

# COURSE: SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

LECTURE 11: SPEECH ACT THEORY AND SPEECH ACTS

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# SPEECH ACTS

- ▶ In attempting to express themselves, people do not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words-
- ▶ They perform actions via those utterances (Yule, 1996)
- ▶ For example, the expression ‘You are fired!’ from a boss, can be used to end someone’s employment.
- ▶ ‘you are welcome’. - a statement that also performs an action.
- ▶ **Speech acts:** Actions performed via utterances

Yule, George. (1996). *Pragmatics*. NY: Oxford University Press, pg. 47

# Speech acts

I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow  
I hereby christen this ship the H.M.S. Flounder  
I declare war on Zanzibar  
I apologize  
I dub thee Sir Walter  
I object  
I sentence you to ten years of hard labour  
I bequeath you my Sansovino  
I give my word  
I warn you that trespassers will be prosecuted

From: Levinson, Stephen (1993). Pragmatics. Britain:  
Cambridge

# Speech acts

- ▶ The peculiar thing about these sentences,
- ▶ according to Austin, is that they are not used just to *say* things, i.e. describe states of affairs,
- ▶ But rather actively to *do* things.
- ▶ After you've declared war on Zanzibar, the world has changed in substantial ways.

# Speech acts

- ▶ They include labels like
- ▶ Apology
- ▶ Compliment
- ▶ Invitation
- ▶ Promise
- ▶ Requests

# Speech events

- ▶ Speech events- the circumstances including other utterances that surround a speech act.
- ▶ Speaker expects that his or her communicative intention will be recognized by the hearer.
- ▶ Both speaker and hearer are usually helped in this process by the circumstances surrounding the utterance.
- ▶ Nature of speech event determines the interpretation of an utterance as performing a particular speech act.

# Speech acts

- ▶ This tea is really cold.
- ▶ This statement can be interpreted differently depending on the context
- ▶ If it is said during a very cold season and someone reaches for a cup of tea expecting it to be hot but finds it cold, this will be interpreted as a complaint.
- ▶ If it is said during a hot season, it would be interpreted as a compliment/praise
- ▶ This means that there is more to the interpretation of a speech act than can be found in the utterance.

# LOCUTION, ILLOCUTION, PERLOCUTION FORCES

- ▶ On any occasion, the action performed by producing an utterance will consist of three related acts.
- ▶ 1. **locutionary act**- the basic act of utterance, or producing a meaningful linguistic expression.
- ▶ the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference
- ▶ If one has difficulty in forming the sounds and words to create a meaningful utterance in a language(because it is foreign, or one is tongue tied) then he/she might fail to produce a locutionary act
- ▶ **Aha mokofa** in English will not count as a locutionary act,
- ▶ **I have just made some coffee** will count as a locutionary act.

# LOCUTION, ILLOCUTION, PERLOCUTION FORCES

- ▶ 2. illocutionary act- utterances with some kind of function in mind.
- ▶ the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence, by virtue of the conventional *force* associated with it (or with its explicit performative paraphrase)
- ▶ The act is performed via the communicative force of an utterance.
- ▶ I have just made coffee might be said as a statement, offer, explanation of for some other communicative purpose.

# LOCUTION, ILLOCUTION, PERLOCUTION FORCES

- ▶ 3. perlocutionary act- the effect of an utterance
- ▶ utterances are not created with a function without intending it to have an effect.
- ▶ Hence, this is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterance

# Felicity conditions

- ▶ These are certain expected or appropriate circumstances for a performance of a speech act to be recognized as intended.
- ▶ **I sentence you to six months in prison.**
- ▶ Will meet the felicity conditions if it is said to a defendant in a courtroom
- ▶ If it would be said outside this context, then it would be inappropriate and infelicitous.

# Speech acts classification (Searle)

Five types

Declarations

Representatives

Expressives

Directives

Commissives

# Declarations

- ▶ They change the world via their utterance
- ▶ The speaker must have a special institutional role, in a specific context to perform a declaration appropriately.
- ▶ Priest: I now pronounce you husband and wife,
- ▶ Referee: You are out.
- ▶ Jury head- We find the defendant guilty.
- ▶ In using declaratives, the speaker changes the world via words.

