

## **SPEECH ACTS AND CONVERSATION: THE INTERACTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SPEECH ACT THEORY**

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### **Resumen**

La necesidad de trascender las limitaciones de la teoría del acto de habla para el análisis empírico del discurso ha llevado a su revisión. Los cambios más importantes son la redefinición del papel que desempeñan las condiciones esencial, preparatoria y de sinceridad en la descripción de un acto de habla, y la inclusión de la participación del receptor como una condición más para que el acto se lleve a cabo. Seméjante revisión de la teoría original acarrea consecuencias de índole metodológica para un análisis del discurso basado en la noción de acto de habla, que se ve abocado a adoptar el procedimiento interpretativo característico del análisis conversacional.

**Palabras clave:** acto de habla, receptor, interpretación, interacción

### **Abstract**

The need to transcend the limitations of classical speech act theory for the empirical analysis of discourse has led to its revision, outlined and discussed in this paper. The main developments are the reconsideration of essential, preparatory and sincerity conditions in the description of speech acts, and the inclusion of recipients' participation as a condition for their realization. Such revision of the original theory has brought about methodological consequences for speech act-based discourse analysis, which is led to take up the interpretive procedure characteristically adopted by conversation analysis.

**Key words:** speech act, recipient, interpretation, interaction

### **Résumé**

Pour mener à bout une analyse empirique du discours, il s'est avéré nécessaire de transcender les limitations de la théorie classique des actes de langage. Les changements introduits ont été une reconsidération des conditions essentielles, préparatoires et de sincérité dans la description des actes et l'inclusion de la participation du récepteur comme une condition de leur réalisation. La conséquence méthodologique de la révision de la théorie originale a conduit à l'adoption du procédé interprétatif propre de l'analyse conversationnelle.

**Mots clés:** acte de langage, récepteur, interprétation, interaction

### **Summary**

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## **0. Introduction**

One general aim of discourse analysis, according to a widely-accepted view, is to investigate "the function of a particular utterance, in a particular social situation and at a particular place in a sequence, as a specific contribution to a developing discourse" (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975, 13). Speech act theory has attempted to do this by identifying the function of utterances as speech (or illocutionary) acts.

In what follows I shall discuss the theoretical inadequacies of the concept of speech act for the study of discourse and interaction, together with various solutions that have been offered. The two first sections deal with those aspects of speech act theory which have been most objected to. This will be followed, in sections 3. and 4., by examining the interactional dimensions of speech acts. The fifth and last section turns to the methodological implications that the interactional development of speech act theory brings about for discourse analysis.

## **1. Speech act theory**

Speech act theory, first spelled out by Austin (1962), offers an unparalleled contribution to linguistic investigation. Language had previously been conceived chiefly as an instrument for representation, and broken into units such as sentences or words for its study. Instead of this structural approach, speech act theory concentrates on action-theoretic units, focussing on how the issuance of certain linguistic entities constitute a means for interpersonal action. In examining action through the utterance of a linguistic expression, speech act philosophers took "a step in the right direction (although not following the programme completely), namely a step towards taking seriously the simple fact that linguistic communication is a form of *human behaviour* and that the study of language and meaning should accordingly be a *behavioral science*" (Brennenstuhl 1988, 54).

Searle's elaboration (1970; 1977, 1981a, 1981b) of Austin's ideas has had great influence on subsequent literature, and has come to be known as the classical theory. Its most questioned features are the so-called literal force hypothesis and the consequent distinction between direct and indirect act, on the one hand and, closely related with these notions, the emphasis on the producer's viewpoint and the disregard for the receiver's.

According to the literal force hypothesis, the illocutionary force of an act is conventionally associated with the syntactic-semantic structure of the utterance. Illocutionary acts contain indicators which signal the type being carried out (according to Searle, sentence type, performative verbs, intra-sentential word order, accent, intonation and punctuation are indicators in the English language). Much research has been devoted to the grammar conventions that affect the illocutionary force of an utterance in specific languages (Sadock 1988).

