audience identifies, in accordance with the speaker's intention, the attitude being expressed.

Some speech acts, however, are not primarily acts of communication and have the function not of communicating but of affecting institutional states of affairs. They can do so in either of two ways. Some officially judge something to be the case, and others actually make something the case. Those of the first kind include judges' rulings, referees' calls and assessors' appraisals, and the latter include sentencing, bequeathing and appointing. Acts of both kinds can be performed only in certain ways under certain circumstances by those in certain institutional or social positions.

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##### **1. Levels of speech acts**

How language represents the world has long been, and still is, a major concern of philosophers of language. Many thinkers, such as Leibniz, Frege, Russell, the early Wittgenstein, and Carnap (q.v.), have thought that understanding the structure of language could illuminate the nature of reality. However noble their concerns, such philosophers have implicitly assumed, as J. L. Austin complains at the beginning of How to Do Things with Words, that 'the business of a [sentence] can only be to "describe" some state of affairs, or to "state some fact", which it must do either truly or falsely'. Austin reminds us that we perform all sorts of 'speech acts' besides making statements, and that there are other ways for them to go wrong or be 'infelicitous' besides not being true. The later Wittgenstein also came to think of language not primarily as a system of representation but as a vehicle for all sorts of social activity. 'Don't ask for the meaning', he admonished, 'ask for the use'. But it was Austin who presented the first systematic account of the use of language. And whereas Wittgenstein could be charged with having conflating meaning and use, Austin was careful to separate the two. He distinguished the meaning (and reference) of the words used from the speech acts performed by the speaker using them.

Austin's attention was first attracted to what he called 'explicit performative utterances', in which one uses sentences like 'I nominate ...', 'You're fired', 'The meeting is adjourned', and 'You are hereby sentenced ...' to perform acts of the very sort named by the verb, such as nominating, firing, adjourning, or sentencing (see PERFORMATIVES). Austin held that performatives are neither true nor false, unlike what he called 'constatives'. However, he came to realize that constatives work just like performatives. Just as a suggestion or an apology can be made by uttering 'I suggest ...' or 'I apologize ...', so an assertion or a

prediction can be made by uttering 'I assert ...' or 'I predict ...'. Accordingly, the distinction between constative and performative utterances is, in Austin's general theory of speech acts, superseded by that between saying something and what one does in saying it. This broader distinction applies to both statements and other sorts of speech acts, and takes into account the fact that one does not have to say 'I suggest ...' to make a suggestion, 'I apologize ...' to make an apology, or 'I assert' to make an assertion.

The theory of speech acts aims to do justice to the fact that even though words (phrases, sentences) encode information, people do more things with words than convey information, and that when people do convey information, they often convey more than their words encode. Although the focus of speech act theory has been on utterances, especially those made in conversational and other face-to-face situations, the phrase 'speech act' should be taken as a generic term for any sort of language use, oral or otherwise. Speech acts, whatever the medium of their performance, fall under the broad category of intentional action, with which they share certain general features (see ACTION). An especially pertinent feature is that when one acts intentionally, generally one has a set of nested intentions. For instance, having arrived home without one's keys, one might push a button with the intention not just of pushing the button but of ringing a bell, arousing one's spouse and, ultimately, getting into one's house. The single bodily movement involved in pushing the button comprises a multiplicity of actions, each corresponding to a different one of the nested intentions. Similarly, speech acts are not just acts of producing certain sounds.

Austin identifies three distinct levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself. He distinguishes the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, and what one does by saying it, and dubs these the 'locutionary', the 'illocutionary' and the 'perlocutionary' act, respectively. Suppose, for example, that a bartender utters the words, 'The bar will be closed in five minutes,' reported by means of direct quotation. He is thereby performing the locutionary act of saying that the bar (i.e., the one he is tending) will be closed in five minutes (from the time of utterance), and what is said is reported by indirect quotation (notice that what the bartender is saying, the content of his locutionary act, is not fully determined by the words he is using, for they do not specify the bar in question or the time of the utterance). In saying this, the bartender is performing the illocutionary act of informing the patrons of the bar's imminent closing and perhaps also the act of urging them to order a last drink. Whereas the upshot of these illocutionary acts is understanding on the part of the audience, perlocutionary acts are performed with the intention of producing a further effect. The bartender intends to be performing the perlocutionary acts of causing the patrons to believe that the bar is about to close and of getting them to want and to order one last drink. He is performing all these speech acts, at all three levels, just by uttering certain words.

