Pragmatics
Speech Act Theory

By Siti Mahripah, M.App.Ling.

“Oh! It’s you!”

Contexts:
- Annoying boss at party
- 2 friends with the same name
- Meeting a famous person
- Last words before getting murdered…

An infinite number of possibilities…

Hi Stephen

I wanted to post my ppts on the site for the students, but I can't find a way in. Can you do it?

Hi Stephen

I wanted to post my ppts on the site for the students, but I can't find a way in. Do you know how to do it?
I'm attaching the file - perhaps you could upload it for me?
Thanks

Jill

Different meaning – different phonology
Dear Dr Murray,

My name is ________________

I would like to know whether LING904 will be available externally semester 1 2008. If so, would you use both web ct and i-lectures for distance students. …

I hope to hear from you soon.

Regards ________________

In this session we will consider...

• Key figures in speech act theory
• Speech acts and speech events
• Felicity conditions
• Direct and indirect speech acts
• Classifying speech acts
• Applying speech act analysis to texts
• Cross cultural implications of speech act theory

Major figures in Speech Act Theory

John Austin


*When may we hope to see your Harvard lectures published sir?*

*You may hope to see them published any time*
Major figures in Speech Act Theory

John Searle


Constative and performative utterances

**Constative utterances**

can be true or false

e.g. “There’s a bull in the field.”

uttering the words does not usually affect the truth of the utterance.

**Performative utterances**

cannot be true or false

The uttering of the words is part of doing the action.

e.g. “I now pronounce you man and wife.”

“I hereby name this ship the Titanic”

But can be felicitous or infelicitous

**Felicitous** means that they are uttered by someone who has the power to utter them, in a context in which they have the power to function effectively.

A speech act has three different kinds of FORCE

- locutionary
- illocutionary
- perlocutionary
“There’s a bull in the field.” can mean….

- **Locutionary act** – the act of making meaning (meaning in the traditional, literal sense - the propositional content of an utterance.)

- **Illocutionary act** – that act of making an utterance with a certain force contributing a particular type of interactional move to a conversation: warning, advising, suggesting, promising, requesting

- **Perlocutionary act**:
  - the psychological consequences of the utterance
  - what is achieved by the utterance – e.g. the utterance results in in deterring the listener from doing something, or in influencing them to do it… (in this case to leave the field quickly)

A speech act has three different kinds of FORCE

To sum up:

- Locutionary – propositional meaning(s)
- Illocutionary - speakers intended effect(s)
- Perlocutionary – the psychological effect(s) on the hearer (intended or not)

Discussion: Consider the utterances:
1. “You’re fired”
2. “I sentence you to ten years hard labour”
3. “The weather will be fine tomorrow”
4. “Would you like to come to my party”

Imagine a context where these could be said.
For 3 and 4, what is the probable speaker intent? (Illocutionary force)
What are the probable effects on the hearer? (Perlocutionary force)
Who would the speaker have to be, for the speech acts to be to be effective?
Under what circumstances would they have to be effective?

Four types of felicity conditions
(Searle)

- **Propositional content** rules, which specify the kind of meaning expressed by the propositional part of the utterance (e.g., promises refer to future acts by speakers)
- **Preparatory** rules, which specify the prerequisites to the performance of a speech act (e.g., thanking depends on the speaker being aware of a past benefit); the speaker having the right to perform the speech act
• **Sincerity** rules, which specify what must obtain if the speech act is to be sincerely performed (e.g., apologies presume being sorry);

• **Essential** rules, which specify what the speech act must conventionally ‘count as’ (e.g., warnings count as undertakings that some future event is not in your best interest).

Also:

• **Conditions of execution**
the ritual or other action may accompany a speech act, and without it the speech act does not “count”.

Felicity conditions for the speech act of promising.

Involved in the act are:
• A speaker – S

Involved in the act are:
• A speaker – S
• A hearer – H
Felicity conditions for the speech act of promising.

