What are speech acts?

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Speech acts are utterances that perform actions (Allan & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan, 1995; 2006a; 2007b; 2008a; 2011b; 2013b; 2016a; 2016c). Their focus is usually less on their truth value than on their illocutionary effect, the effect that a speaker wishes to have on his or her environment (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008b; 2013a; 2014b; 2014c). The study of speech acts initially focused on performative acts such as making a bet, naming a ship (or a person), or declaring two people to be married (Flowerdew, 2013; Salmani Nodoushan, 2006b; 2007a; 2012a; 2012b; 2015a; 2015b). However, no utterance exists in a vacuum, and all speech can be considered to have illocutionary effects (Salmani Nodoushan, 2016d; 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2019). Therefore, the study of speech acts has broadened to include more or less every kind of utterance, as well as the interpersonal aspects of whole texts (Salmani Nodoushan, 2011a; 2014a; 2016b), different genres (Bhatia & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Johns & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2012; Salmani Nodoushan & Montazeran, 2012), and even grammatical constructs (Capone & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan & Mohiyedin Ghomshei, 2014).

A variety of methods exist for classifying speech acts based on their illocutionary effects. Austin (1975) and Searle (1976) devised two well-known taxonomies of speech act that are still used today to study the interpersonal features of texts. However, both of these classification systems are incomplete in their description of speech acts. In this paper, I will address the shortcomings of both systems, including Searle's criticism of Austin's taxonomy, and propose a new taxonomy

based on Searle's that incorporates features of Brown's (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper et al.'s (2003) impoliteness theory in order to make more precise distinctions among classes of speech acts.

Taxonomies of Speech Acts

- ### 2.1.1 Austin's Taxonomy

Austin (1975) establishes five categories of speech act based on broad classes of illocutionary force. They are as follows. Verdictives are acts in which a verdict or appraisal is given, usually by someone in a position of power to give that appraisal. Exercitives involve the exercise "of powers, rights, or influence." Austin's examples of exercitives include "appointing…urging… warning, &c." Commissives commit the speaker to an action or intention; they include promises as well as mental commitments like taking one side of an argument (Austin, 1975).

The last two of Austin's categories are broader than the first three, and defined in a vague way that Austin acknowledges as problematic. Behabitives have to do with social behavior, including "apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, and challenging." Austin acknowledges the broad scope of this category, but moves on to describing the even vaguer expositives, which he defines as "mak[ing] plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation, how we are using words, or, in general, are expository. Examples are 'I reply', 'I argue', 'I concede', 'I illustrate', 'I assume', 'I postulate'" (Austin, 1975).

- ### Searle's Taxonomy

Searle (1976) challenges Austin's taxonomy on the basis of the categories that Austin himself admits are problematic. They are too vaguely defined: Searle points out that many of the example words Austin chooses fit into multiple categories; for example, "describe" is listed as both a verdictive (in that it reports findings) and an expositive (in that it is an act of exposition). Searle goes so far as to challenge Austin's claim that his categories are based on types of illocutionary force, claiming that, of Austin's categories, only commissives are "clearly and unambiguously" based on the illocutionary point of the actions they describe (Searle, 1976).

In response, Searle establishes a set of features that vary across speech acts and creates a taxonomy of speech acts based on variation in these features. Searle lists twelve of these features, which he calls "dimensions of variation," but the following three are most significant for his purposes. First is illocutionary point, the purpose of a speech act. Searle illustrates illocutionary point by comparing requests with commands: while they are different speech acts with different amounts of force behind them, they share the purpose of getting the addressee to do something. Second is direction of fit: whether the words comprising the speech act are intended to match the world, as in assertions and descriptions, or the world is intended to match the words of the speech act, as in promises and requests. Searle's example of world-to-word fit is a shopping list used by a man in a grocery store; his example of word-to-world fit is a detective following the shopper around the store and writing down everything he buys. Third is expressed psychological state, which is less precise but can still be generalized across classes of speech act. If a speech act contains propositional content, the act must also express the speaker's attitude

Based on these features, Searle creates the following five categories of speech act. Representatives commit the speaker to the truth value of a proposition. Their fit is word-to-world, and their psychological state is belief in a proposition; examples include suggesting, insisting, complaining, and deducing. Directives try to get their addressee to do something. Their fit is world-to-words, and their psychological state is a desire "that the hearer…does some future action." Examples include requesting, inviting, and challenging. Searle borrows his third category, commissives, from Austin's system, but defines it more tightly than Austin on the basis of his own system of features. Commissives fit world-to¬word, and their psychological state is an intention that the speaker do "some future action" (Searle, 1976).