# representatives

- ▶ They state what the speaker believes to be the case or not.
- ▶ Statements of fact, assertions, conclusions and descriptions are examples of speakers representing the world as he or she believes it.
- ▶ It was a warm sunny day.
- ▶ Chomsky didn't write about peanuts.
- ▶ The earth is flat.
- ▶ In using representatives, the speaker makes words fit the world (of belief).

# Expressives

- ▶ They state what the speaker feels
- ▶ Express psychological states of pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes joy, or sorrow.
- ▶ I am really sorry!
- ▶ Congratulations!
- ▶ Oh yes, great, mmmmm!
- ▶ In expressives, the speaker makes words fit the world (of feeling)

# Directives

- ▶ Acts used to get someone do something
- ▶ They express what the speaker wants
- ▶ Commands
- ▶ Orders
- ▶ requests,
- ▶ Suggestions,
- ▶ Can be positive or negative

# DIRECTIVES

- ▶ Give a cup of coffee. Make it black,
- ▶ Could you lend me a pen please?

Don't touch that.

# Commissives

- ▶ Speech acts that speakers use to commit themselves to some future action.
- ▶ Express what the speaker intends
  
- ▶ E.g
- ▶ Promises
- ▶ Threats
- ▶ Refusals
- ▶ Pledges etc

# Speech act theory

**Speech act theory:** a philosophical explanation of the nature of linguistic communication. It aims to answer this question: “What do we do when using language?”



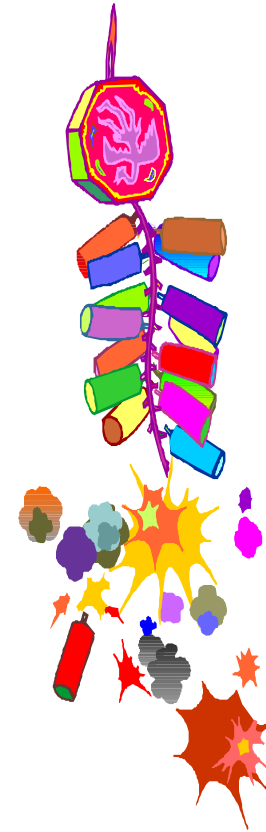
# Speech Act Theory

- ▶ **John Austin (1911-1960)**
- ▶ *How to Do Things with Words* (1962)
- ▶ **speech acts**: actions performed via utterances



# Speech Acts

- ▶ **Speech act theory** originated with the British philosopher John Austin in the late 50's.
- ▶ According to this theory, we are performing various kinds of acts when we are speaking.



## Constatives vs. performatives

- Austin made the primary distinction between two types of utterances: **constative** and **performative**.
- **Constatives**: utterances which roughly serves to state a fact, report that something is the case, or describe what something is.
- The **constative** utterance is verifiable and it is either true or false.



