



LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF SPEECH ACTS IN ENGLISH

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17899525>

Abstract

Speech act theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how language functions as a form of action rather than merely a conduit for transmitting information. Rooted in the seminal work of J. L. Austin and expanded by John Searle, this study examines the linguistic features of speech acts in English by exploring their classifications, contextual determinants, and pragmatic implications. Using a qualitative literature review method, the research synthesizes theoretical and empirical insights to analyze locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, emphasizing how context, culture, and power dynamics influence their interpretation. The findings reveal that speech acts are deeply embedded in social interaction, shaped by politeness strategies, situational expectations, and non-verbal cues. The study concludes that speech act theory offers significant explanatory power for understanding human communication and recommends further exploration of speech acts in digital communication environments and cross-cultural contexts.

Introduction

Speech act theory offers a compelling framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of human communication. Initially introduced by J. L. Austin in the mid-20th century and later expanded upon by John Searle, the theory contends that language serves not only as a vehicle for conveying information but also as a mechanism for performing social actions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). As such, an utterance may simultaneously express meaning and fulfill a communicative function, thereby influencing social dynamics. This dual nature underscores the philosophical and linguistic richness of speech act theory, highlighting how language constructs, negotiates, and maintains human relationships.

Given the theory's broad applicability, examining the linguistic features of speech acts in English offers insight into how language functions at both structural and pragmatic levels. This paper investigates the classification of speech acts, the contextual variables influencing their interpretation, and their broader pragmatic implications. By synthesizing classical theoretical perspectives with contemporary scholarship, this study aims to present a holistic understanding of how linguistic forms and social contexts interact to shape human communication.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative literature review methodology to examine the linguistic features of speech acts in English. Foundational theoretical works, including Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and Searle's *Speech Acts* (1969), serve as the core conceptual anchors for the study. In addition, relevant contemporary scholarship on

pragmatics, politeness, and intercultural communication is reviewed to illustrate how speech act theory is applied in modern linguistic analysis.

The literature selection process included scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and empirical studies addressing speech act classifications, contextual influences, and pragmatic strategies. Conversational examples drawn from existing literature were used to demonstrate the application of theoretical concepts to real-life communication. The aim of this approach is not to test hypotheses empirically, but to synthesize theoretical and applied insights to deepen understanding of speech acts as communicative tools.

Results

Classification of Speech Acts

Searle's (1979) classification framework identifies three primary types of speech acts—locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts—each representing different layers of meaning and function.

Locutionary Acts: Locutionary acts involve the literal production of an utterance, including its phonetic, syntactic, and semantic components. For example, when someone states, "It's cold in here," the locutionary act consists of the literal assertion about temperature. As Yule (1996) describes, this level focuses solely on the surface meaning, independent of any deeper intentions or social cues.

Illocutionary Acts: Illocutionary acts represent the speaker's intended function behind the utterance. Austin (1962) and Searle (1979) emphasize that illocutionary force depends heavily on contextual cues, speaker intentions, and shared background knowledge. For instance, the statement "It's cold in here" may function as an indirect request to close a window, depending on situational dynamics. Illocutionary force becomes even more evident in hierarchical interactions; for example, a manager stating, "The report seems a bit off," conveys criticism and a request for correction rather than a mere observation.

Perlocutionary Acts: Perlocutionary acts refer to the effects an utterance produces on a listener, including emotional, behavioral, or cognitive responses (Searle, 1979). For example, a listener who hears "It's cold in here" may choose to close the window, feel discomfort, or respond verbally. The perlocutionary dimension highlights how communication extends beyond intention to encompass real-world consequences.

Contextual Influences on Speech Acts

Context plays a critical role in shaping how speech acts are produced and interpreted. Situational, cultural, and relational factors all contribute to the communicative meaning of an utterance. Cultural norms influence how speakers perceive and produce speech acts. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory demonstrates how different cultures manage face-threatening acts such as requests or commands. For example, indirectness may be valued in collectivist cultures, whereas directness may be preferred in individualistic ones. These differences underscore the importance of cultural competence in interpreting illocutionary intentions.

Power imbalances between interlocutors shape both the form and interpretation of speech acts. Holmes (1995) notes that individuals with greater authority tend to issue more direct directives, while those with less power often use mitigation strategies. For instance, a supervisor may say, "Finish this report by Friday," while an employee might soften a request to "Would it be possible to adjust the deadline?"



Pragmatic Implications

Politeness Strategies: Politeness strategies help speakers mitigate the potential face-threatening impact of their speech acts. Indirection, hedging, and softening devices are common techniques used to maintain social harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, “Could you please close the window?” signals respect for the listener’s autonomy compared to the direct imperative “Close the window.”

Contextual Adaptation: Effective communication requires the ability to adjust speech act performance based on situational factors. Yule (1996) notes that speakers shift between informal and formal registers depending on the social expectations of the interaction. This adaptability is crucial to ensuring successful interpretation of illocutionary force.

Non-verbal Elements: Non-verbal communication significantly shapes speech act interpretation. Tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions may reinforce or contradict the literal meaning of words. For instance, “Good job” uttered sarcastically conveys criticism rather than praise, demonstrating how verbal and non-verbal cues jointly construct meaning.

Discussion

The findings of this literature review demonstrate that speech acts constitute a complex and dynamic component of human communication. The classifications of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts illustrate how linguistic meaning extends beyond literal interpretation to encompass intentions and social effects. Context significantly shapes the communicative force of speech acts, with culture, power relations, and situational factors guiding how messages are produced and understood.

Pragmatically, speech acts highlight the importance of social sensitivity and adaptability. Politeness strategies and non-verbal cues underscore the intricate balance between conveying intent and maintaining interpersonal harmony. These insights reaffirm the centrality of speech act theory in fields such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and communication studies.

Future research may examine how speech acts evolve in digital communication—such as social media interactions, email discourse, and virtual meetings—where non-verbal cues are altered or absent. Comparative cross-cultural studies may further illuminate how different linguistic communities navigate communicative intentions using diverse pragmatic norms.

Conclusion

This study explored the linguistic features of speech acts in English through a detailed examination of their classification, contextual determinants, and pragmatic implications. The findings illustrate that speech act theory provides a powerful framework for understanding how language serves as social action. By analyzing how speakers express intentions, navigate social contexts, and produce desired effects, we gain deeper insight into the complex nature of human communication. Speech acts thus highlight the essential interplay between language and social interaction, reinforcing the need for continued inquiry into linguistic and pragmatic phenomena.

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