



Speech Acts In Pragmatics

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Abstract: This article investigates speech acts as the core explanatory construct of pragmatics, examining how illocutionary force, conventional form, contextual inference, and social normativity interact to produce action through language. Building on the foundations of Austin's performative-constative distinction and Searle's taxonomy, the study synthesizes contemporary developments across interactional linguistics, experimental pragmatics, corpus-based analyses, and computational modeling. The aim is to show that speech acts are neither reducible to sentence types nor free-floating intentions, but coordinated practices anchored in grammar, inference, embodiment, and institutional settings. Methodologically, the paper conducts a theory-driven review that operationalizes key variables such as force-indicating devices, felicity conditions, uptake mechanisms, commitment dynamics, and politeness management, and relates them to empirical findings on indirectness, scalar enrichment, reference, and dialog structure. The results indicate that speech acts emerge from the alignment of conventional cues and rational expectations, that they are processed incrementally and probabilistically by interlocutors, and that their social effects depend on accountability structures encoded by culture, role, and activity type. The discussion integrates these strands into a unified perspective in which speech acts function as interface phenomena linking syntax and semantics to cognition, interactional organization, and broader socio-institutional orders. The conclusion outlines priorities for future research: multimodal corpora with force annotation, cross-linguistic comparative work on honorifics and evidentials, experimental designs that manipulate stakes and authority, and computational implementations modeling commitment and plan recognition.

Keywords: Speech act; illocutionary force; performative; indirectness; implicature; politeness; felicity conditions; commitment; interactional

linguistics; computational pragmatics.

Introduction: The notion that uttering a sentence can constitute doing something rather than just describing a state of affairs revolutionized the study of language. When a judge pronounces a sentence or a couple exchanges vows, language acts are not secondary to action; they are the action. This insight, formalized by Austin and refined by Searle, seeded a research program in which the central objects of analysis are requests, offers, promises, questions, assertions, apologies, and compliments. These categories, while intuitively familiar, immediately confront a tension between conventional form and practical use. Imperatives do not always command, interrogatives are not always questions, and declaratives can request as effectively as commands when contextual conditions align. The problem for pragmatics is to explain how interlocutors reliably recover illocutionary force from underspecified linguistic signals, how they negotiate uptake, and how they hold one another accountable for the commitments that speech acts create.

Modern linguistics positions speech acts at the intersection of multiple explanatory levels. Grammar furnishes form types, clause structures, particles, and prosodic contours that cue force. Semantics contributes conventional content and force-sensitive operators. Pragmatics coordinates these resources with background knowledge, rational expectations, and social norms to yield recognizable actions. Conversation analysis shows that speech acts unfold over turns and that their meaning depends on sequential placement and response relevance. Politeness theory and sociolinguistics demonstrate that indirectness and mitigation are not noise but strategic adaptations to face wants and power relations. Psycholinguistics and developmental studies reveal that speech act recognition is incremental, probabilistic, and learned through social interaction. Computational modeling operationalizes these insights and demonstrates that dialogue systems endowed with plan recognition and belief modeling achieve more coherent interaction than literalist systems.

Taken together, these strands reshape the original theory. Speech acts are not simply sentence-bound types with fixed felicity conditions, nor are they unconstrained inferences detached from form. They are joint accomplishments that recruit grammar, exploit inference, adhere to normative expectations, and leave a trace in the ledger of public commitments. This article argues that treating speech acts as interface phenomena clarifies the distribution of

indirect strategies, explains cross-cultural variation, and enables computational systems to participate in cooperative interaction.

The aim of this study is to articulate an integrative account of speech acts within pragmatics that links classical theory to contemporary empirical and computational approaches. The objectives are to clarify the constructs of illocutionary force, felicity, and commitment; to demonstrate how conventional markers, prosody, and sequential context guide force recognition; to synthesize corpus and experimental evidence on indirectness and inference; and to outline implementable models that connect speech acts to dialog management and social accountability.

