

# Speech Act Theory: Development, Structure, And Classifications (Through Examples from Oliver Twist)

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**Abstract:** The object of this research is the theory of speech acts as a key component of pragmatic linguistics. The article investigates the evolution and structure of speech act theory, tracing its development from the foundational ideas of J.L. Austin — particularly the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts — to J.R. Searle’s refinements involving propositional content and felicity conditions. Central notions explored include illocutionary force, communicative intention, and the classification of speech acts based on their function and effect. The study further reviews the contributions of modern scholars such as D. Wunderlich, G.G. Pocheptsov, G. Leech, and others, who expanded the traditional categories by introducing additional types (e.g., erothetives, retractive acts, vocatives) and integrating sociopragmatic variables. By analyzing selected examples from *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, the article demonstrates how speech acts function within literary discourse and reflect broader communicative strategies. The practical relevance of speech act theory is emphasized through its application to both real-world and fictional interactions.

**Keywords:** Speech act, illocution, performativity, pragmatics, taxonomy.

**Introduction:** Speech act theory revolutionized the understanding of language, viewing utterances as actions rather than mere statements. Instead of treating language solely as a system for describing facts, theorists began to see it as a tool for doing things — issuing commands, making promises, expressing emotions, or altering social reality. This perspective was most notably developed by J.L. Austin and later refined by J.R. Searle, whose frameworks established foundational distinctions in the study of meaning and use, particularly between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

J.L. Austin (1962) distinguished three levels in speech acts:

- Locutionary act: the act of saying something with a particular meaning and reference.
- Illocutionary act: the conventional force behind an utterance (e.g., warning, promising).
- Perlocutionary act: the effect or result intended on the listener (e.g., convincing, frightening).

For instance, in the line “I promise you solemnly,” answered Rose, the act operates on all three levels: she is saying something meaningful (locution), committing herself to a promise (illocution), and potentially calming or reassuring the listener (perlocution).

Later developments in speech act theory, particularly by John Searle, introduced a more refined structure of utterances by inserting the propositional act between locutionary and illocutionary acts. This addition emphasizes the role of propositional content, referring to the actual state of affairs being described, and involves two key sub-components: reference (the identification of entities) and predication (what is asserted about them).

J. Searle (1969) formalized the structure of a speech act using the notation  $F(p)$ , where  $F$  denotes the illocutionary force (such as a command, question, or assertion), and  $p$  represents the propositional content—the embedded statement or idea.

Building on J. Austin’s concept of felicity conditions, both philosophers argued that for a speech act to be successful, certain criteria must be met. These include

the correct and recognized use of a conventional procedure, the authority and sincerity of the participants, and appropriate contextual and intentional alignment. In other words, a performative utterance can fail not only by being factually incorrect, but also through misused conventions, lack of sincerity, or inappropriate context.

J. Searle (1969) further systematized these requirements into four key categories known as Searle's rule groups:

1. Propositional content rules – the rules restrict the kind of proposition that can occur in a specific speech act. For example, a promise must refer to a future act by the speaker: If you are not afraid to come with me, say so, my boy; and I shall take you home with me. (The propositional content here refers to a future action (taking Oliver home), which suits the structure of an offer. This fits the propositional content rule for a commissive speech act (offering, promising)).

2. Preparatory conditions – these specify that the context must be suitable – the speaker must have the authority or status, and the act must be needed or appropriate: I have orders to apprentice him to a chimney-sweep. (Mr. Bumble has institutional authority as the beadle to make such assignments. The preparatory conditions are met: there's a boy needing placement and an adult with legal power.)

3. Sincerity conditions – the speaker must genuinely believe or desire what they express. A promise should be made with the intent to keep it; an apology should reflect real regret: I know he's a good boy! I know he is! (Nancy passionately defends Oliver. Her sincerity is not in question – this emotional insistence shows she genuinely believes in his innocence. If she were lying or uncertain, the speech act would fail the sincerity test.)

4. Essential conditions – these state what act is being performed – i.e., what the utterance counts as in the act of communication: You must go out tomorrow morning with the Dodger and Charley. (This is not just a suggestion – it functions as a command. The essential condition for a directive is fulfilled: Fagin is using his authority to get Oliver to do something.)

According to J.L. Austin (1962) speech acts present five types:

1. Verdictives – giving verdicts: He has been hurt already, said the old gentleman in conclusion

2. Exercitives – exercising power: That boy will be hung, said the gentleman in the white waistcoat.

3. Commissives – orders, advice, etc.: My advice, or, leastways, I should say, my orders, is, said the fattest man of the party, 'that we 'mediately go home again.

4. Behabitives – social behavior – apologizing, congratulating: I am very sorry if I have disturbed you, sir.

5. Expositives – clarifying, explaining: That boy, said Mr. Brownlow, may be a thief. But the women's story is so curious, and the boy's face is so honest...

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative analytical method, drawing on both descriptive and comparative approaches within the framework of pragmatics. Primary theoretical models by J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle are examined through conceptual analysis, while later modifications by linguists such as D. Wunderlich, G. Leech, and G.G. Pocheptsov are integrated through literature review and systematization. To illustrate theoretical claims in practice, selected utterances from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* are subjected to discourse analysis, identifying the type, structure, and function of speech acts in context. This literary corpus serves as a practical testing ground to validate and compare classic and contemporary speech act taxonomies. The method also includes contextual interpretation, allowing the analysis to account for speaker intention, social hierarchy, and perlocutionary effects within the narrative.

## RESULTS

John Searle's classification of speech acts identifies five major categories, each defined by its communicative function, the direction of fit between language and the world, and the speaker's underlying psychological state.

