Mohammed Kheidher University of Biskra

Faculty of Arabic Language Arts & Foreign Languages

Division of Foreign Languages

Department of English Studies

(**Major**) Sciences of Language (**Module**) Pragmatics

(**Class**) First Year Master (**Instructor**) Dr.SEGUENI Lamri

**Speech Acts**

**Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.** (Hamlet III.ii.20)

**Outcomes of the tutorial**: By the end of this tutorial, you will be able to:

1**. Develop** an encompassing definition of speech acts.

2. **Familiarize** with the different types of speech acts.

3. **Perform** various speech acts with their illocutionary force.

4. **Interpret** and respond to different speech acts.

**Terminology used in this tutorial**: speech acts, locution, illocution perlocution ,constative, performative, felicity conditions, form and function, direct and indirect speech acts.

The philosopher J.L. Austin (1911-1960) claims that many utterances (things people say) are equivalent to actions. When someone says: “I name this ship” or “I now pronounce you man and wife”, the utterance creates a new social or psychological reality. We can add many more examples:

* Sergeant Major: Squad, by the left… left turn!
* Referee: (Pointing to the centre circle) Goal!
* Groom: With this ring, I thee wed.

Whether one asserts or merely suggests, promises or merely indicates an intention, persuades or merely argues, depends not only on the literal meaning of one's words, but what one intends to do with them, and the institutional and social setting in which the linguistic activity occurs. One thing a speaker might intend to do, and be taken to do, in saying "I'll be there to pick you up at six," is to *promise* to pick his listener up at that time. The ability to promise and to intend to promise arguably depends on the existence of a social practice or set of conventions about what a promise is and what constitutes promising. Austin especially emphasized the importance of social fact and conventions in doing things with words, in particular with respect to the class of speech acts known as *illocutionary acts*.

Austin began by distinguishing between what he called ‘***constatives***’ and ‘***performatives*.**’

1. **A constative** : It is simply saying something true or false.

2.**A performative** :It is *doing* something by speaking; paradigmatically, one can get married by saying "I do" (Austin, 1961).

Constatives are true or false, depending on their correspondence (or not) with the facts; performatives are actions and, as such, are not true or false, but ‘**felicitous’** or ‘**infelicitous,**’ depending on whether or not they successfully perform the action in question. In particular, performative utterances to be felicitous must invoke an existing convention and be invoked in the right circumstances.

**Felicity Conditions :** They take their name from a Latin root - “felix” or “happy”. They are conditions needed for success or achievement of a performative. Only certain people are qualified to declare war, marry people or sentence convicted felons. There are certain expected or appropriate circumstances, technically known as felicity conditions.

**1**.There are **general conditions** on the participants, for example, that they can understands the language being used and that they are not play acting or being nonsensical.

**2**. **Content Conditions**: For example, for both a promise and warning, the content of the utterance must be about a future event.

**3. Preparatory conditions**: for a promise are significantly different from those for a warning. When I promise to do something, there are two preparatory conditions: first, the event will not happen by itself, and second, the event will have a beneficial effect. When I utter a warning, there are the following preparatory conditions: it is isn’t clear that the hearer knows the event will occur, the speaker does think the event will occur, and the event will not have a beneficial effect.

**4. Sincerity Conditions** For a promise, the speaker genuinely intends to carry out the future action, and, for a warning the speaker genuinely believes that the future event will; not have a beneficial effect. The fact that by the act of uttering a promise, I thereby intend to create an obligation to carry out the action as promised. In other words, the utterance changes my state from non-obligation to obligation. Thus essential conditions combines with a specification of what must be in the utterance content, the context ,and the speaker’s intentions in order for a speech act to felicitously performed.

**5. Essential Conditions**: They define the act being performed in the sense that the speaker that the speaker has the intention that his or her utterance will count as the identifiable act, and that this intention is recognized by the addressee. In other words, the utterance changes my state from non-obligation to obligation such as in promises .In the case of a warning, under the essential conditions, the utterance changes my state from non-informing to a bad future of informing.

In addition to the distinction between performatives and constatives , Austin (1962) proposed a new three-fold distinction.

According to this trichotomy, a speech act is, first of all, ***a locutionary act***, that is, an act of saying something. Saying something can also be viewed from three different perspectives: (i) as **a *phonetic*** act: uttering certain noises; (ii) as **a *phatic*** act: uttering words "belonging to and as belonging to, a certain vocabulary, conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar"; and (iii) as a ***rhetic act***: uttering words "with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference" (Austin, 1962a, 95). Now, to perform a locutionary act is also in general to perform an ***illocutionary act***; *in* performing a locutionary act, we perform an act with a certain *force*: ordering, warning, assuring, promising, expressing an intention, and so on. And *by* doing that, we will normally produce "certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons" that Austin calls ***perlocutionary***. At the point of his untimely death, Austin's work on speech act theory was far from complete. His main work, *How to do things with words* was published posthumously, based on lecture notes of Austin and his students.

Searle’s (1969) later systematization of Austin’s work, in which he proposes a typology of speech acts based on *felicity conditions* (the social and cultural criteria that have to be met for the act to have the desired effect), came very influential. Austin and Searle’s position can be formulated by saying that all utterances not only express propositions, but also perform actions. The *illocutionary act*, or, more simply, the *speech act*, is at a privileged level within these actions. Searle’s typology of speech acts is rooted in the range of illocutionary verbs that occur in a given language. According to this author, then, there are five basic kinds of action that a speaker can perform by means of the following five types of utterance:

1) **Representatives**: Acts which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (e.g.: concluding, asserting). Here the speaker asserts a proposition to be true, using such verbs as: affirm, believe, conclude, deny, report.

2) **Directives**: Attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something e.g.: questioning, requesting, ordering, begging, forbidding, instructing, urging, warning). Here the speaker tries to make the hearer do something, with such words as: ask, beg, challenge, command, dare, invite, insist, request.

3) **Commissives**: Acts which commit the speaker to some future course of action (e.g.: promising, threatening, offering, guaranteeing, pledging, swearing, vowing, undertaking, warranting, inviting, offering, swearing, volunteering ). Here the speaker commits himself (or herself) to a (future) course of action, with verbs such as: guarantee, pledge, promise, swear, vow, undertake, warrant.

4) **Expressives**: Acts which express a psychological state (e.g.: apologizing, welcoming, thanking, appreciating, congratulating, deploring, detesting, and regretting). Here the speaker expresses an attitude to or about a state of affairs, using such verbs as: apologize, appreciate, congratulate, deplore, detest, regret, thank, welcome, .regret, thank, welcome.

5) **Declaratives**: Acts which bring about immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and thus tend to rely on extra-linguistic institutions (e.g.: christening, declaring war, excommunicating, sentencing (a convict to Capital Punishment), pronouncing (a couple husband and wife), naming (e.g. a ship).