**Chapter IV: Speech Act Theory**

**1. Speech Act Definition**

*“Speech is fundamentally a social act of doing things with words”.* (Austin, 1962)

[Speech Act](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/speechactterm.htm) raises important questions about how the addressee is able to determine what sort of act the speaker intended to perform. The theory of speech acts, then, is inherently a pragmatic theory, since it involves an intention on the part of the speaker and an inference on the part of the hearer. Speech Act Theory can help to examine utterances from the perspective of their function, rather than their form. Speech-act theory, was introduced by Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin, and further developed by American philosopher J.R. Searle.

**2. Types of utterances**

Early in the development of speech act theory Austin proposed that there were only two types of utterances possible. **The performative utterances** and **the constative ones**.

**2.1. Performative utterances:**  which he defined as utterances which:

[...] do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and [...] the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as saying something (Austin, 1962:5)

**2.2. Constative utterances:**  uttering a constative is ‘saying something’ that has the property of being either true or false (Austin 2000:351). So the constative includes all descriptive utterances, statements of fact, definitions and so forth: utterances which report, inform and state (Searle, 1969).

There exist many utterance types which do not fall into any particular grammatical category other than the category ‘statement’ (Austin 1962). These are utterances that are void of **descriptions and are neither true nor false** in virtue of their meaning or definition but still remain understandable and meaningful (Searle 1969:6). These include things like jokes, descriptions, exclamations, indicators of sociality such as ‘hello’ and ‘good night’ and a multitude of other utterances which are not statements but something else all together.

The former category, performatives, is our concern as a performative utterance can be viewed as a ‘speech act’ where “the uttering of the words is

[...] the leading incident in the performance of an act, [...] the performance of which is also the object of the utterance” (Austin 1962:8). Some examples these types of utterances

include:

a. ‘I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’ [...]

b. ‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*’ speech act

1. Locutionary act -communicative act

2. Illocutionary act -speakers intention

3. Perlocutionary act -the effect that the speech act has on the context participants world

**3. Implicit performatives vs. explicit performatives**

One distinction Austin makes in relation to performatives, is that between ***implicit performatives*** and ***explicit performatives***. Thus, the *intended illocutionary force* of the *imperative*

•‘Don’t say that!’, is implicit, as what the speaker has in mind by saying it is not specifically indicated. Because of its implicitness, the sentence can be, depending on the paralinguistic or kinetic cues given by the speaker, and on the power or status relationship between the speaker and hearer, a *warning*, a *command*, a *request* or a piece of *advice.*

For the speaker to make the *illocutionary force explicit*, s/he has to indicate the speech act involved by inserting the *performative verb* before the clause. If the clause is not declarative, this will involve its grammatical conversion into a declarative clause:

‘*I warn you* not to say that’,

‘*I order you* not to say that ‘,

‘*I advise you* not to say that’,

‘*I forbid* you to say that’, etc.

•An explicit performative clause contains a verb that names the illocutionary point of the utterance.

•By saying :

‘I promise I’ll lend you a hand with your proofreading’,

Speaker uses an explicit performative verb to make a promise.

•Speaker could also have made the promise by merely uttering

‘I’ll lend you a hand with your proofreading’,

in which the promise is not explicitly spelled out yet is easily inferable.

As ***performative****s* are seldom uttered using the above constructions, it does seem to be the case that most of the performatives we encounter in English are ***implicit***.

• A short list of performative verbs may comprise:

–*abolish, accept, acknowledge, acquit, admit, admonish, advise, affirm, agree to, announce, answer, apologize, ascribe, ask, assert, assess, assume, authorize, baptize, beg, bet, bid, caution, charge, christen, claim, classify, command, commiserate, compliment, concur, congratulate, convict, counsel, declare, delegate, demand, deny, describe, diagnose, disagree, donate, dub, excuse, exempt, fire, forbid, grant, guarantee, guess, hire, hypothesize, identify, implore, inform, instruct, license, name, notify, offer, order, pardon, permit, plead, pray, predict, prohibit, promise, query, question, rank, recommend, refuse, reject, renounce, report, request, require, resign, sanction, say, sentence, state, submit, suggest, summon, suppose, swear, tell, testify, thank, urge, volunteer, warn, withdraw.*

1. **The performative verbs**

•The performative verb must be in the present tense, because the illocutionary act is being performed and denominated at the moment of utterance. If

‘*I promise* to take you to the game tomorrow’

counts as a promise on the part of Speaker, than

‘*I promised* to take you to the game tomorrow’

only reports on a past promise and

’I promise to visit you next time I’m in town’

only announces a predicted promise.