However, most acts produced by speakers in real discourse do not have the structure predicted by literal force hypothesis. To account for this fact, Searle, in his theory of indirect acts, distinguishes between two types: the literal, secondary or direct and the nonliteral, primary or indirect acts. On examining the sequence in example (1), he argues that X's utterance has the illocutionary force of a proposal in virtue of the meaning of *let's*:

- (1) Student X: Let's go to the movies tonight  
Student Y: I have to study for an exam (1979b, 34)

In contrast, speaker Y's utterance will commonly be interpreted as a rejection despite its meaning being related to a literal declaration. According to Searle, the first utterance is a direct act while the second is indirect. Between the two there is a difference of principle: in the direct act there is a straightforward relation between meaning and force, whereas in the indirect act "a sentence that contains the illocutionary force indicators for one kind of illocutionary act can be uttered to perform, *in addition*, another type of illocutionary act" (1979, 30). Searle focuses on indirect acts that contain conventional formulas affirming or questioning a felicity condition related to producer or receiver. For example, on uttering *Can you close the door?* the speaker produces a literal question about the receiver's capability to carry out the act. At the same time he or she also realizes an indirect request.

A second significant notion of speech act theory is that of felicity conditions (Austin 1980, chaps. 2, 3 and 4), which acts must observe in regard to the context of utterance. Searle (1970, 54-71; 1977, 1981, 1-29) distinguishes the following:

a) Essential condition. On uttering an expression the producer commits himself<sup>1</sup>, by means of the force conventionally associated with the utterance, to certain beliefs or intentions. The essential condition underlies the conception of speech acts as social and institutional facts. It also is at the basis of the literal force hypothesis and the consequent distinction between direct and indirect acts.

b) Preparatory conditions. These are the requirements that must be met by the real world for the illocutionary act to be carried out: people and circumstances must be appropriate.

c) Sincerity condition. This establishes that the producer of the act must have the required beliefs, intentions or feelings.

According to Searle, felicity conditions not only provide the basis for classification of illocutionary acts, but also clarify their internal structure and help formulate rules for their realization.

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<sup>1</sup> I consider my use of the third person masculine in the generic sense throughout this paper not to be in contradiction with my support of the use of non-sexist language

## 2. Objections to the classical theory

Speech act theory, in its Searlean version, has been objected to on various grounds. A first group of criticisms questions the adequacy of the essential condition —the convention relating linguistic expression to illocutionary force— for the description of acts. Thus, Meyer-Hermann (1976) takes up the issue of one central tenet of the theory of indirect acts. According to this scholar, Searle's question (1979b, 34), "How is it possible for Y to mean the primary illocution when he only utters a sentence which means the secondary illocution ...?", is based on the incorrect assumption that the meaning-force relation is different in direct and indirect acts. Meyer-Hermann again examines the example posed by Searle (cf (1)) and argues that, in the supposed indirect rejection *I have to study for an exam*, it is precisely meaning that brings about such interpretation. Other utterances having identical syntactical but different semantic structures (*I have to eat pop corn* or *I have to tie my shoes*) cannot be interpreted as rejections. It follows that the meaning-force relation in the so-called indirect act is no different in principle from that in the direct act. The notions of direct and indirect act seem therefore to be unfounded theoretical constructs and, as we shall see (cf. section 4.), they are also unnecessary.

The concepts of the classical theory arise from observation of isolated utterances out of context. But, as many scholars have pointed out (Franck 1980, Edmondson 1981, Leech 1983, Levinson 1983), linguistic information may well be complemented, altered or even cancelled out by information originating in the cotext and/or context. Therefore, there can be little doubt that a model for interpretation that only considers linguistic form, while regarding cotext and context as merely secondary components which may be added to linguistic meaning, is basically inadequate. Such a model will disregard the fact that cotextual and contextual conditions are prior to the utterance itself: in fact, producers and receivers take them into consideration when formulating and interpreting. This is why, as Levinson writes (1983, 265), an utterance containing no illocutionary indicator of request, such as *Now Johnny, what do big people do when they come in?*, may still function, in some situations, as a request (*Close the door*). Levinson concludes that "what people do with sentences seems quite unrestricted by the surface form (i.e. sentence-type) of the sentence uttered."