Representatives are used to assert or describe a state of affairs. In this type of act, the speaker attempts to make their words correspond to reality – a words-to-world fit. These acts express belief, as in the simple statement, He's an orphan, born in the workhouse.

Directives aim to get the hearer to perform an action, thus intending to change the world to match the speaker's words – a world-to-words fit. These reflect the speaker's desire or wish, as seen in commands or requests like Hold your tongue, you young rascal!

Commissives function by committing the speaker to a future course of action. Like directives, they involve a world-to-words fit, but the emphasis is on the speaker's intention rather than the hearer's response. A classic example is, I shall take you home with me.

Expressives serve to convey the speaker's emotional state or attitude about a situation. These do not necessarily involve a directional fit between words and the world but are tied to internal states such as gratitude, regret, or joy – as in God bless the poor child!

Finally, declarations are unique in that they bring about a change in the external reality solely through the act of being uttered, provided the speaker has the proper authority and context. These involve a dual fit — both world-to-words and words-to-world — and do not necessarily depend on a psychological state. A clear example is the performative utterance, I have orders to apprentice him to be a chimney-sweep. which enacts a real change upon being spoken.

## DISCUSSION

Several scholars have expanded upon the classical framework of speech act theory, offering nuanced taxonomies that emphasize different aspects of communicative behavior. Among them, D. Wunderlich (1976) introduced additional categories such as erothetives (questions), satisfactives (expressions of thanks or apology), retractives (withdrawals or retractions), and vocatives (calls or summons). These categories enrich the understanding of how speech acts function in everyday discourse beyond the original classifications proposed by Austin and Searle.

In parallel, G.G. Pocheptsov emphasized the importance of communicative intention and illocutionary force, categorizing utterances into constatives, commissives, performatives, directives, and interrogatives. G. Leech (1983), focusing on the pragmatics of politeness, contributed by formulating politeness maxims and exploring their interaction with rhetorical structure. Meanwhile, Bach K., and Harnish R.M (1979) and Bogdanov (1980) offered a detailed categorization grounded in pragmatic intent, institutional context, and speaker-hearer dynamics.

To illustrate these classifications, selected examples from *Oliver Twist* demonstrate how speech acts are employed in literary dialogue:

- Directive: “Hold your tongue, you young rascal!” — a clear command issued by authority figures such as Mr. Bumble or Mrs. Mann.
- Commissive: “I shall never forget your kindness, sir,” — Oliver expresses a future commitment to gratitude.
- Erothetic: “What have you done with the boy?” — an interrogative from Mr. Brownlow, seeking information.
- Representative: “He was born in the workhouse,” — a factual assertion conveying belief.
- Satisfactive: “Thank Heaven she is alive!” — an expression of relief and gratitude from a character such as Rose Maylie.
- Retractive: “I didn’t mean to say that...” — an example of a character like Nancy or Oliver retracting a prior statement.

- Declaration: “He is to be apprenticed to a chimney-sweep,” — a formal declaration altering Oliver’s social status, performed by an institutional figure.

- Vocative: “Oliver! Come here, boy!” — a direct address to summon or call upon the listener.

These examples also reflect the core distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. For instance, when Mr. Brownlow says, “I trust you, my boy,” the utterance carries illocutionary force (an expression of belief and commitment), while the perlocutionary effect may be to reassure or emotionally move Oliver. In another case, the exclamation “Run for your life!” may be interpreted both as a warning (illocution) and a trigger for action (perlocution).

Moreover, ambiguous utterances — such as Fagin’s subtle remark “You’ve learned quickly, haven’t you?” — may be interpreted as either praise, sarcasm, or implicit threat, depending on context, tone, and relational dynamics. Such examples highlight the importance of pragmatic inference and contextual clues in interpreting speech acts, especially within fictional narratives.

## CONCLUSION

Speech act theory has undergone significant theoretical development since its inception, evolving from J.L. Austin’s foundational triadic model to more refined and context-aware classifications proposed by later scholars such as J. Searle, D. Wunderlich, V.I. Bogdanov, G. Leech, and others. These developments underscore that language is not merely a vehicle for conveying information, but a tool for performing actions — from asserting facts and giving orders to expressing emotions and shaping social reality.

While Austin and Searle laid the groundwork by identifying core distinctions like locution, illocution, and perlocution, contemporary models have extended these insights to encompass more diverse and nuanced speech functions. Additions such as erothetives, retractives, and satisfactives reflect an ongoing effort to account for the complexity of real-world communication, where tone, context, speaker authority, and social conventions constantly influence interpretation.

At the center of all these models remains the concept of illocutionary force and communicative intention, which together form the backbone of pragmatic analysis. Yet, this very centrality introduces a persistent tension: the need for structured, typological categorization often clashes with the inherently fluid, context-dependent nature of language use. The

difficulty in drawing rigid boundaries between categories like expressives and representatives or between illocution and perlocution reflects deeper theoretical questions about meaning, intention, and inference.

Moreover, literary texts such as *Oliver Twist* offer fertile ground for testing these theoretical constructs. Dickens's characters perform speech acts not just within fictional dialogue, but also within power structures, emotional relationships, and moral dilemmas — allowing researchers to explore how linguistic form and social function intertwine.

Ultimately, speech act theory continues to evolve because communication itself does. As new forms of discourse emerge — from digital communication to multimodal interaction — the theory must remain adaptable. Its continued relevance lies in its ability to bridge formal structure and human nuance, offering a powerful lens through which to understand both everyday conversation and complex literary expression.

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