There seems to be a straightforward relationship in this example between the words uttered ('The bar will be closed in five minutes'), what is thereby said, and the act of informing the patrons that the bar will close in five minutes. Less direct is the connection between the utterance and the act of urging the patrons to order one last drink. Clearly there is no linguistic connection here, for the words make no mention of drinks or of ordering. This indirect connection is inferential. The patrons must infer that the bartender intends to be urging them to leave and, indeed, it seems that the reason his utterance counts as an act of that sort is that he is speaking with this intention. There is a similarly indirect connection when an utterance of 'It's getting cold in here' is made not merely as a statement about the temperature but as a request to close the window or as a proposal to go some place warmer. Whether it is intended (and is taken) as a request or as a proposal depends on contextual information that the speaker relies on the audience to rely on. This is true even when the connection between word and deed is more direct than in the above example, for the form of the sentence uttered may fail to determine just which sort of illocutionary act is being performed. Consider, by analogy, the fact that in shaking hands we can, depending on the circumstances, do any one of several different things: introduce ourselves, greet each other, seal a deal, or bid farewell. Similarly, a given sentence can be used in a variety of ways, so that, for example, 'I will call a lawyer' could be used as a prediction, a promise, or a warning. How one intends it determines the sort of act it is.

## 2. Communicative and conventional speech acts

The examples considered thus far suggest that performing a speech act, in particular an illocutionary act, is a matter of having a certain communicative intention in uttering certain words. Such an act succeeds, the intention with which it is performed is fulfilled, if the audience recognizes that intention. This is not by magic, of course. One must choose one's words in such a way that their utterance makes one's intention recognizable under the circumstances. However, as illustrated above, the utterance need not encode one's intention. So, in general, understanding an utterance is not merely a matter of decoding it.

A specifically communicative intention is a reflexive intention, of the sort characterized by H. P. Grice (see COMMUNICATION/INTENTION). This is an intention part of whose content is that it be recognized, indeed be recognized partly on the basis that this is intended. Accordingly, it is an intention whose fulfillment consists in its recognition. This feature distinguishes acts of communication from most sorts of acts, whose success does not depend on anyone's recognizing the intention with which they are performed. One cannot succeed in running a marathon just by virtue of someone's recognizing one's intention to do so, but one can succeed in stating something, requesting something, etc., by virtue of one's addressee recognizing that one is stating it, requesting it, etc. This is success at the illocutionary level. It is a further matter, a condition on the success of perlocutionary act, whether the addressee believes what one states or does what one requests.

Now Austin did not take into account the central role of speakers' intentions and hearers' inferences. He supposed that the successful performance of an illocutionary act is a matter of convention, not intention. Indeed, he held that the use of a sentence with a certain illocutionary force is conventional in the peculiar sense that this force can be 'made explicit by the performative formula'. P. F. Strawson argues that in making this claim Austin was overly impressed by the special case of utterances that affect institutional states of affairs, and should have not taken them as a model of illocutionary acts in general. Austin was especially struck by the character of explicit performative utterances, in which one uses a verb that names the very type of act one is performing. For them he developed an account of what it takes for such acts to be performed successfully and felicitously, classifying the various things that can go wrong as 'flaws', 'hitches', and other sorts of 'infelicities'. It is only in certain conventionally designated circumstances and by people in certain positions that certain utterances can have the force they do. For example, only in certain circumstances does a jury foreman's pronouncement of 'Guilty' or 'Not guilty' count as a verdict, a legislator's 'Aye' or 'Nay' as a vote, and a baseball umpire's cry of 'Y'er out' as calling a runner out. In these cases it is only by conforming to a convention that an utterance of a certain form counts as the performance of an act of a certain sort. However, as Strawson argues, most illocutionary acts succeed not by conformity to convention but by recognition of intention. They are not conventional except in the irrelevant sense that the words and sentences being used have their linguistic meanings by virtue of convention (see CONVENTIONALITY OF LANGUAGE).