Meyer-Hermann (1976) addresses yet another problematic point in the essential condition postulated by Searle: to suppose that there is a linguistic correlate of an act implies the existence and identification of a structure which in every case will carry out only this act. But determining what structure carries out an act means, in turn, that it must be possible to identify when the act in question is being realized. The circularity of the argument is obvious. No independent definition of acts or linguistic structures is offered; consequently neither can there be a function that assigns one to another. Levinson (1982, 34-5; 1983, 286-294) argues in like manner and concludes that the classical speech act analysis is irrefutable and therefore lacking empirical content.

Conversation analysis also presents its objections to speech act theory. According to Schegloff (1988; 1992), this theory does not consider the sequential arrangement of

discourse and the way it affects the function of an utterance. For example, it predicts that an utterance of the form *Do you know + Wh- question*, such as *Do you know who's going to that meeting?*, will allow two interpretations. The first is a direct request for information about the state of the receiver's knowledge: *Do you know x?* The second interpretation, the more usual, is an indirect request for the information referred to in the *Wh-* question: *Who is coming?* However, as Schlegloff emphasizes, in dialogue (2), utterance a) is given neither of the two interpretations foreseen by classical theory. In fact, in uttering b) Russ shows his understanding of his mother's question as a pre-sequence, the preliminary to a subsequent action (in this case, informing). Only when he hears her reply c) does Russ realize that his previous interpretation has been inadequate. By then providing the relevant answer d) he shows his alternative interpretation of utterance a), the one anticipated by speech act theory: an indirect request for information.

- (2) a) Mother: Do you know who's going to that meeting?  
b) Russ: Who.  
c) Mother: I don't know.  
d) Russ: Oh:: Prob'ly Missiz McOwen ('n detsa) en prob'ly Missiz Cadry and some of the teachers (Schegloff 1988, 59).

This example leads Schlegloff (1988, 61) to conclude that the disregard of sequential and interactional expectations set up by utterances may cause classical speech act theory to produce "wrong results", an "understanding of the utterances other than those demonstrably relevant to, and employed by, the participants."

Another group of adaptations and criticisms of classical theory challenge the assumption that speech acts can be described through real-world characteristics (the preparatory conditions) and the psychological state of the speaker (the sincerity condition). The most widely held objection is that speech act theory only accounts for subjective aspects, the producer's intention, and fails to consider objective dimensions such as the conventional consequences of speech acts. Indeed, it neither includes nor develops the interactional notions in Austin's work, the uptake and the distinction between attempt and achievement of an act (Austin 1980, 116ff, 105ff).

Different proposals have been made to place the study of speech acts within the problem of interaction. Edmondson (1981, 51ff, cf. Franck 1979) argues for reconciling the utterance as illocutionary act with a social perspective viewing it as a speaker's contribution to conversation. As will be discussed in the next section, this leads to the reinterpretation of speech act theory to include, besides a producer's expressed propositions and intentions, such sequential phenomena as the negotiation between participants and the ratification by the receiver. This shift of perspective will lessen the significance of the essential condition and renders the Searlean distinction between direct and indirect speech act unnecessary.

### 3. From speech act to conversational move

The so-called *linguistique de la énonciation* is concerned with the problem of interaction and illocutionary acts. As opposed to Austin and Searle, Ducrot (1977) maintains that carrying out an illocutionary act is not subject to a group of external conditions that the real world must conform to, the felicity conditions. On the contrary, every act is auto-referential; when uttering it, a speaker presents himself as if he were establishing rights and obligations —either for himself or the interlocutor— stemming from the very fact of the utterance. Thus Ducrot reduces the illocutionary act to a mere pretension of the producer to *juridically* characterize the interlocutive situation by means of obligations and rights which originate and are valid only within discourse. It is precisely this fact which makes them provisional: the speaker's pretensions may always be revoked by the same or other speakers subsequently setting up new rights and obligations.

