



## **J. AUSTIN AND J. SEAL'S SPEECH ACTS THEORY**

Eshboyeva Fazilat Burkhon kizi

Teacher of GulSU

fazilateshboyeva22@gmail.com

### **Abstract:**

This article highlights the theory of speech acts, which has played a significant role in the formation of linguistic pragmatics and, due to its methodological status, has become one of the distinct branches of the anthropocentric theory, using the views of J. Austin and J. Searle as examples.

**Keywords:** Speech act, illocutionary function, locative act, "Pragmatics" illocutionary act, perlocutionary act, proposition or propositional act, "Can you pass me the salt?", the principle of politeness.

### **Introduction**

By the end of the 20th century, the theory of speech acts had emerged as a linguistic-philosophical doctrine. Although the concept had previously existed in the teachings of scholars such as Humboldt, Ch. Bally, K. Bühler, E. Benveniste, and M. Bakhtin, it was fully developed as a distinct doctrine through the research of the English logician J. Austin and the American psychologist J. Searle. Philosophers working at Oxford and Cambridge universities focused on the multifunctionality of linguistic activity and its close connection with the way people live their lives. Language is related to the performance of speech or writing acts by individuals, and during these acts, beyond the literal meaning of an utterance, it can also convey intentions such as asserting, commanding, warning, promising, or inviting. These meanings are the result of the speaker's communicative actions. Therefore, a speech act is a linguistic address made by the speaker to the listener in a particular context with a specific purpose.

In 1955, John Austin raised this issue during the traditional "William James Lectures" held at Harvard University. These lectures were later published in 1962 under the title *How to Do Things with Words*. The stage of speech activity that involves producing an effect is referred to as the *perlocutionary act*. Perlocution is



the act of influencing the listener's consciousness, emotions, and behavior. The content of a speech act is formed through a combination of both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Furthermore, a speech act is considered a three-stage activity, comprising three distinct types of actions: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.

The speech act theory developed by J. Austin and J. R. Searle provides significant examples for studying indirect meaning. By employing the concept of *illocutionary force*, they demonstrated that the type of thought and the type of speech act are never identical, and that a single speech act can be realized through various forms of thought. In his works, J. Searle examines indirect speech acts, which essentially perform two illocutionary functions. For instance, the utterance "*Can you pass me the salt?*" carries two illocutionary functions — a question and a request. However, in modern pragmalinguistics, beyond Searle's interpretation, there is a growing number of approaches that regard the lexical-syntactic structure of an utterance as a means for realizing a speaker's specific communicative intention. For example, the phrase "*Can you pass me the salt?*" is interpreted as a motivational cue expressed in the form of a question. Based on this view, the speech act itself is not expressed indirectly; rather, it is only the method of its realization that may be indirect.

In "*Pragmatics*," N. I. Serkova emphasizes that the concept of this term can be applied in both broader and narrower interpretations. However, interpretations of pragmatics vary significantly in this regard. Building upon the ideas of school representatives such as C. Morris and L. Wittgenstein, J. Austin and J. R. Searle developed their theory within the framework of linguistic philosophy. Their research took the understanding of language as action as its starting point, which eventually led to the formation of speech act theory. J. Searle sought to develop a system of sufficient conditions, which he described as rules that could be formulated for the realization of various types of speech acts.

T. A. van Dijk proposes further developing Searle's approach and considers pragmatics as an integral part of linguistic theory, suggesting that its status can be compared with that of syntax and semantics. According to him, the pragmatic component of language should be incorporated into grammatical theory as a system of rules that describe linguistic form, meaning, and function. Pragmatic



interpretations are determined in advance by the *pragmatic context*, which includes cognitive and social factors related to the use of expressions.

This shows that forms of speech etiquette expressing communicative relations among people are the object of study in linguopragmatics, and its development in the second half of the 20th century is closely connected to the emergence of speech act theory as a linguistic-philosophical doctrine. Thus, a speech act is a purposeful communicative action carried out in accordance with linguistic behavioral rules, involving three key components: the speaker (addresser), the listener (addressee), and the speech situation. When a person engages in communication through speech or expresses an intention to perform an action via language, a speech act is produced.

Issues of speech acts and the means of shaping speech initially appeared in the linguistic concepts of V. Humboldt, S. Bally, S. Karcevsky, L. P. Yakubinsky, K. Bühler, E. Benveniste, M. M. Bakhtin, and others. The first systematically developed theory of speech acts was introduced by L. Wittgenstein. He argued that speech serves various purposes and must be analyzed in inseparable relation to its speaker, illustrating this idea through his concept of “language games.” Representatives of the linguistic philosophy school, J. Austin and J. R. Searle, developed the theory of pragmatic functions by building on the foundational ideas of L. Wittgenstein, Ch. S. Peirce, and his most notable follower in the field of semiotics, C. Morris. At the core of their research lies the understanding of language as action.

