Speech Act Theory

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(KW=Kulturwirt)

Modul VIII
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What is a speech act?

“A speech act is an utterance that serves a function in communication.”

We perform speech acts in everyday life by:
- Greeting
- Apologising
- Requesting
- Complaining and so on...

The cultural differences are also important while performing a speech act.

http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/definition.html
John L. Austin’s short biography

- **Name:**
  John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960)

- **Function:**
  famous British philosopher
  and professor at the University of Oxford

- **Famous for:**

  - Speech Act Theory
  - book: “How to do things with words”

(cf. Longworth, Guy: 2014)
Performative and constative

Austin distinguishes between the two main speech act as performatives and constatives:

**Performatives:**
are used to undertake an action which is rather felicitous or infelicitous.

**Constatives:**
are used to make just a statement which can be either true or false.

(Cf. Longworth:online) [http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/austin-jl/]
Felicity conditions by Austin

Two types:

1) Constitutive conditions: necessary to successfully perform an speech act.

2) Regulative conditions: “concerned how happily or how well it is performed” (Geis:4).

=> further developed by Searle
Example of felicity conditions

One Example of “How to do things with words”:
“I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*- as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.” (Austin:p.5)

=> It is necessary to smash the bottle against the stem in order to make this speech act happy or felicitous. Otherwise the speech act is infelicitous to keep it simple.
Locution / Illocution / Perlocution

Distinction between the following:

- **Locution** => (“the words that are uttered or written”)
- **Illocution** => (“the speaker’s or writer’s intention [...]”)
- **Perlocution** => (“the intended effect [...]”)

(Archer, D. and Grundy: p.12)
Example of English

Example to illustrated the distinction between the Locution / Illocution and Perlocution of an simple English sentence:

What happens when you hear the question, **Would you close the door?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locution / Intention</th>
<th>Illocution / Meaning:</th>
<th>Perlocution/ effect on the hearer:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The door is open.</td>
<td>Close the door.</td>
<td>It could be too noisy therefore I have to close the door.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cross-cultural example of Polish

“
A characteristic Polish offer in likely to involve a diminutive (Wierzbicka 1991: 51):

Wez jeszcze sledzika! Koniecznie!
“Take some more dear-little-herring-(DIM)! You must!”

Instead, one might say in English:

Would you like some more herring? Are you sure?

Consider a Polish request to stay involving insistence as well as a diminutive (Wierzbicka 1991: 52):

Ale jeszcze troszczek! Ale koniecznie!
“But [stay] a little-DIM more! But you must!”

(Trosborg: p.497)
Cross-cultural example of Polish

Weź jeszcze siedzika! Koniecznie!
“Take some more dear-little-herring-(DIM)! You must!”

Locution: => what is said: Try more herrings.
Illocution: => meaning: That you should try more herring.
Perlocution: => effect: That you need to try this herring in order to be “polite”.

Ale jeszcze troszeczke! Ale koniecznie!
“But [stay] a little-DIM more! But you must!”

The same locution/Ilocution and Perlocution as the example above but more intense in requesting.
Conclusion

Austin was the creator of speech act theory:

He made clear that by saying something we do perform an action or just state things.

He also stated that there are differences in perceiving a speech act by differentiating a speech act into locution, illocution and perlocution.

And as a last point he made clear that speech acts (performatives) can be felicitous or infelicitous.
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Picture of J.L. Austin:
Hoffmann, "John Langshaw Austin".
http://home.edo.uni-dortmund.de/~hoffmann/Reader/Austin.html [accessed 18 May 2014]
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   5. Essential rule

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Searle’s Speech Act Theory

Introduction:

- Like Austin, Searle believes that the meaning of a speech act cannot be accounted in the absence of the context.
- Sentences (types) alone do not express propositions.
- Sentences in a context or tokens, express propositions (Searle 1969:16).

- **Austin**: many ways of describing same speech act (physical act, act of reference, perlocutionary act, and illocutionary act).
- **Searle**: the speech act or illocutionary act:
  - basic unit of language
  - the production of a token in the context of a speech act (not the word, sentence type or the theory) (Searle 1969:16).

- a **token** as an **instance of communication**:
  - relevancy of the speakers’ intentions
  - correct understanding and description of their utterances
Conditions:

- Individual speech act: ‘promising’ rules and set of necessary and sufficient conditions

- Searle’s **first question** is:

  - What conditions can be formulated for a speech act to ‘count as’ a promise? (Jacob L. Mey 1993:118)

  - nine conditions to the discussion of the speech act **promising**
Condition 1:
- To obtain normal input and output conditions
- know how to deal with language; must speak it; do not have any special handicaps

Condition 2:
- `propositional content´ (Searle) is needed for the promise

  e.g. *I promise I´ll be there tomorrow.*
  
  *(Mey 1993:119)*

- propositional content:
  to be there tomorrow; the day after tomorrow
Condition 3:

- A future, possible action of the speaker
  - promising to try and make somebody else do sth.

