

AI-03295 Saying Something vs Do Something

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What are "speech acts". Deep dive and unpack each topic and sub topic.

Let's do a comprehensive deep dive into **speech acts**. I'll break this down into concepts, subtopics, examples, and applications for clarity.

1. Definition of Speech Acts

A **speech act** is an utterance that performs an action rather than merely conveying information. Coined by philosophers **J.L. Austin** and developed further by **John Searle**, speech acts are central to **pragmatics**, the study of language in context.

Key idea: Saying something can *do something*. Words are not just descriptive; they can function as actions.

Example:

- Saying "I apologize" is performing the act of apologizing.
- Saying "I promise to call you" is performing the act of promising.

2. Austin's Theory (1962) – "How to Do Things with Words"

Austin identified **three levels of a speech act**:

2.1 Locutionary Act

- **Definition:** The act of saying something — the literal meaning or utterance itself.

- **Focus:** Syntax and semantics (words + meaning).
- **Example:** "It's cold in here." (the literal statement about temperature)

2.2 Illocutionary Act

- **Definition:** The *intent behind the utterance*. The speaker is doing something by saying it.
- **Focus:** Pragmatic force or social function.
- **Types of Illocutionary Acts:**
 1. **Assertives:** Commit speaker to truth (e.g., "It's raining.")
 2. **Directives:** Get listener to do something (e.g., "Close the window.")
 3. **Commissives:** Commit speaker to a future action (e.g., "I will help you.")
 4. **Expressives:** Express feelings or attitudes (e.g., "I'm sorry.")
 5. **Declarations:** Change reality via speech (e.g., "I now pronounce you husband and wife.")

2.3 Perlocutionary Act

- **Definition:** The effect or outcome the utterance has on the listener.
- **Focus:** Result or response induced by the speech act.
- **Example:** "It's cold in here." → Listener closes the window → the perlocutionary effect is achieved.

3. Searle's Classification (1969, 1975)

John Searle refined Austin's ideas, emphasizing rules and intentions behind speech acts.

3.1 Searle's Five Categories

1. Assertives / Representatives

- Commit speaker to truth.
- Examples: "The sky is blue," "Water boils at 100°C."

2. Directives

- Make listener act in a certain way.
- Examples: "Please pass the salt," "Shut the door."

3. Commissives

- Commit speaker to future action.
- Examples: "I'll meet you at 5 PM," "I swear to tell the truth."

4. Expressives

- Express psychological state.
- Examples: "I thank you," "I regret that," "Congratulations!"

5. Declarations

- Alter reality just by uttering them.
 - Examples: "You are fired," "I baptize you," "You are now promoted."
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4. Key Principles of Speech Acts

4.1 Felicity Conditions

- Conditions required for a speech act to be successful (Austin's term).
- Example: Saying "I promise" is only effective if the speaker intends to keep it and the listener understands the promise.

4.2 Direct vs Indirect Speech Acts

- **Direct:** Intent matches form.
 - "Please open the window." (directive)
- **Indirect:** Intent differs from literal form.
 - "It's stuffy in here." → implies request to open window (listener infers intent)

4.3 Context Dependence

- Speech acts rely heavily on **context**, including social norms, speaker–listener relationship, and situation.

4.4 Illocutionary Force

- The *power* or *force* of an utterance in performing the intended action.
 - Can be modulated by tone, politeness, and authority.
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5. Applications of Speech Act Theory

5.1 Linguistics

- Understanding pragmatics, meaning in context, and conversation analysis.

5.2 Communication & Negotiation

- Framing requests, making commitments, apologies, or persuasion more effective.

5.3 Artificial Intelligence / NLP

- Programming chatbots or virtual assistants to recognize and perform speech acts.

5.4 Philosophy & Law

- Examining promises, contracts, declarations, or legal speech (e.g., “I plead guilty”).

5.5 Social & Cultural Studies

- Understanding politeness, power dynamics, and indirect communication in different cultures.
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6. Advanced Topics / Extensions

6.1 Indirectness and Implicature

- Understanding meaning *beyond literal words* (Gricean maxims).

6.2 Performative Utterances

- Utterances that *perform the action* simply by being spoken, e.g., "I resign," "I christen this ship."

6.3 Meta-communication

- Talking about speech acts themselves, e.g., "I'm going to warn you..."

6.4 Speech Acts in Digital Media

- Emojis, likes, and reactions can be considered *paralinguistic speech acts*.

7. Common Examples

Type	Utterance	Intended Action
Assertive	"The report is due tomorrow."	Informing
Directive	"Could you send me the report?"	Requesting action
Commissive	"I will review the report."	Commitment
Expressive	"I'm sorry I missed the meeting."	Apologizing
Declaration	"You are officially enrolled."	Changing status

Summary:

Speech acts show that language is not just about *describing the world*, but also *shaping it*. Austin's locution/illocution/perlocution framework combined with Searle's classification provides a toolkit to analyze intention, effect, and social function of language.

If you want, I can **draw a full visual map** showing **Austin vs Searle vs Felicity conditions vs direct/indirect acts**, which makes this theory extremely easy to grasp and memorize.

Do you want me to do that?