**Involved in the act are:**
- A speaker - S
- A hearer – H
- A literal utterance - T
- A proposition ‘that p’
- A future act A
- Some knowledge K

1. Normal input and output conditions
   Intelligible speaking, absence of deafness, aphasia ….
2. S expresses the proposition ‘that p’ in the utterance of T
   The proposition can be isolated from the rest of T and recognised in it.
3. In expressing ‘that p’ S predicates a future act A of S
   The speaker says she will perform a future action.

**PREPARATORY CONDITIONS**
4. H would prefer S doing A to her not doing A,
   S believes H would prefer her doing A to her not doing A.
   The speaker thinks the hearer wants her to do it (rather than not do it)
5. It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.

(it is not something she would have done anyway.)

SINCERITY CONDITION

6. S intends to do A
   (this also implies a belief that it is possible)

ESSENTIAL CONDITION

7. S intends that the utterance of T will place her under the obligation to do A.

Because she has said it, she is obliged to do it.

8. (slightly simplified from Searle's version)
   S intends to produce in H the knowledge K that the utterance of T is to count as placing S under an obligation to do A.

   i.e. it's not a promise if the speaker doesn't intend the hearer to understand that it's a promise

In everyday language, we can express these conditions as:

• A speaker says he will perform a future action.
• He intends to do it.
• He believes he can do it.
• He thinks it is not something he would have done anyway in his normal course of action.
• He thinks the addressee wants him to do it (rather than not do it).
• He intends to place himself under an obligation to do it by uttering it.
• Speaker and hearer understand English; can hear etc.

9. The rules of the dialect spoken by S and H are such that T is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions 1-8 are met.

i.e. S uses a form such that the words chosen are ones that can be uttered in that language to make a promise and all the above conditions apply.
TASK 1
Without trying to classify them into types, what would be the felicity conditions – i.e., conditions of situational appropriateness for:
1. Asking a question about proposition P:
2. Making a request (for action A)
3. Commanding H to do an action A
4. Making criticisms of H's past actions

Asking a question about proposition P:
- S does not know P
- S wants to know P
- S believes that H knows P
- S believes that H is willing to provide information about P
Making a request (for action A)
- S wants A to be done
- S wants H to do A
- S believes that A has not yet been done
- S believes H can do A
- S believes H is willing to do A anyway
- S has the power to ask H to do A
- H has the power to refuse

How is this different to commanding H to do an action A?
- S wants A to be done (same as request)
- S believes that A has not yet been done (same)
- S believes H can do A (same)
- S believes H is willing to do A (not relevant, so leave this out)
- S believes H was not going to do A anyway (same)
- S has the power to ask H to do A (in the case of a command - to compel)
- H does not have the power to refuse (unlike a request)

Making criticisms of H’s past actions
- H has performed A in the past
- S knows H has performed A
- S believes A has or will have a bad consequence
- S has the power to voice her beliefs to H
- H may accept or reject S’s expressed belief

Defining speech acts
- A Speech Act is an act performed using language (e.g., to give orders; to make requests; etc.).
- A Speech Act is an utterance which has both a propositional meaning and an illocutionary force (Thus, a Speech Act is an utterance defined in terms of intention and/or effect).
- Speech Acts can be defined by their felicity conditions.

Classifying speech acts
Searle described 5 basic classes of speech act.
Yule (1996) adapted these to show the direction of fit between the speech act and the world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech act type</th>
<th>Direction of fit</th>
<th>S = speaker, X = situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarations</td>
<td>Words change the world</td>
<td>S causes X, Words change the state of the world - as in performatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>Make words fit the world</td>
<td>S believes X, Describe a state of affairs in the world - a claim, an assertion, a report</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expressives  
Make words fit the world  
S feels X  
S expresses feelings or attitudes, thanks, congratulations

Directives  
Make the world fit words  
S wants X  
Has the function of getting H to do something - request, order

Commissives  
Make the world fit words  
S intends X  
Action as result of S having uttered the words - promise

When the felicity conditions for a speech act are not met:
• Either some misunderstanding has occurred
  or
• the real meaning is something else.

INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

Indirect speech acts
• Can I get a lift home with you?
• Would you mind giving me a lift home?
• I'm not sure how I'm going to get home....I've missed the bus.
• Is that your car?

Identifying indirect speech acts
• A performative cannot be an indirect speech act.
• An indirect speech act has a literal meaning which is different from its intended meaning.
• Felicity conditions are violated for the literal meaning but not for the intended meaning.

Could you give me a lift home?

Literally, S questions H about P
but the felicity conditions
• S does not know the truth about P.
• S wants to know the truth about P.
are not met.

However the felicity conditions on requests are not violated.
• S requests H to do A (action):
  • S believes A has not yet been done.
  • S believes that H is able to do A.
  • S believes that H is willing to do A-type things for S.
  • S wants A to be done.
Why use indirect speech acts?

- Framing the request as a question thus allows the hearer the opportunity to more gracefully decline.
- Perhaps the speaker has the power to make the hearer do the action but does not want to make a show of that power by making a direct request.
- Perhaps the speaker is unsure about whether the hearer will be willing to do the action and doesn’t want to risk losing face.

TASK 2

- Consider the dialogue from the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*

- Look at the most basic meaning of each utterance in terms of the speech acts it could perform.
- Is this how it is used in the dialogue?
- For each one, identify what the speaker really means to convey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse me</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry to interrupt</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you have the wedding list for Banks?

| Shop assistant: | |
|-----------------| |
| Certainly, sir. | |

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.

**UNDERLYING MEANING:** Attracting attention (slight irony??)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse me</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry to interrupt</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you have the wedding list for Banks?

| Shop assistant: | |
|-----------------| |
| Certainly, sir. | |

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.

**UNDERLYING MEANING:** Attracting attention (slight irony??)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse me</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry to interrupt</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you have the wedding list for Banks?

| Shop assistant: | |
|-----------------| |
| Certainly, sir. | |

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.

**UNDERLYING MEANING:** Attracting attention (slight irony??)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse me</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry to interrupt</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you have the wedding list for Banks?

| Shop assistant: | |
|-----------------| |
| Certainly, sir. | |

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.

**UNDERLYING MEANING:** Attracting attention (slight irony??)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse me</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry to interrupt</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you have the wedding list for Banks?

| Shop assistant: | |
|-----------------| |
| Certainly, sir. | |

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.

**UNDERLYING MEANING:** Attracting attention (slight irony??)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse me</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry to interrupt</td>
<td>Apologising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you have the wedding list for Banks?

| Shop assistant: | |
|-----------------| |
| Certainly, sir. | |

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.
**Charles:** Excuse me
Sorry to interrupt

**Shop assistant:**
Certainly, sir.

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.

---

**Charles:**
Do you have the wedding list for Banks?

**Shop assistant:**
Certainly, sir.

Lots of beautiful things for around about the thousand pound mark.

---

**Charles:**
What about things around the sort of fifty pound mark?

**Shop assistant:**
Well, you could get that Pygmy warrior over there.

**Charles:** This? Excellent!

---

**Charles:**
What about things around the sort of fifty pound mark?

**Shop assistant:**
Well, you could get that Pygmy warrior over there.

**Charles:** This? Excellent!

---

**Shop assistant:**
...if you could find someone to chip in the other three thousand nine hundred and fifty pounds.

Or our carrier bags are one pound fifty each.

Why don't you just get 33 of them?
**Shop assistant:**
...if you could find someone to chip in the other three thousand nine hundred and fifty pounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shop assistant:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...if you could find someone to chip in the other three thousand nine hundred and fifty pounds.</td>
<td>Providing clarification</td>
<td>Expressing derision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Or our carrier bags are one pound fifty each.

| Or our carrier bags are one pound fifty each. | Providing information/ Commenting | Ex pressing derision |

Why don’t you just get 33 of them?

| Why don’t you just get 33 of them? | Suggesting | Ex pressing derision |

**Charles:**
Well, I think I’ll probably leave it.

Thanks very much. You’ve been very….