*I teach English.*

**I go to the park every day.**

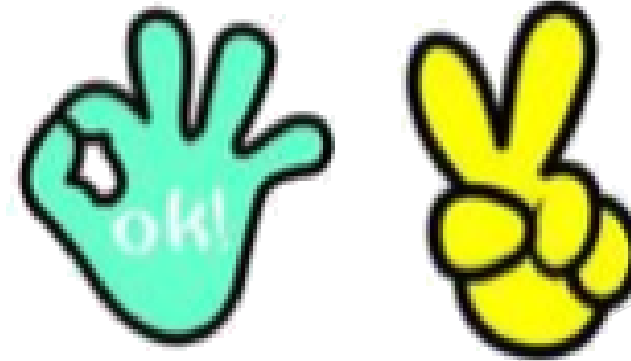


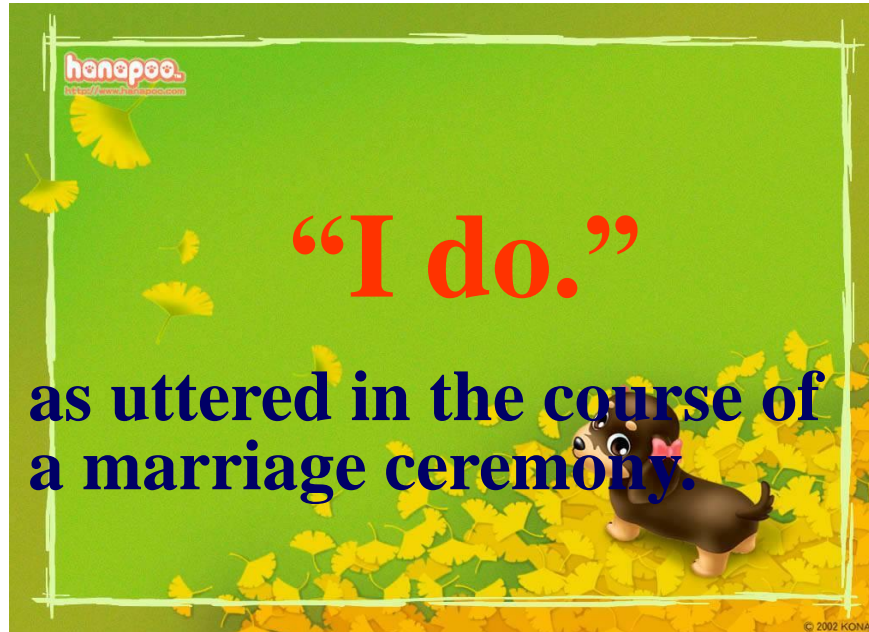
# Performatives

- ◆ **Utterances which are used to perform acts, do not describe or report anything at all; the uttering of the sentence is the doing of an action.**
- ◆ **The performative utterance is used to perform an action, so it has no truth value.**

# Features of performatives

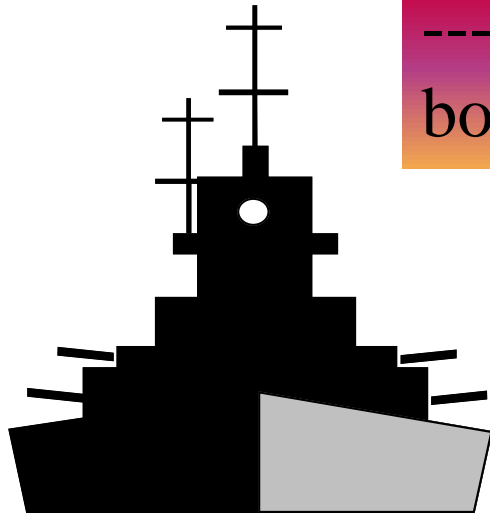
- **The first person singular**
- **Speech act verbs / performative verbs**
- **The present tense**
- **Indicative mood**
- **Active voice**





I name this ship Elizabeth.

---as uttered when smashing the  
bottle against the stern.





**“ I give and bequeath my  
watch to my brother.”**

**--- as occurring in a  
will.**

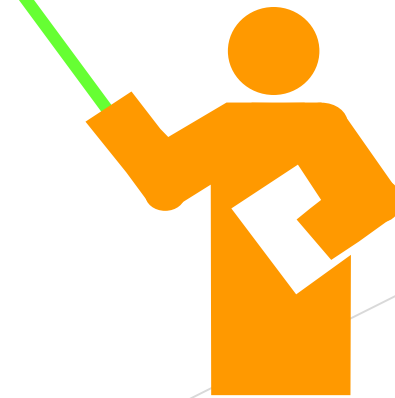
**“ I bet you sixpence  
it will rain  
tomorrow.”**

**--- as uttered when  
making a bet.**

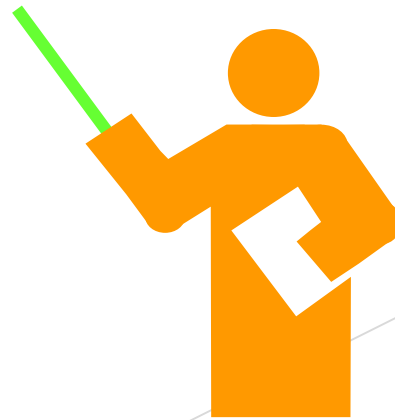


## Austin's model of speech acts

- ❖ ***A locutionary act*** is the act of uttering words, phrases, clauses. It is the act of conveying literal meaning by means of syntax, lexicon and phonology.