His fourth category, expressives, describes the speaker's attitude toward the propositional content of the speech act, and includes many of Austin's behabitives, such as apologies, thanks, and congratulations. They are presupposed to be true and therefore have no direction of fit. His fifth category, declarations, is essentially performative utterances: speaking a declaration causes it to become true. Searle describes declarations as having bidirectional fit: the words fit the world at the same time as the world is caused to fit the words (Searle, 1976). The descriptions of the direction of fit of expressives and declarations are not entirely satisfactory, for reasons that will become clear in the following section.

Criticism of Searle's Taxonomy

Searle's criticism of Austin's taxonomy as insufficiently rigorous is a valid one: as we have seen, Austin's categories overlap to the extent that verdictives and expositives are essentially the same category repeated, and his main criterion of classification, the illocutionary force or purpose of an act, is vaguely defined except in the case of commissives, a category Searle borrows for his own taxonomy (Searle, 1976).

Searle's taxonomy is superior to Austin's in that it begins with a strict set of organizational principles and holds to them. However, the application of these principles to his categories is not without fault. He acknowledges one shortcoming himself: that directives and commissives seem, under his rules, to be one category, except for the fact that directives impose on the hearer and commissives on the speaker. In fact, though he reports three colleagues of his suggested to him that this fact is sufficient to combine directives and commissives into one category, Searle brushes off these suggestions, saying that "[he has] been unable to make [them] work" (Searle, 1976).

The greater flaw in Searle's analysis is his insistence on giving each of his categories a unique direction of fit. This is an impossible task, as he admits in his definition of direction of fit, but his attempts to do it anyway weaken his theory by expanding a reasonable binary feature into one with multiple unnecessary values. Searle describes his expressives as having no direction of fit because the truth of the utterance is presupposed (Searle, 1976); however, the truth of his representatives can be assumed in the same way, given the Sincerity Condition of speech acts, which requires that the speaker of a speech act sincerely intend the probable illocutionary force of that act. In the case of representatives, this means that the speaker is describing the world honestly and accurately as he or she sees it. As a result, representatives have an unambiguous word-to-world fit.

In the case of expressives, the Sincerity Condition also requires that the speaker describe a state of being honestly and accurately as he or she perceives it. Under Searle's rules, expressives and representatives should therefore be a single category, and yet Searle insists on giving expressives their own direction of fit because they describe expressions of emotion and not tangible features of the speaker's environment.

A similar problem occurs in Searle's description of declarations as having two directions of fit. Describing declarations as world-to-word makes sense: a speaker performs an act, such as taking an oath of office, and the world changes so that the propositional content of the utterance is true. But describing them as simultaneously word-to-world is inappropriate, as can be seen in Searle's definition of mistakes in word-to-world utterances. Imagine a detective following another man around a grocery store and writing down everything that man buys:

> If the detective gets home and suddenly realizes that the man bought pork chops instead of bacon, he can simply erase the word 'bacon' and write 'pork chops'. (Searle, 1976, p. 3)

A change in the state of the world (the man bought pork chops instead of bacon) causes a change in the propositional content of a word-to-world utterance (the report that reads "bacon" is now untruthful). This is not the case for declarative speech acts. Barack Obama took the oath of office that made him President of the United States in 2009 and again in 2013. When he leaves office in 2017, the American presidential oath of office will not suddenly become false. In fact, it has no truth value, which is what drew Austin's attention to speech acts in the first place (Austin, 1975, p. 5). Since declarations have no truth value, they can only have a world-to-word direction of fit as directives and commissives do. Not only is it impossible for Searle to give each of his categories a unique direction of fit, it is also unnecessary. Direction of fit can be used as a simple binary feature to separate Searle's representatives and expressives from his commissives, directives, and declarations.

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