

Speech Acts in Pragmatic Linguistics: A Conceptual Review and Its Applications

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine in depth how speech act theory is applied in various communication contexts and to explore linguists' perspectives regarding this theory. A qualitative method was employed through a literature review approach, which included several stages: data collection, analysis, and validation. The data were gathered from relevant literature, both printed and digital, about the concepts of speech acts and pragmatics. This study investigates the role of speech acts in shaping the understanding of social interaction dynamics and the cultural values embedded within them. The findings indicate that speech acts function as instruments for performing communicative actions. In this context, a speaker's utterance carries a specific intention or meaning, recognizing that people do not speak without purpose. Various descriptive terms are used to illustrate the communicative intent behind utterances. Understanding speech acts is relevant to linguistic analysis and has practical applications in enhancing communication effectiveness across diverse social and cultural settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is a part of a series of speech acts systematically used to achieve specific goals. Human communication involves various actions through language, such as requesting, promising, or asserting something (Safitri et al., 2021). The study of language is not limited to internal linguistic structures; it can also be approached from the perspective of its use within social contexts (Suryawin et al., 2022). Learning a language involves more than knowledge about its structure; it also encompasses understanding how the language is used appropriately according to the context in which it occurs in everyday life.

The field of language study that examines language in its context is known as pragmatics (Nuramila, 2020). Pragmatics involves actions manifested through utterances or speech acts. Pragmatics expert Geoffrey Leech defines it as the study of meaning in speech situations (Leech, 1993). According to him, pragmatics explores how language is used in communication and investigates meaning as an abstract concept. Pragmatics is the study of how language is employed for communication. Pragmatics differs from general linguistics because it does not focus on language's internal structure but examines linguistic units' external meanings (Saifudin et al.,

2008). Thus, pragmatics does not merely analyze language structure, but seeks to understand the relationship between language and the actions performed by its speakers.

One of the fundamental aspects of pragmatics is speech acts, which describe the relationship between utterances and the actions intended by the speaker. This concept was first introduced by J.L. Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1962). Austin was a leading philosopher within the Oxford School of Ordinary Language Philosophy. The theory was later expanded by his student, John Searle (Searle, 1971). Since then, their ideas have significantly influenced the study of language use, particularly within the field of pragmatics (Rahardi, 2005). The study of speech acts helps reveal how utterances produce specific effects in social interactions (Trotzke & Reimer, 2023).

Given the crucial role of speech acts in communication, an in-depth investigation is necessary to understand how speech act theory is applied in various communicative contexts and explore linguists' perspectives on the theory. By comprehending the types and classifications of speech acts, it is expected that such understanding will contribute to enhancing pragmatic competence and the ability to communicate effectively.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Numerous studies have examined speech acts, one of which is (Suryawin et al., 2022) entitled *Speech Acts and Implicature in Language Use*. This study emphasizes that the speech act theory developed by Austin and Searle posits that language is not merely a means of conveying information, but also a tool for performing actions. Speech acts are categorized into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary, each serving different functions. The illocutionary act is central because it reflects the speaker's intent, such as giving commands or making promises. The success of a speech act depends on felicity conditions, which include context, sincerity, and the speaker's authority.

Another study by Safitri et al. (Safitri et al., 2021), titled *Speech Act Theory in Pragmatic Studies*, asserts that the speech act theory proposed by Austin and Searle explains that language is not merely a tool for conveying information, but also a means of performing actions. Speech acts are divided into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, with the illocutionary act being central as it reflects the speaker's intention. Searle further categorizes illocutionary acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. The success of a speech act is determined by felicity conditions, such as the speaker's sincerity and authority.

A study by House and Kádár (House & Kádár, 2023), titled *Speech Acts and Interaction in Second Language Pragmatics: A Position Paper*, highlights the importance of examining speech acts from an interactional perspective in second language (L2) learning. The authors' critique traditional approaches that separate speech acts from the context of interaction. They propose a typology of speech acts that are limited, radical, and replicable. This approach offers a more accurate and contextualized understanding of L2 pragmatic issues.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the literature review method (Moleong, 2002), which involves collecting and analyzing information from existing literature related to the concepts, types, and applications of speech acts within the framework of pragmatic linguistic theory. This method aims to comprehensively understand relevant concepts and theories through critically examining various secondary sources, including books, scholarly articles, academic journals, and prior research documents pertinent to the research theme.