Condition 4:

- Promise must be to the advantage of the `promisee`
  
  `a promise is a pledge to do something for you, not to you ... a threat is a pledge to do something to you, not for you´ (Searle, 1969: 58).
Example:

`If you do not behave, I promise there´s going to be trouble.´ (Mey 1993:119)

- Threat includes formulation of a promise
- No promise → no advantage of the promisee
Condition 5:
- Content of promising: not clearly if it is going to happen anyway
- Searle: conditions are not obvious in the normal course of events
- (4) and (5) often called preparatory conditions

Condition 6:
- Sincerity condition: (S intends to do A)
- Sincerity: promiser must intend to carry out act that he promises to do
Condition 7:

- **Essential condition**: promiser intends to put himself under the obligation of carrying out the promised act

- ‘cornerstone of Searle’s philosophy of promises’ (Mey; 1993: 120)

Condition 8:

- ‘promisee now understands that a promise is being made or the utterance conventionally produces this understanding in the promisee that the utterance counts as the undertaking of an obligation’ (Searle 1969: 61).
- **Condition 9:**
  - *Wrap-up condition:*
  - promise between speaker and hearer, promiser and promisee is correctly and sincerely uttered
  - must obtain all conditions (1-8)
Rules:

- Searle’s **second question** is:
  
  - *What rules govern a successful use of this speech act?*  
    (Jacob L. Mey 1993:118)

**Promising** (by S to H of A via P using E):

1. **Propositional/content rule**:

   - Content of the utterance is about a future act A of the speaker
   
   - Captures conditions 2 and 3
2. Preparatory rule:

1. P is to be uttered only if the ‘promise contains something that the promisee actually wants to happen to him/her’ (Mey 1993:122).

1. P is to be uttered only if it is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.

➢ Captures conditions 4 and 5
4. **Sincerity rule:**

- P is to be uttered only if S intends to do A/to carry out his/her promise.

- Corresponding to the sincerity condition (6)

5. **Essential rule:**

- The utterance of P counts as an undertaking of an obligation to do A (Searle).

- Analogical to condition 7
Could you close the window?

- **Requesting:** (by S to H via P using E);

  **Propostional condition:** Future act A of H.
  (by S´s P using E)

  **Prep. conditions:**
  
  - 1. H is able to do A. S believes H is able to do A.
  - 2. It is not obvious to both that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accounts.

  **Sincerity condition:** S wants H to do A.

  **Essential condition:** The utterance E of P (request) counts as an attempt to get H to do A.
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Classification of Speech Acts

- Searle’s five-part classification where he divides the illocutionary acts into: (Searle 1977: 34-8)

  ➔ **Representatives:** They contain a certain statement about the world e.g. describing, claiming, concluding...

    Example: ‘No one makes a better cake than me.’

  ➔ **Directives:** They direct the hearer towards doing something; e.g. ordering, asking, requesting, advising...

    Example: ‘Could you close the window?’
→ **Commisives:** Speaker commits himself to doing something e.g. promising, threatening, offering...

Example: `I'm going to Paris tomorrow`

→ **Expressives:** They express how the speaker feels about a certain situation; e.g. thanking, apologising, welcoming...

Example: Saying `Excuse me` when stepping on a person’s toe. (Mey 2001, 165)
→ **Declarations:**  The point of which is to bring something about in the world e.g. christening, marrying, firing

Example: "You’re (hereby) fired"
Direction of `fit`

- Relation between the word (``language``) and the world (``reality``)

- The `fit` can have two directions:
  
  → **Words-to-world:** The language is `fitted to`, or even `fit for` my environment

    `My checking account is 7000$ in the red` (Mey 2001, 155)

  
  → **World-to-words:** Here the world is fitted to my words

    `Please transfer $7,000 from my savings to put into my account` (Mey 2001, 155)
In speech acting, either the language is fitted to reality, or reality is fitted to language.

- Two further possible cases are:
  - **No direction of fit**
  - **Bidirectional fit**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech-act category</th>
<th>Direction of fit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representatives</strong></td>
<td><strong>Words fit the world</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>No one makes a better cake than me</code></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directives</strong></td>
<td><strong>World will fit the words</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>Could you close the window</code></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commisives</strong></td>
<td><strong>World will fit the words</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>I´m going to Paris</code></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expressives</strong></td>
<td><strong>No direction of fit</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>Excuse me</code></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>** Declarations**</td>
<td><strong>Bidirectional fit</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>I just resigned</code>; <code>You´re fired</code></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Criticism of Searle`s classification

- Example: Saying `Excuse me` when stepping on sb`s toes
  - According to Searle excusing oneself does not change the world
  - But there are also other factors that change the world
  - Words fit the `psychological` world (Paccei 1999:53)

- Cross-cultural differences
  - West-Africa: Use of an excuse does not connate any guilt on the speaker
  - Japan: One can say `sumimasen` in situations where an excuse would be inappropriate in our culture (Mey 2001)
Indirect Speech Act

- Is a combination of a primary illocutionary act and a secondary act

- ‘....The secondary illocutionary act is literal; the primary illocutionary act is not literal ... The question is, how does the listener understand the nonliteral primary illocutionary act from understanding the literal secondary illocutionary act?’ (Searle 1975:62)

- Example: A: ‘Let’s go to the movies’
  B: ‘I have to study for an exam’ (Searle 1975:61)
The ten steps of Searle

- **Step 1:** Bare facts of the case. A has made a suggestion and B made a statement

- **Step 2:** A assumes B to be cooperative in the conversation and that his answer is taken to be relevant

- **Step 3:** Relevant answers in this situation could be: acceptance, rejection or counter-suggestions

- **Step 4:** None of these relevant answers matches the answer that is given (study for the exam)
Step 5: B means something different by uttering his statement → his primary intention is different from his secondary one.

Step 6: Factual, shared information about the world: One needs time to study for an exam.

Step 7: The consequence is that B does not want to combine the two things: go to the movies and study.

Step 8: Any speech act that have to do with proposals are the ability to carry out such a proposed act.
**Step 9:** From this, A can infer that B`s utterance is meant to tell him that he cannot accept his proposal (this follows from steps 1, 7 and 8)

**Step 10:** We conclude that B`s primary intention in mentioning his exam preparation has been to reject A`s proposal (from steps 5 and 9)

→ `In normal conversation no one would consciously go through the steps involved in this reasoning`
References

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Thanks for your attention 😊