

Speech acts



When a person utters a sequence of words, the speaker is often trying to **achieve some effect** with those words, an effect which might in some cases have been accomplished by an alternative **action**.

The words **‘Get back!’** might convey the same notion as a push.

A judge’s statement: **‘I sentence you to five years’
imprisonment’**

has the same effect as if the judge had marched a man along to a prison, and locked him up.

In brief, a number of utterances behave somewhat like actions.

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- Even an ordinary utterance such as '*Violets are blue*' might be regarded as a special type of act, the act of making a statement: (I state that:) *Violets are blue*.
- This overall approach is known as **speech act theory**, and it is another method by which philosophers and linguists have tried to classify the ways in which **humans use language**, in this case by treating it as **parallel to other actions** which humans perform.

Proponents of speech act theory try, in the first place, to list the various possible speech acts which a speaker might attempt to perform – **statements, requests, queries, commands, promises, placing of bets**, and so on.

Speech acts



- At the heart of the list come **statements**, **questions** and **commands**:
- (I state that:) *It's cold.*
- (I ask you:) *What's the time?*
- (I command you:) *Go away!*
- These are examples of **direct** speech acts: the act is expressed **overtly** by the most obvious linguistic means.

But many speech acts are **indirect**, in that they **possess the syntactic structure more usually associated with another act.**

Speech acts



<u>Form</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>type of speech act</u>
1. Declarative (I am happy.)	Statement	Direct
2. Interrogative (Are you happy?)	Question	Direct
3. Imperative (Go away!)	Command/Request	Direct

If the syntactic **form** **corresponds** to the pragmatic **function**, the speech act is **direct**.

If the syntactic **form** **does not correspond** to the pragmatic **function**, the speech act is **indirect**.

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For example, the following might all be intended as commands, yet only the first has the typical command structure:

- *Go to bed!*
- *Isn't it past your bedtime?*
- *You should have been in bed long ago.*

- The **first** is therefore a **direct speech act**, but the **second two** are **indirect speech acts**.

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But how do people **know which speech act is intended**, if each act can use the syntactic structure typically associated with one of the others?

A possible answer is to specify **felicity conditions: circumstances under which it would be appropriate to interpret something as a particular type of speech act.**

For example, if a genuine command has been given, the hearer must be physically capable of doing it, and must be able to identify the object(s) involved.

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What type of speech acts are the following? Which of them are direct speech acts and which indirect?

1. Close the door.
2. I need your car.
3. Can you bring me a glass of water, please?
4. You have to be present tomorrow.
5. I will always be faithful to you.
6. I don't like politics.

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	<u>Form</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>type of speech act</u>
1. Close the door.	Imperative	Request	Direct
2. I need your car.	Declarative	Request	Indirect
3. Can you bring me a glass of water, please?	Interrogative	Request	Indirect
4. You have to be present tomorrow.	Declarative	Request	Indirect
5. I will always be faithful to you.	Declarative	Promise	Direct
6. I don't like politics.	Declarative	Statement	Direct

Speech acts



Someone needs to make a phone call. Make an offer using different syntactic forms?

1. Declarative
2. Interrogative.
3. Imperative

1. You can use my phone./ You may take my phone.
2. Do you need my phone?/ Shall I give you my phone?
3. Use my phone./ Take my phone.