The research procedure consists of several stages: data collection, analysis, and validation. Data were obtained from printed and digital literature relevant to speech acts in pragmatics. The data were then analyzed using content analysis methods, whereby the researcher critically interprets textual data (Krippendorff, 2004). A comparative analysis was also conducted to evaluate various arguments related to the topic. The study involved reading, reviewing, and

synthesizing information from diverse references to identify patterns, concepts, and interrelationships among theories within the field of pragmatic linguistics. Data validity was ensured by selecting credible sources, such as indexed journals, academic books, and publications authored by experts in the field of linguistics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before speech acts emerged, linguists treated language primarily as representing situations or events. Within this framework, every utterance in a language was considered to be bound by what is known as truth conditions. Truth conditions were used as the sole measure for determining the truth value of a sentence. The truth or falsity of a sentence's meaning depended on whether the statement or content of the sentence corresponded to reality. For example, "*Your smile is very charming*" would be evaluated based on whether the smile captivates others. In other words, an assessment must determine the statement's truth value.

On the other hand, Austin rejected the notion that statements must be evaluated solely based on empirical facts and their associated truth values. Not all utterances can be verified through truth conditions (Safitri et al., 2021). For instance, "*Please leave!*" cannot be assessed for truth value, as it does not depict a factual situation or state of affairs. This utterance serves instead as a form of exhortation or directive. Austin argued that when people use language, they are not merely producing a sequence of isolated sentences, but are also performing actions. In other words, by using language, individuals are doing something or prompting others to do something. This is referred to as performative language.

Austin began his discussion of speech act theory by dividing language into two categories: constatives and performatives. The first category, constative utterances, refers to "saying something that can be evaluated as either true or false" (Austin, 1962). Constatives encompass all descriptive expressions, factual statements, definitions, and so forth, including discourse that informs, describes, or asserts (Searle, 1971). For example, the utterance "*The thief is this person*," stated by a witness in court, implies that its content can be judged as either true or false. The second category, performatives (also known as performative speech acts), refers to utterances in which speaking constitutes an action, rather than merely reporting or describing something (Safitri et al., 2021). In other words, when a person produces a performative utterance, they act the very act of speaking. For instance, "*I promise not to do it again*," or "*I hereby terminate your employment*." In such examples, the utterances are not merely statements; they represent direct actions that are valid and recognized within a particular social context.

The following table presents a comparison between constative and performative speech acts according to Austin:

Table 1. A comparison between constative and performative speech acts according to Austin

Aspect	Constative Speech Act	Performative Speech Act
Purpose	To state facts or convey information	To act on speech
Truth Value	Can be judged as true or false	Not judged as true or false, but as successful or unsuccessful
Example (Indonesian)	(I am a smart student in class.)	(I will go to school.)
Function	Describes a situation	Carries out an action
Condition for Success	Does not depend on context	Must fulfill certain linguistic and social conditions
Logical Test	Tested logically or empirically	Tested socially and contextually

A performative utterance constitutes or brings about an action. For example, in the utterance "*Beware of wild dogs!*", what is said sincerely leads the listener to adopt a cautious attitude—not because the propositional content is true or false (i.e., whether there are wild dogs or not), but because the utterance functions as a warning or an act of cautioning. About

performative utterances, J.L. Austin introduced a set of conditions, known as felicity conditions, which must be fulfilled for a performative act to be considered successful and effective.

Austin's classification of speech acts was later refined and empirically developed by John Searle, who proposed that in actual language use, there are three distinct types of speech acts:

1. Locutionary Act

A locutionary act refers to the act of saying something. Austin (1962) described it as uttering words, conveying information, speaking, asking questions, etc. Truth conditions govern verbal expressions under this category and require reference and sense to be properly understood. Reference, in this context, depends on the speaker's knowledge at the time of speaking. Sadock defines a locutionary act as "performed for the sake of communication" (Ruytenbeek et al., 2023). Essentially, to "say something" is to perform a locutionary act. This act is concerned solely with the production of utterances, without considering the speaker's intention or function. For example, the utterance "*My hand itches*" informs the hearer that the speaker's hand is itching when speaking.

2. Illocutionary Act

An illocutionary act is doing something with a specific intention or function. According to Austin (Austin, 1962), this is the act of doing something. In this case, the utterance "*My hand itches*" is not merely an informative statement, but may carry a particular intention. The speaker could implicitly request the hearer to take a certain action, such as applying balm to the itchy area. Therefore, the utterance functions beyond its literal meaning, representing an attempt to elicit an action from the listener indirectly.

3. Perlocutionary Act

A perlocutionary act refers to the act of producing an effect or influence on the hearer. It is described by Austin (1962) as the act of affecting someone. For instance, the utterance "*My hand itches*" might create a psychological effect, such as fear, on the hearer. This effect may arise if, for example, the speaker is known to be a violent individual or a professional enforcer. Thus, the utterance indirectly threatens or intimidates (Rahardi, 2005). In this sense, the utterance generates a perlocutionary effect beyond the literal or intended function.

Table 2. Three distinct types of speech acts by John Searle:

Type	Definition	Main Focus	Example (from the sentence: "I'm thirsty")
Locution	The act of uttering something with its literal meaning	Sentence structure and meaning	Literal meaning: "I am feeling thirsty"
Illocution	The intended act or function performed by the speaker's utterance	The speaker's social or communicative intent	Intended meaning: Requesting a drink
Perlocution	The effect or response the utterance has on the listener	Reaction or psychological impact	Listener's response: Offering a glass of water

In essence, the three types of speech acts can be distinguished through the following structure: a speaker utters a sentence with a particular meaning (locutionary act), with a certain communicative force (illocutionary act), to produce a specific effect on the listener (perlocutionary act). For instance, when a man says to his fiancée, "*I will marry you this year after the oath,*" the locutionary act lies in the propositional content of the utterance, the illocutionary act represents the act of promising, and the perlocutionary act refers to the effect of convincing or reassuring the listener with the promise conveyed.

The central focus of speech act theory, particularly in the study of performative language, lies in the illocutionary force of an utterance. Austin (1962) categorized illocutionary acts into five distinct types, each reflecting a different function that language performs beyond merely conveying information. This classification became foundational in understanding how language describes and acts upon reality.

1. Verdictive Acts refer to illocutionary acts in which evaluations or decisions are communicated based on specific reasons or factual considerations. Such acts include evaluating, diagnosing, calculating, predicting, and others.
2. Exercitives are acts in which the speaker exerts authority, rights, or influence. Examples include commanding, praying, recommending, and so on.
3. Commissives are acts wherein the speaker commits to a certain course of action, such as promising or betting.
4. Behabitives are expressions that reflect the speaker's reaction to the behavior or actions of others, whether in the past, present, or future. Examples include apologizing, thanking, congratulating, and similar expressions.
5. Expositives are explanatory acts that articulate a point of view, argumentation, or clarification of usage and reference. The speaker explains how their utterance fits into an argument or line of reasoning, such as asserting, defining, agreeing, etc.

Austin's categorization of speech acts was later developed by his student, John Searle, who argued that Austin's classification was based solely on lexicographical considerations and that the boundaries between the five categories were ambiguous and overlapping. Searle reclassified illocutionary acts into five categories of speech acts, each serving a distinct communicative function (Searle, 1971). These five types of speech acts and their corresponding functions can be summarized as follows:

1. Assertives: Speech acts that commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. Examples include stating, suggesting, boasting, complaining, and claiming.
2. Directives: Speech acts intended to get the hearer to do something. Examples include ordering, commanding, requesting, advising, and recommending.
3. Expressives: Speech acts that express the speaker's psychological attitude or emotional reaction toward a certain state of affairs. Examples include thanking, congratulating, apologizing, blaming, praising, and condoling.
4. Commissives: Speech acts that commit the speaker to a future course of action, such as promising, vowing, and offering.
5. Declarations: Speech acts that bring about a change in the external situation via their utterance. Examples include resigning, dismissing, christening, naming, appointing, excommunicating, and sentencing.

Based on Searle's categorization, essentially all utterances are performative or constitute speech acts. Accordingly, Searle proposed that the basic unit of linguistic communication is the speech act. This unit can be a word, phrase, sentence, or sound conveying the speaker's intention. In pragmatics, a speech act is considered a linguistic unit, just as morphemes, words, phrases, and sentences are regarded as linguistic units in linguistics. The form of a speech act may vary depending on whether it is realized as a sound or a word. Speech acts are also divided into two types: direct and indirect speech acts. A direct speech act typically takes a declarative form used to make a statement, whereas an indirect speech act may also take a declarative form but is used to create a request. The use of conventional utterances indicates the occurrence of a direct speech act. Declarative, interrogative, and imperative utterances are conventionally utilized to state information, ask questions, and issue commands. The alignment between grammatical mood and communicative function characterizes a direct speech act.