- ❖ ***An illocutionary act*** is the act of expressing the speaker's intention; it is the act performed in saying something.



## *An illocutionary act*

- In saying X, I was doing Y.
- *In saying “I will come tomorrow”, I was making a promise.*
- **Illocutionary force**

- ❖ ***A perlocutionary act*** is the act performed by or resulting from saying something; it is the consequence of, or the change brought about by the utterance; it is the act performed by saying something.



## *A perlocutionary act*

- By saying X and doing Y, I did Z.
- By saying “I will come tomorrow” and making a promise, I reassure my friends.

## Searle's classification of speech acts

**Searle also made his contribution to the study of illocutionary speech acts. He specified five types of illocutionary speech acts:**

- 1) Representative**
- 2) Directive**
- 3) Commissive**
- 4) Expressive**
- 5) Declaration**

# 1. representatives:

- ➔ stating or describing, saying what the speaker believes to be true.
- ➔ assert, state, swear, guess, deny, inform, notify, etc

*I guess that he has come.*

*I think that the film is moving.*

*I am certain that he has come.*

**Directives are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something.**

**Request, advise, order, urge, tell, etc**

*Open the door!  
Don't you think it's  
a bit stuffy here?*



**Commissives are those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action. When speaking, the speaker puts himself under obligation.**

*I promise to  
love you!*

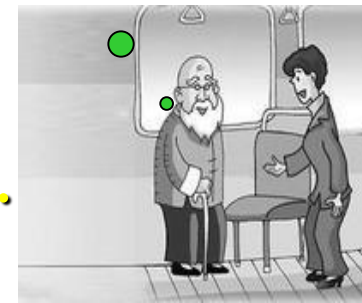


**Commit, promise, threaten, pledge, etc**

The illocutionary point of expressives to to express the psychological state specified in the propositional content such as apologizing, thanking, congratulating, welcoming etc.



Apologize, thank, congratulate, greet, etc.



**The point of this declaration is to bringing about immediate changes by saying sth.**



**I declare  
the  
meeting  
open.**



**I appoint you  
chairman of  
the  
committee.**

**Declare, appoint, nominate, name, etc.**

I fire you!





## Searle's indirect speech act theory

	Forms	Functions
<i>Did you eat the food?</i>	Interrogative	Question
<i>Eat the food (please)</i> Command/request	Imperative	
<i>You eat the food</i>	Declarative	Statement
<i>Can you pass me the salt?</i>	Interrogative	request
<i>You left the door open.</i>	Declarative	request



# Indirect speech acts

*Did you eat the food?*

**Interrogative**

**Question**

*Eat the food (please)*

**Imperative**

**Command/request**

*You eat the food*

**Declarative**

**Statement**

*Can you pass me the salt?*

**Interrogative**

**request**

*You left the door open.*

**Declarative**

**request**

# Searle's indirect speech act theory

- 📖 When a form such as *Did he...?*, *Are they...?* is used to ask a question, it is described as a *direct speech act*.
- 📖 But the utterance *Can you pass the salt?* is different. In this example, you would not usually understand the utterance as a question about your ability to do something. In fact, you would not treat it as a question at all. You would treat it as a request and perform the action requested. Yet, this request has been presented in the syntactic form usually associated with a question. Such an example is described as an *indirect speech act*.

# References

- ▶ Levinson, Stephen (1983). *Pragmatics*. Britain: Cambridge.
- ▶ Yule, George. (1996). *Pragmatics*. NY: Oxford University Press