Wunderlich (1976) examines the receiver's side of the matter. He relegates the producer's intentions and proposes an interactional description of the illocutionary act through the notion of its success (*Erfolgreichsein*). He distinguishes different degrees: first, the receiver must understand (*Erkennen*) and secondly, adopt (*Übernehmen*) the producer's intentions in order, finally, to comply with the obligation imposed by the act (*Erfüllen*). The first two degrees —understanding and adopting the illocutionary act— bear upon the following moves of each speaker and the immediate development of the interaction. Different reactions by the hearer/next speaker signal that the preceding act has (or has not) been understood and adopted (see examples (3) - (6)).

Rogers agrees with Wunderlich in his view that speech act theory has neglected "the external and interactional nature of speech acts" (Rogers 1978, 190). To overcome this limitation Rogers distinguishes two interactional phases in the accomplishment of an act. The first consists of an *incrementation of common ground* between producer and receiver, and comprises three stages. During the first, termed *performance*, the act must be addressed by the speaker to the hearer. The second stage is Austin's *uptake*: the receiver must understand the act's content as well as its illocutionary force. It is at this moment that different types of misunderstanding may arise. Intelligibility may be at stake, as in examples (3) and (4), or the propositional content may be unclear, as in (5), or the illocutionary force seem uncertain to the hearer, as in (6):

- (3) A: Do you have the time?  
B: What did you say?
- (4) A: Do you have the time?  
B: What dime? (Goffman 1976 cit. Rogers 1978, 191)
- (5) A: Do you have the time?  
B: Do you mean the magazine or the hour? (Rogers 1978, 191)

- (6) A: I'll see you tomorrow.  
B: Is that a threat or a promise? (Rogers 1978, 191).

Once content and force have been clarified, the third stage, the so-called *admittance*, ensues: the receiver must accept the execution of the illocutionary act, its felicity conditions and presuppositions. Rogers illustrates possible obstacles at this stage:

- (7) A: Do you have the time?  
B: I'm sorry, we are not allowed to give out the time. Please call TI-6-6666. (Goffman 1976, cit. Rogers 1978, 192).
- (8) A: Have you stopped learning Russian?  
B: (No, I haven't), I never started.

In (7), speaker B denies one of the felicity conditions for a request (that the receiver can carry out the action) being met. In (8), speaker B queries the presupposition in A's question.

If the receiver has encountered no difficulty with the three stages, the speaker may legitimately assume that the speech act has been understood and admitted and that the common ground between both participants has increased. According to Rogers, this attainment of this first interactional phase is a distinctive feature of the illocutionary act. However, for the act to *be in effect* and operate as a conversational element, a second interactional phase, the *disposition*, has to be undergone. Indeed, the act has to be accepted or rejected by the receiver, either tacitly or openly. In short, then, according to Rogers, the transition from illocutionary act to conversational element requires the completion of two interactional phases, the incrementation of common ground and the disposition (acceptance or rejection) by the receiver.

Scholars related to the University of Geneva have resumed the above discussion about speech acts and their relevance for the study of discursive interaction. Moeschler follows Ducrot in distancing himself from Austin's and Searle's "juridisme réaliste" (Moeschler 1982, 68sff; cf. Roulet 1981), and reformulates the felicity conditions in terms of the rights and obligations that a speaker claims to establish by performing an act. More specifically, Moeschler defines the completion of the two interactional phases distinguished by Rogers as an *interactional condition*, according to which every act imposes upon the receiver the cognitive action of taking into account ("prise en compte") the content and value of the utterance and the obligation of providing an answer ("réponse"), often verbal (Moeschler 1980, 58). In other words, the interactional condition calls for the receiver's participation, both cognitive and verbal. This involvement is conventionally linked to the act's illocutionary properties and must be distinguished from its non-conventional consequences, the perlocution.

#### 4. Illocutionary value and illocutionary function

According to the interactional condition, an act is carried out successfully if the receiver takes it into consideration and furnishes an answer. Thus, the notion of an isolated speech act is recast into that of a component act in an interactional sequence between two speakers. This modification of speech act theory contemplates the receiver's interpretation of the producer's act and, significantly, makes allowance for it in the description of the act. Some examples may serve to illustrate these points

In sequence (9) speaker B interprets A's utterance as a representative, which he or she acknowledges (*Yes, ...*).

