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SPEECH ACT THEORY

Speech Act Theory

We have been considering ways in which we interpret the meaning of an utterance in terms of what the speaker intended to convey. We have not yet considered the fact that we usually know how the speaker intends us to "take" (or "interpret the function of") what is said. In very general terms, we can usually recognize the type of "action" performed by a speaker with the utterance. We use the term speech act to describe actions such as "requesting," "commanding," "questioning" or "informing." We can define a speech act as the action performed by a speaker with an utterance. If you say, I'll be there at six, you are not just speaking, you seem to be performing the speech act of "promising."

Direct and indirect speech acts

We usually use certain syntactic structures with the functions listed beside them in the table below. When an interrogative structure such as Did you ...?, Are they ...? or Can we ...? is used with the function of a question, it is described as a direct speech act. For example, when we don't know something and we ask someone to provide the information, we produce a direct speech act such as Can you ride a bicycle?. Compare that utterance with Can you pass the salt?. In this second example, we are not really asking a question about someone's ability.

	Structures	functions
Did you eat the pizza?	Interrogative	Question
Eat the pizza (please)!	Imperative	Command (Request)
You ate the pizza.	Declarative	Statement

In fact, we don't normally use this structure as a question at all. We normally use it to make a request. That is, we are using a structure associated with the function of a question, but in this case with the function of a request. This is an example of an indirect speech act. Whenever one of the structures in the set above is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it on the same line, the result is an indirect speech act. The utterance You left the door open has a declarative structure and, as a direct speech act, would be used to make a statement. However, if you say this to someone who has just come in (and it's cold outside), you would probably want that person to close the door. You aren't using the imperative structure. You are using a declarative structure to make a request. It's another indirect speech act. It is possible to have strange effects if one person fails to recognize another person's indirect speech act. Consider the following scene. A visitor to a city, carrying his luggage, looking lost, stops a passer-by. visitor: Excuse me. Do you know where the Ambassador Hotel is? passer-by: Oh sure, I know where it is. (and walks away) In this scene, the visitor uses a form normally associated with a question (Do you know ...?), and the passer-by answers that question literally (I know ...). That is, the passer-by is acting as if the utterance was a direct speech act instead of an indirect speech act used as a request for directions. The main reason we use indirect speech acts seems to be that actions such as requests, presented in an indirect way (Could you open that door for me?), are generally more polite in our society than direct speech acts (Open that door for me!). Exactly why they are more polite is based on some complex assumptions.

Intension and [extension](#), in [logic](#), correlative words that indicate the reference of a [term](#) or concept: "intension" indicates the internal content of a term or concept that [constitutes](#) its formal definition; and "extension" indicates its range of applicability by naming the particular objects that it denotes. For instance, the intension of "ship" as a [substantive](#) is "vehicle for [conveyance](#) on water," whereas its extension embraces such things as cargo ships, passenger ships, battleships, and sailing ships. The distinction between intension and extension is not the same as that between [connotation](#) and [denotation](#).

5 types of speech acts by Searle

Let's take a look at each category and some examples.

Declarations - The speaker declares something that has the potential to bring about a change in the world.

'I now declare you husband and wife.'

'You're fired!'

Assertives - The speaker asserts an idea, opinion, or suggestion. The speaker presents 'facts' of the world, such as statements and claims.

'Paris is the capital of France.'

'I watched a great documentary last night.'

Expressives - The speaker states something about their psychological attitudes and their attitudes towards a situation. This could be an apology, a welcome, or an expression of gratitude.

I'm so sorry about yesterday. '

'I really appreciate your help.'

Directives - The speaker intends to get the listener to do something. This could be by giving an order, offering advice, or making a request.

'Pass me the salt please.'

'You should not drink that!'

Commissives - The speaker commits to doing something in the future. This could be making a promise, a plan, a vow, or a bet.

'I'll see you at 6 tomorrow'

'I do!'