Strawson's argument raises a serious problem for theories inspired by Austin's view. Consider, for example, the theory advanced by John Searle, who proposes to explain illocutionary forces by means of 'constitutive rules' (conventions) for using 'force-indicating' devices, such as performative verbs and sentential moods. The problem is that the same sorts of illocutionary acts that can be performed by means of such devices can be performed without them. For example, one does not have to use a performative, as in 'I demand that you be quiet', or the imperative mood, as in 'Be quiet!', to demand someone to be quiet. Clearly a theory that relies on rules for using such devices is not equipped to explain the illocutionary forces of utterances lacking such devices. No such difficulty arises for a theory according to which most illocutionary acts are performed not with an intention to conform to a convention but with a communicative intention.

### 3. Types of speech acts

Pretheoretically, we think of an act of communication, linguistic or otherwise, as an act of expressing oneself. This rather vague idea can be made more precise if we get more specific about what is being expressed. Take the case of an apology. If you utter, '[I'm] sorry I didn't call back' and intend this as an apology, you are expressing regret for something, in this case for not returning a phone call. An apology just is the act of (verbally) expressing regret for, and thereby acknowledging, something one did that might have harmed or at least bothered the hearer. An apology is communicative because it is intended to be taken as expressing a certain attitude, in this case regret. It succeeds as such if it is so taken. In general, an act of communication succeeds if it is taken as intended. That is, it must be understood or, in Austin's words, 'produce uptake'. With an apology, this a matter of the addressee recognizing the speaker's intention to be expressing regret for some deed or omission. Using a special device such as the performative 'I apologize' may of course facilitate understanding (understanding is correlative with communicating), but in general this is unnecessary. Communicative success is achieved if the speaker chooses his words in such a way that the hearer will, under the circumstances of utterance, recognize his communicative intention. So, for example, if you spill some beer on someone and say 'Oops' in the right way, your utterance will be taken as an apology for what you did.

In saying something one generally intends more than just to communicate--getting oneself understood is intended to produce some effect on the listener. However, our speech act vocabulary can obscure this fact. When one apologizes, for example, one may intend not merely to express regret but also to seek forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness is, strictly speaking, distinct from apologizing, even though one utterance is the performance of an act of both types. As an apology, the utterance succeeds if it is taken as expressing regret for the deed in question; as an act of seeking forgiveness, it succeeds if forgiveness is thereby obtained. Speech acts, being perlocutionary as well as illocutionary, generally have some ulterior purpose, but they are distinguished primarily by their illocutionary type, such as asserting, requesting, promising and apologizing, which in turn are distinguished by the type of attitude expressed. The perlocutionary act is a matter of trying to get the hearer to form some correlative attitude and in some cases to act in a certain way. For example, a statement expresses a belief and normally has the further purpose of getting the addressee form the same belief. A request expresses a desire for the addressee to do a certain thing and normally aims for the addressee to intend to and, indeed, actually do that thing. A promise expresses the speaker's firm intention to do something, together with the belief that by his utterance he is obligated to do it, and normally aims further for the addressee to expect, and to feel entitled to expect, the speaker to do it.

Statements, requests, promises and apologies are examples of the four major categories of communicative illocutionary acts: constatives, directives, commissives and acknowledgments. This is the nomenclature used by Kent Bach and Michael Harnish, who develop a detailed taxonomy in which each type of illocutionary act is individuated by the type of attitude expressed (in some cases there are constraints on the content as well). There is no generally accepted terminology here, and Bach and Harnish borrow the terms 'constative' and 'commissive' from Austin and 'directive' from Searle. They adopt the term 'acknowledgment', over Austin's 'behabitive' and Searle's 'expressive', for apologies, greetings, congratulations etc., which express an attitude regarding the

hearer that is occasioned by some event that is thereby being acknowledged, often in satisfaction of a social expectation. Here are assorted examples of each type:

Constatives: affirming, alleging, announcing, answering, attributing, claiming, classifying, concurring, confirming, conjecturing, denying, disagreeing, disclosing, disputing, identifying, informing, insisting, predicting, ranking, reporting, stating, stipulating

Directives: advising, admonishing, asking, begging, dismissing, excusing, forbidding, instructing, ordering, permitting, requesting, requiring, suggesting, urging, warning

Commissives: agreeing, guaranteeing, inviting, offering, promising, swearing, volunteering

Acknowledgments: apologizing, condoling, congratulating, greeting, thanking, accepting (acknowledging an acknowledgment)

Bach and Harnish spell out the correlation between type of illocutionary act and type of expressed attitude. In many cases, such as answering, disputing, excusing and agreeing, as well as all types of acknowledgment, the act and the attitude it expresses presuppose a specific conversational or other social circumstance.

For types of acts that are distinguished by the type of attitude expressed, there is no need to invoke the notion of convention to explain how it can succeed. The act can succeed if the hearer recognizes the attitude being expressed, such as a belief in the case of a statement and a desire in the case of a request. Any further effect it has on the hearer, such as being believed or being complied with, or just being taken as sincere, is not essential to its being a statement or a request. Thus an utterance can succeed as an act of communication even if the speaker does not possess the attitude he is expressing: communication is one thing, sincerity another. Communicating is as it were just putting an attitude on the table; sincerity is actually possessing the attitude one is expressing. Correlatively, the hearer can understand the utterance without regarding it as sincere, e.g., take it as an apology, as expressing regret for something, without believing that the speaker regrets having done the deed in question. Getting one's audience to believe that one actually possesses the attitude one is expressing is not an illocutionary but a perlocutionary act.

#### 4. Direct, indirect and nonliteral speech acts

As Austin observed, the content of a locutionary act (what is said) is not always determined by what is meant by the sentence being uttered. Ambiguous words or phrases need to be disambiguated (see AMBIGUITY) and the references of indexical and other context-sensitive expressions need to be fixed in order for what is said to be determined fully (see DEMONSTRATIVES AND INDEXICALS). Moreover, what is said does not determine the illocutionary act(s) being performed. We can perform a speech act (1) directly or indirectly, by way of performing another speech act, (2) literally or nonliterally, depending on how we are using our words, and (3) explicitly or implicitly, depending on whether we fully spell out what we mean.

These three contrasts are distinct and should not be confused. The first two concern the relation between the utterance and the speech act(s) thereby performed. In indirection a single utterance is the performance of one illocutionary act by way of performing another. For example, we can make a request or give permission by way of making a statement, say by uttering 'I am getting thirsty' or 'It doesn't matter to me', and we can make a statement or give an order by way of asking a question, such as 'Will the sun rise tomorrow?' or 'Can you clean up your room?' When an illocutionary act is performed indirectly, it is performed by way of performing some other one directly. In the case of nonliteral utterances, we do not mean what our words mean but something else instead. With nonliterality the illocutionary act we are performing is not the one that would be predicted just from the meanings of the words being used, as with likely utterances of 'My mind got derailed' or 'You can stick that in your ear'. Occasionally utterances are both nonliteral and indirect. For example, one might utter 'I love the sound of your voice' to tell someone nonliterally (ironically) that she can't stand the sound of his voice and thereby indirectly to ask him to stop singing.

Nonliterality and indirection are the two main ways in which the semantic content of a sentence can fail to determine the full force and content of the illocutionary act being performed in using the sentence. They rely on the same sorts of processes that Grice discovered in connection with what he called 'conversational implicature' (see IMPLICATURE), which, as is clear from Grice's examples, is nothing more than the special case of nonliteral or indirect constatives made with the use of indicative sentences. A few of Grice's examples illustrate nonliterality, e.g., 'He was a little intoxicated', used to explain why a man smashed some furniture, but most of them are indirect statements, e.g., 'There is a garage around the corner' used to tell someone where to get petrol, and 'Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance has been regular', giving the high points in a letter of recommendation. These are all examples in which what is meant is not determined by what is said. However, Grice overlooks a different kind of case, marked by contrast (3) listed above.

There are many sentences whose standard uses are not strictly determined by their meanings but are not implicatures or figurative uses either. For example, if one's spouse says 'I will be home later'. she is likely to mean that she will be home later that night, not merely some time in the future. In such cases what one means is an expansion of what one says, in that adding more words

('tonight', in the example) would have made what was meant fully explicit. In other cases, such as 'Jack is ready' and 'Jill is late', the sentence does not express a complete proposition. There must be something which Jack is being claimed to be ready for and something which Jill is being claimed to be late to. In these cases what one means is a completion of what one says. In both sorts of case, no particular word or phrase is being used nonliterally and there is no indirection. They both exemplify what may be called 'implicature', since part of what is meant is communicated not explicitly but implicitly, by way of expansion or completion.

## 5. Philosophical importance of speech act theory

The theory of speech acts has applications to philosophy in general, but these can only be illustrated here. In ethics, for example, it has been supposed that sentences containing words like 'good' and 'right' are used not to describe but to commend, hence that such sentences are not used to make statements and that questions of value and morals are not matters of fact. This line of argument is fallacious. Sentences used for ethical evaluation, such as 'Loyalty is good' and 'Abortion is wrong,' are no different in form from other indicative sentences. Whatever the status of their contents, they are standardly used to make statements. This leaves open the possibility that there is something fundamentally problematic about their contents. Perhaps such statements are factually defective and, despite syntactic appearances, are neither true nor false. However, this is a metaphysical issue about the status of the properties to which ethical predicates purport to refer. It is not the business of the philosophy of language to determine whether or not there are such properties as goodness or rightness and whether or not the goodness of loyalty and the rightness of abortion are matters of fact. The above argument is but one illustration of what Searle calls the 'speech act fallacy'. He also identifies examples of the 'assertion fallacy', whereby conditions of making an assertion are confused with what is asserted. For example, one might fallaciously argue, on the grounds that because one would not assert that one believes something if one was prepared to assert that one knows it, that knowing does not entail believing. Grice identifies the same fallacy in a parallel argument, according to which seeming to have a certain feature entails not actually having that feature (see ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY).

For philosophy of language in particular, the theory of speech acts underscores the importance of the distinction between language use and linguistic meaning (see PRAGMATICS and SEMANTICS). This distinction sharpens the formulation of questions about the nature of linguistic knowledge (see LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE), by separating questions about capacities exercised in linguistic interaction from those specific to knowledge of language itself. A parallel distinction, between speaker reference and linguistic reference (see REFERENCE), provokes the question of to what extent linguistic expressions refer independently of speakers' use of them to refer. It is common, for example, for philosophers to describe expressions like 'the car', 'Robert Jones' and 'they' as having different references in different contexts, but it is arguable that this is merely a misleading way of saying that speakers use such expressions to refer to different things in different contexts.

## References and further reading

\* Austin, J. L. (1962) How to Do Things with Words, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (Develops the distinction between performative and constative utterances into the first systematic account of speech acts.)

Bach, K. (1994) 'Conversational implicature', Mind & Language 9: 124-62. (Identifies the middle ground between explicit utterances and Gricean implicatures.)

\* Bach, K. and R. M. Harnish (1979), Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. (Combines elements of Austin's taxonomy and Grice's theory of conversation into a systematic account of the roles of the speaker's communicative intention and the hearer's inference in literal, nonliteral and indirect uses of sentences to perform speech acts.)

\* Grice, H. P. (1989) Studies in the Way of Words, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (The essays on meaning and conversational implicature provide a framework for distinguishing speaker meaning from linguistic meaning and for explaining their relationship.)

\* Searle, J. (1969) Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language, Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press. (Presents a theory of speech acts relying on the notion of constitutive rules.)

\* Strawson, P. F. (1964) 'Intention and convention in speech acts', Philosophical Review 73: 439-60. (Applies Grice's account of meaning to support the claim that most speech acts are communicative rather than conventional, as Austin had suggested.)

Tsohatzidis, S. L., ed. (1994) Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives, London: Routledge. (Collection of original essays on outstanding problems in the field, with useful bibliography.)