1. **The performative adverbs**

•The adverb ***hereby*,** inserted into a performative clause, will mark the verb as performative (Austin, 1962).

•For instance:

‘I must hereby renounce at your services’.

‘Trespassers should hereby be warned that they will be prosecuted’.

‘I hereby authorize you to act as our agent from this moment’.

1. **Felicity conditions**

Unlike *constative* utterances, *performative* utterances do not depend on *truth conditions* in order to be meaningful, but on certain ***appropriateness or felicity conditions***.

•Austin distinguishes three types of felicity conditions:

**(i)** There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect.

**(ii)** The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure.

**(iii)** The procedure must be executed correctly and completely.

Violation of any of the felicity conditions results in a performative ‘unhappy’ or infelicitous performative or a ‘***misfire***’.

•For instance:

* a registrar or a priest conducting a marriage ceremony in an unauthorized place will violate condition (i), thus committing a misfire.
* if a judge utters ‘I sentence you to life imprisonment’ not in court but in the shower.
* When a president declares war to another country not via the official procedures but within an informal setting, when he merely voices his thought or intentions.
* A *command* cannot be issued by a particular person of lower *status* or *power* to another particular person of higher *status* or *power*.
* A promise is usually issued in relation to some future act, while an apology indicates regret for a past action Speaker feels responsible for.

**4.1. Sincerity condition**

In addition, he formulates a sincerity condition, specifying that the persons must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure. If the sincerity condition is violated, there is a case of what Austin calls an ‘***abuse***’. Examples of abuse include:

* congratulating someone when one knows that they have passed an examination by cheating, or making a promise when one already intends to break it.

**4.2. Performatives and truth values**

Truth conditions are, nevertheless, not fully excluded from the performative framework. Thus, an utterance such as :

* ‘I promise to feed the fish’ has no truth value but is felicitous if there is a fish such that Speaker has the ability and intention to feed, and is infelicitous - yet not false – in case there is no such fish. This contrasts with
* ‘I’ve fed the fish’ which is either true if Speaker has fed the fish, or false if not.

To sum up, felicity conditions need to be met for performative acts to be successful. This not exclude taking truth value into account, yet entails that truth value is less communicatively significant than illocutionary point

Allan (1994) summarises the Austinian framework of felicity conditions as follows:

* **A PREPARATORY CONDITION**, meant to establish whether or not the circumstances of the speech act and the participants in it are appropriate to its successful performance.
* **An EXECUTIVE CONDITION**, meant to determine whether or not the speech act has been properly executed.
* **A SINCERITY CONDITION** involves Speaker's responsibility for the illocutions in the utterance. Normally, Hearer will assume that Speaker is being sincere unless s/he has good reason to believe otherwise.
* **A FULFILMENT CONDITION** determined by the perlocutionary effect of the speech act

1. **The types of illocutionary speech acts**

On the basis of these dimensions, Searle (1969)has set up the following classification of illocutionary speech acts:

* ***Assertives.***

Examples of assertives are 'It is raining' and 'There is a horse in the hall’.

The illocutionary point of the members of this class is to commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. The direction of fit is word-to-world, and the sincerity condition expressed is 'belief that p'.

* ***Directives.***

Examples of directives are 'Can you give me the salt' and 'Close the window'.

The illocutionary point of these acts consists in the fact that they are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something, expressed by the propositional content.

The direction of fit is world-to-word, and the sincerity condition is 'want that H

takes a course of action establishing the truth of p'.

Searle considers questions to be a subclass of directives, since they are attempts by S to get H to answer, Le. to perform a speech act.

* ***Commissives.***

Examples ofcommissives are 'I promise you to take the horse away' and 'I will be

there' . Commissives are those speech acts whose illocutionary point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action. The direction of fit is world-to-word, and the sincerity condition is 'intend to act such that p becomes true’.

* ***Expressives.*** Examples of expressives are: 'I apologize for stepping on your toe' and ' congratulate you on winning the race'.