In contrast, when a declarative utterance is used to ask a question or give a command, or

when any other mood is used non-conventional, the utterance becomes an indirect speech act (Khakim et al., 2020). For example, "*It's cold outside*" can be a direct speech act if intended to inform the listener about the weather. However, if it is designed to serve as a request for the listener to close the door, it functions as an indirect speech act. Several scholars in pragmatics have evaluated Searle's speech act theory from various perspectives. One of them is George Yule (Yule, 1996), who, in his book *Pragmatics*, argues that Searle's theory offers a more accurate explanation of communicative function than purely grammatical theories. Yule also appreciates Searle's classification of speech as a valuable tool for interpreting implicit meanings in everyday conversation. Similarly, Levinson (Levinson, 1983), in his book *Pragmatics*, describes Searle's approach as a systematic advancement of Austin's ideas. He highlights three key improvements: (1) greater precision in distinguishing types of utterances, (2) the structured introduction of *felicity conditions*, and (3) the potential for deeper analysis of cross-cultural differences in speech behavior. (Leech, 1993), in his book *Principles of Pragmatics*, regards Searle's speech act theory as a crucial framework for linking literal meaning with intended meaning. He also builds upon this theory to develop his politeness theory: "The illocutionary act is the site where politeness operates in language—between what is said and what is meant."

From the perspective of Indonesian linguistics, Kasdi (2022) notes that Searle's theory is particularly useful for discourse analysis, especially in education and communication. He says, "Searle's speech acts provide a foundation for analyzing implicit meanings in teacher-student interactions, political speeches, and local speech cultures." Kasdi emphasizes that illocutionary force is the essence of speech acts, conveying the speaker's intent and purpose. He also underscores the importance of social and contextual conditions in determining the success of a speech act. In the Indonesian cultural context, *expressive* and *directive* acts are especially dominant, particularly in social situations that uphold norms of politeness and hierarchy.

Several scholars have also critiqued Searle's Speech Act Theory, identifying several limitations. One prominent criticism is its lack of attention to social and cultural context. Gumperz (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982) argues that while Searle formulates speech acts rationally and universally, *Culture significantly shapes how people speak, interpret, and respond to utterances*. In Eastern cultures such as Indonesia, direct expressions may be perceived as impolite. As a result, meanings are often conveyed indirectly or implicitly, which does not always align with Searle's formal classifications. For example, the utterance "*Your house is big, isn't it?*" may serve as a request for praise or a subtle critique, depending on the context—an interpretation that formal theory struggles to account for. Another limitation lies in the blurred boundary between illocution and perlocution. While Searle differentiates between *illocutionary force* (intended meaning) and *perlocutionary effect* (actual impact), Gumperz notes that, in practice, these elements often overlap. It is difficult to determine whether an effect was intended or merely a byproduct of the utterance. For instance, the question "*Can you be quiet for a moment?*" could function as a polite request or as sarcasm; the speaker may not fully control the perlocutionary effect.

Mey (2021) provides a further critical perspective in his book *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. He contends that Searle's theory focuses on isolated individual sentences, rather than real, dynamic, and interactive conversation. In natural communication, meaning is often constructed collaboratively and evolves throughout dialogue. Additional critique comes from Levinson (1983), who argues that felicity conditions are normative and difficult to test empirically. Although Searle posits these conditions as prerequisites for successful speech acts, in practice, *not all utterances succeed even when these conditions are met, and many are deemed successful even when not*. For example, a person may "make a promise" without genuine intent—while the formality of the utterance is performed, the sincerity is absent. Moreover, Searle's theory pays insufficient attention to politeness strategies and conversational implicatures. It does not address the pragmatic importance of politeness, which is essential in many speech cultures, nor does it incorporate the theory of conversational implicature developed by H.P. Grice

In conclusion, while John Searle's speech act theory contributes significantly to

understanding language function through speaker intent, it has been criticized for its limited consideration of sociocultural context, strong individualistic orientation, and rigid classification system. Furthermore, the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts remains ambiguous in real-world communication, and the felicity conditions do not always reflect the complexities of actual discourse. Therefore, despite its theoretical importance, Searle's model should be complemented by more contextual and interactional approaches to reflect the realities of communication better.

CONCLUSIONS

Speech acts serve as instruments for performing communicative actions. In this context, a speaker's utterance carries a specific intention or meaning, acknowledging that people do not speak without purpose. Various descriptive terms are used to convey the communicative intent behind an utterance. Understanding speech acts is relevant in linguistic analysis and has practical applications for enhancing communication effectiveness across diverse social and cultural contexts. The speech act theory proposed by Austin and Searle has significantly contributed to understanding language function based on the speaker's intent. However, it has been criticized for insufficiently addressing social and cultural contexts, being overly focused on individualistic perspectives, and restricting analysis to rigid speech act categories. Therefore, despite its considerable influence, the application of Austin and Searle's theory should be complemented by contextual and interactional approaches to more accurately reflect the realities of communication.

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