**Charles:**
Well, I think I’ll probably leave it.

Predicting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well, I think I’ll probably leave it.</td>
<td>Predicting</td>
<td>Expressing intent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thanks very much. You’ve been very….

| Thanks very much. You’ve been very…. | Thanking | Thanking complimenting (incomplete) |

**Suddenly Carrie appears in the shop.**

**Carrie:** What did you get?

**Charles:** Blimey! Well, I never!
Nothing yet.
I’m just, you know, deciding.

**Carrie:** What did you get?

**Charles:** Blimey! Well, I never!
Nothing yet.
I’m just, you know, deciding.

**Carrie:**
It’s nice to see you.

**Charles:**
It’s nice to see you.

**Carrie:**
This present thing is great.
I should’ve gotten married years ago.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carrie:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It's nice to see you.</td>
<td>Greeting/ Expressing feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles:</td>
<td>SURFACE MEANING</td>
<td>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's nice to see you.</td>
<td>Expressing feelings</td>
<td>Indicating that feelings are similar??</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie:</td>
<td>SURFACE MEANING</td>
<td>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This present thing is great – I should've got married years ago</td>
<td>Expressing regret about a past action</td>
<td>Probably just making casual conversation, but there is a slight hint that maybe she should have married Charles…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- *(to shop assistant)*
  Anybody get the Pygmy?

- **Shop assistant:**
  The young man thought about it...

- Carrie:
  - No!
  - Just get me an ashtray.
  - Are you free for about a half-hour?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carrie:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you free for about a half-hour?</td>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>Preparation for inviting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop assistant:</td>
<td>SURFACE MEANING</td>
<td>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The young man thought about it...</td>
<td>Answering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie:</td>
<td>SURFACE MEANING</td>
<td>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No! Just get me an ashtray.</td>
<td>Expressing surprise/disbelief</td>
<td>Commanding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Charles:
  Yeah.
  I'm meeting my brother, but I can be a bit late....

- Carrie:
  - Oh good –
  - come with me
  - I have an important decision to make

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, I'm meeting my brother, but I can be a bit late....</td>
<td>Accepting invitation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie:</td>
<td>SURFACE MEANING</td>
<td>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh good – come with me I have an important decision to make</td>
<td>Commanding Elaborating</td>
<td>Commanding Inviting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charles:</th>
<th>SURFACE MEANING</th>
<th>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, I'm meeting my brother, but I can be a bit late....</td>
<td>Accepting invitation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie:</td>
<td>SURFACE MEANING</td>
<td>UNDERLYING MEANING(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh good – come with me I have an important decision to make</td>
<td>Commanding Elaborating</td>
<td>Commanding Inviting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
 TASK 3

Speech acts and cross cultural communication
(see Task sheet)

Wierzbicka quotes Searle:

The mechanisms are not peculiar to this language or that, but at the same time the standard forms from one language will not always maintain their indirect speech potential when translated from one language to another within the class of idiomatic sentences, some forms tend to become entrenched as conventional devices for indirect speech acts. In the case of directives, in which politeness is the chief motivation for the indirect forms, certain forms are conventionally used as polite requests. Which kinds of forms are selected will, in all likelihood, vary from one language to another. (Searle 1975:76-77)

And disagrees...

But this makes it sound as if the variation were more or less random and accidental, whereas the general mechanisms were universal. In fact, as I have tried to show, specific differences between languages in the area of so called “indirect” speech acts are motivated, to a considerable degree, by differences in cultural norms and cultural assumptions, and the general mechanisms themselves are culture-specific.

Wierzbicka 2002:61

Source: