

# INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

## Speech acts

Radek Šimík



FACULTY OF ARTS  
Charles University

# SPEECH ACTS

Every use of a language is also an act, a SPEECH ACT (Austin 1962; Searle 1969)

The kind of act whose primary goal is information exchange is called a **STATEMENT**. Statements are typically expressed by DECLARATIVE clauses.

Other acts that frequently have their own form (so called SENTENCE TYPE/MOOD):

- A **QUESTION** is a request for information, typically expressed by an INTERROGATIVE clause (in English: clause-initial auxiliary verb):

(1) Has Ben opened the window?

- A **COMMAND**, or a REQUEST in a narrower sense (request for action) may be expressed by an IMPERATIVE clause (In English: verb-initial clauses without an overt subject):

(2) Open the window (please)!

## DIRECT SPEECH ACTS

The kinds of speech acts above are often called DIRECT SPEECH ACTS, i.e., acts which are – in a sense – directly expressed by form:

FORM	SEMANTICS	SPEECH ACT
declarative	proposition (doxastic state)	statement
interrogative	set of propositions (ignorance state)	question
imperative	proposition (bouletic state)	command

## DIRECT SPEECH ACTS

Speech acts are typically studied together with the effect they have on the real world. We then speak of ILLOCUTION ( $\approx$  speech act, speaker's intention) vs. PERLOCUTION ( $\approx$  the real world effect of the speech act). All this is often put under the umbrella of pragmatics.

LOCUTION		PRAGMATICS	
FORM	SEMANTICS	ILLOCUTION SPEECH ACT	PERLOCUTION EFFECT
declarative	proposition (doxastic state)	statement	hearer persuasion
interrogative	set of propositions (ignorance state)	question	hearer statement
imperative	proposition (bouletic state)	command	hearer action

# INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS exhibit a mismatch between form and the act.

- Declarative → request

(3) I need a red crayon (please).

- a. Illocution: Give me a red crayon.
- b. Perlocution: Hearer's action.

- Declarative → question

(4) So in the end you stayed at home.

- a. Illocution: Did you stay at home?
- b. Perlocution: Hearer's statement (yes/no).

- Interrogative → request

(5) Can you pass me the salt (please)?

- a. Illocution: Pass me the salt.
- b. Perlocution: Hearer's action.

# SPEECH ACT TAXONOMY

Speech acts are a kind of BEHAVIOR and are therefore not so strictly constrained as linguistic form or semantic meaning. Despite the existence of certain conventional(ized) speech acts (questions, requests, ...), the class of speech acts is in principle open.

- representatives (providing information)
- directives (request, order, question, advise)
- commissives (promise, threaten, pledge, vow)
- expressives (apology, blame, thanks, praise, congratulations, welcome)
- declarations (war declaration, excommunication)
- ...

Searle 1969

## EMPHASIS ON LO-/ILLO-/PERLOCUTION

While nearly all communicative uses of language involve all above-mentioned aspects (locution, illocution, perlocution), different speech situations can lay emphasis on different communicative aspects:

- Locution primary: Searle's representatives / Austin's constatives (What I'm doing here now.)
- Illocution primary: Searle's directives (questions, commands)
- Perlocution primary: Searle's "declarations", more often called **PERFORMATIVES**:
  - (6) a. I hereby sentence you to 10 years in prison.
  - b. I now pronounce you man and wife.
  - c. I hereby testify that I've seen this man.
  - d. I ask you if you spilt the milk.

Performatives are characterized by a particular linguistic form: verbs in the simple present which stand for the very speech act.

## **READING AND WATCHING TIPS**

Green, Mitchell. 2020. Speech acts. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/speech-acts/>

YouTube video:

- The Ling Space: Performative language  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCR3\\_7-lun4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCR3_7-lun4)
- John Searle on performatives:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrG6p6eYVRw>



# REFERENCES

---

Austin, John L. 1962. *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Green, Mitchell. 2020. Speech acts. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/speech-acts/>.

Halliday, M. A. K. 1973. *Explorations in the functions of language*. London: Edward Arnold.

Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.