- (9) A: It is quite late.  
B: Yes, it's quite dark outside.

Nevertheless, example (10) makes it clear that the same utterance may also be understood differently:

- (10) A: It is quite late.  
B: OK, I'll drive you home.

Here, the classical characterization of A's act as a representative is insufficient, as it does not keep in view its relations with the next component of the sequence. In fact, speaker B interprets A's utterance (by means of conversational implicature) as a request, which he or she accepts (*OK, I'll drive you home*). This will be the valid interpretation in this specific interaction —even if only provisionally: speaker A may question it in his next move, initiating a new phase of negotiation.

Searle has tried to explain this kind of phenomena by means of the indirect act which, as we saw, presents several problems. Other authors favour an *interpretive* explanation. Thus, Moeschler specifies the following hypotheses based on the distinction between value and function of an act (1982, 106ff):

a) Every illocutionary act A has one or more illocutionary *values*. Among them is the intended value  $a^1$ , together with others (literal, conventionally implicit, conversationally implicit) which it may be assigned in a specific context and cotext. Illocutionary values may be made explicit through conventional indicators (performative verb, sentence type, conjunctions or particles).

b) The actual value of an illocutionary act A —whether it matches or not the intended value  $a^1$ — is the illocutionary *function*, which is affected by: i) the formal properties of the utterance; ii) the retrospective interpretation of the act by the receiver.

According to these hypotheses, the receiver, independently of what the producer's original intention may have been, selects one function from among all the values necessarily or potentially ascribed to the act. This interpretation is shown in his reactive utterance, and will be valid and effective as long as it is not questioned in succeeding interaction.

## 5. Towards an interpretive discourse analysis

The distinction between value and function has considerable implications for classical speech act theory. Illocutionary function is no longer a preexisting label deriving from an abstract theory of action, nor does it have a clear-cut connection with the utterance's semantic and syntactic structure. Rather, illocutionary function is an interpretive category, judged to be pertinent and produced by the receiver: it is the intention that hearers assign to speakers in a specific communicative situation. Function does not necessarily conform with the value intended by the producer; on the contrary, it is the selection of one of its potential values within discourse. Therefore, illocutionary characterization of an act cannot be unequivocal, and it is precisely this fact that allows negotiation between participants.

The interactional version of classical notions has methodological consequences for speech act based discourse analysis which may well be worth addressing at this point. It is apparent that reconstruction of the communication process is obliged to give up a prior taxonomy of acts founded on felicity conditions. When describing illocutionary functions, the researcher is forced to relinquish her omniscient position, based on the traditional reliance on linguistic form and the consideration of the producer's intention as *a priori* datum. Quite the opposite, as I have tried to argue in this paper, an interpretive methodology founded on receivers' recognition of the producer's intention is needed. Such methodology has points in common with conversation analysis. According to research in this field, speakers' reactions are always linked to previous speakers' utterances, and this fact allows observers to ascertain what function is being fulfilled by the first utterance. Indeed, "just as a second speaker's analysis and treatment of the prior is available to the first speaker, so it is also available to overhearers of talk, including social scientists" (Atkinson and Heritage 1992, 9; cf. Sacks 1992)<sup>2</sup>.

Conversation analysis' distinctive interpretive method has to be regarded as an important contribution to discourse analysis. The latter, in spite of the criticisms discussed in section 2, may continue to consider the relation between linguistic form and function in an explicit and reasoned way (Moeschler 1990, van Rees 1992, Stoll Dougall 1994). Significantly, however, the intended value of an utterance will now be limited to mere expectations that can always be revoked by participants' reactions. The advantage of this interpretive discourse analysis is twofold: it is theoretically suitable to the study of discourse and interaction, on the one hand, and, on the other, the outcome yielded by such investigation will be relevant to the culture and essential traits of the object of study as they occur in daily life. An interpretive procedure will thus be capable, at least in principle, of avoiding the criticisms held against classical theory.

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<sup>2</sup> It may well be worth remembering, however, that conversation analysis is not without its own problems. As has been pointed out, it does not justify the criteria underlying its analytic categories nor does it demonstrate its claims that such categories are really "member's categories"

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