For a long time, the speech act was regarded as the basic unit of pragmatic analysis. The object of this theory's study is the speech act itself — a purposeful speech action performed by the speaker in a specific communicative situation, in accordance with the established principles and rules of verbal behavior aimed at addressing the listener. In the mid-1950s, J. Austin developed relatively comprehensive criteria for analyzing speech acts. According to him, a unit of communication — a sentence or a text — is not merely a statement, but can also perform various speech functions such as questioning, explaining, warning, describing, thanking, or expressing regret. Austin presents his views on speech acts in his work *How to Do Things with Words*.

In the early 20th century, the process of speech formation was mainly studied in connection with the role of linguistic units in communication, often through



comparisons with language as a potential system of signs designed to store and transmit information. Speech came to be viewed as a purely individual act of word creation that carries specific communicative and stylistic intentions in various spheres of human activity. For example, expressions such as “*I name,*” “*is called,*” “*I apologize,*” “*I congratulate you,*” or “*I recommend doing this*” do not contain informative statements per se but rather indicate the performance of an action — such as making a promise, apologizing, or giving advice — through the use of language.

According to Austin, in the English language, there are more than a thousand types of verbs that express actions such as affirming, describing, warning, reminding, commenting, commanding, requesting, criticizing, apologizing, approving, greeting, promising, and expressing regret. Austin’s key contribution to the theory of speech acts lies in his view of speech not merely as a set of conventional signs constructed according to phonetic, semantic, and syntactic rules and reflecting the surrounding reality, but as the product of an individual. He proposed the idea that the creation of words arises from the speaker's personal qualities and is directly linked to the subject of speech who produces them.

Austin argued that a sentence does not only “describe” the state of things or “state something about a fact”—rather, expressions used by people can serve entirely different purposes. He explained: “*We may issue commands, apologize, make promises, offer assumptions, express resentment, warn someone, accuse, greet, convey wishes — in short, we can perform various actions through the use of language.*”<sup>1</sup>. Previously, language was viewed solely as a means of representing reality, and speech was believed to influence reality only indirectly. However, based on Austin’s theory, language not only describes reality but also performs actions. Purposefulness and conditionality are considered the core features of a speech act. John Austin stated, “To say certain words in a certain situation is equivalent to performing a certain action,” and he divided the speech act into three main components: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.

Locutionary act refers to the actual act of speaking — the utterance of a statement with its literal meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> That work, pages 83-91



Illocutionary act is the act performed through saying something, intended to influence the listener — it reflects the speaker’s communicative intent.

Perlocutionary act is the effect achieved on the listener as a result of the speech act — it is the level of speech performance that depends on the addressee.

In some academic sources, the structure of speech acts is expanded into four components:

The act of speaking or pronouncing – locutionary act

The main information conveyed by the utterance – proposition or propositional act

The speaker’s communicative intention or goal – illocutionary act

The influence on the listener through the utterance – perlocutionary act

This expanded view allows for a more detailed analysis of how meaning is constructed and actions are performed through language<sup>2</sup>.

Somewhat different views on the structure of the speech act can be found in the works of J. Searle. He introduced a fourth component — the propositional act — into the scientific discourse of speech act theory. Searle identified specific parameters of speech acts and developed their classification. His primary goal was to define the rules that regulate speech acts and to describe the mechanisms through which the speaker’s intention is transferred to the listener during communication. Searle believed that the main function of language is not merely to describe objects and events in reality, but to carry out purposeful actions. This led him to pose the fundamental question, “What is meaning?” — eventually concluding that an utterance or expression serves as an action in itself.

This perspective marked a major step in the functional approach to linguistic analysis. It allowed scholars to evaluate utterances not in terms of their truth or falsity, but based on intentions and agreements between interlocutors. Searle also critically examined Austin’s classification of illocutionary acts and argued that it remained incomplete.

Building on the ideas of Austin and Searle, J. Leech developed a classification of speech acts from the perspective of the politeness principle, using the degree of politeness in a speech act as a criterion. However, many researchers criticized

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<sup>2</sup> J. Austin. *Word as action*// NZL. Issue XVII.-M., 1986.



existing classifications of speech acts for their abstraction, detachment from real social contexts, and failure to account for numerous influential parameters.

In conclusion, many researchers, while acknowledging the challenges of analyzing the interactional processes within speech act theory, have argued for not only modifying the theory but also fundamentally reconstructing it. Scholars such as T. A. van Dijk, J. Leech, S. Levinson, J. Mey, I. A. Bezmenova, and V. I. Gerasimov are among those who have advocated for such revision and further development.

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