This paper employs a theory-driven review structured around operational variables rather than author-centric schools. The first step isolates core constructs such as force-indicating devices, preparatory and sincerity conditions, common ground and uptake, sequential organization, and politeness strategies. The second step maps these constructs to empirical domains. Corpus pragmatics provides distributions of request formats, apology formulas, and stance markers across registers and languages, enabling inferences about conventionalization and variability. Conversation-analytic studies supply micro-analytic evidence about turn design, adjacency pair structure, and repair, revealing how actions are recognized in their sequential environment. Experimental pragmatics contributes process-level data on timing and likelihood of implicature and on sensitivity to speaker knowledge and benevolence in recovering indirect requests and refusals. Computational pragmatics operationalizes these dependencies in models that represent beliefs, goals, and utilities, and in dialog policies that manipulate force and mitigation under uncertainty.

The method is synthetic but selective. The discussion focuses on studies that make force recognition measurable and manipulable, as in reference games with pragmatic inference, truth-value and acceptability tasks involving indirectness, and corpora annotated for dialog acts or politeness phenomena. The analysis triangulates these sources to evaluate claims about the conventional and inferential dimensions of speech acts, and about the social structures that stabilize their effects.

The synthesis yields several convergent results regarding the nature and recognition of speech acts. First, force is cued by an interplay of conventional form, prosodic contour, and sequential environment. Imperatives, performative verbs, interrogative syntax, particles, and honorific morphology serve as conventional indicators, but their function is graded by

prosodic emphasis and mitigators and by placement within adjacency pairs. The opening turn of a pair projects a space of relevant next actions, and responses retrospectively confirm or recalibrate the recognized force. This sequential anchoring explains why the same clause type can perform distinct actions in different environments and why repairs play a central role in renegotiating misrecognized force.

Second, indirectness is not an epiphenomenon but a stable resource. Requests framed as questions about ability or willingness, offers packaged as statements, and refusals delivered through accounts rather than explicit negations are systematically patterned across cultures and activities. The distribution of indirect formats correlates with power differentials, degree of imposition, and relational history. Indirectness economizes on face-threats while still achieving uptake when cooperative expectations are in place. Experimental findings show that hearers infer the intended act by integrating conventional alternatives, speaker knowledge, and cost-benefit considerations, and that timing and likelihood of inference depend on the strength of these cues.

Third, speech acts create and update public commitments that structure discourse. Assertions commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition and license challenges and requests for evidence. Promises and offers commit future actions and invite acceptance or refusal. Questions commit to an information deficit and make answers relevant. Apologies acknowledge transgression and propose repair. These commitments can be tracked over turns, and their stability derives from mutual recognition and sanctionability. The link to commitment explains both the institutional power of certain performatives and the accountability felt in ordinary conversation, where misfires, insincere acts, and breaches of promise attract repair or face-threatening consequences.

Fourth, developmental, clinical, and cross-cultural evidence indicates that speech act competence is learned, contingent, and variable. Children gradually acquire the mapping between sentence types and actions, master conventionalized indirectness, and learn to use accounts and justifications to manage refusals and disruptions. Pragmatic impairments reveal selective difficulties in aligning form and force or in maintaining commitments. Cross-cultural comparisons show divergent calibrations of directness, honorific marking, evidentiality, and apology formats, but a shared logic of projecting relevant next actions and managing face suggests a common interactional substrate.

Fifth, computational implementations that encode

speech acts as intentional operators or dialog acts improve dialog coherence. Models that reason about user goals, beliefs, and politeness constraints select more appropriate request and refusal formats and handle clarification and correction more gracefully. Bayesian pragmatic models predict human judgments in reference and politeness trade-offs by representing speaker utility and listener inversion. Dialog policies that treat commitments as state variables better manage multi-turn tasks and de-escalate conflict through apologies and accounts. These systems remain approximations, but they demonstrate the value of formalizing speech act dependencies.

The results support a perspective in which speech acts function as an interface between linguistic form, inferential reasoning, interactional organization, and social normativity. This interface analysis clarifies disputes that have long divided the field. The first concerns the status of force. If force were entirely conventional, we would expect robust form-to-act mappings insensitive to context; if force were purely inferential, we would have no reliable signals for coordination. The evidence favors a hybrid: certain forms and particles conventionally bias recognition, but force crystallizes through inferences guided by rational expectations and confirmed through response and repair. The second dispute concerns the role of felicity conditions. Classical formulations treated them as preconditions that, if unmet, produce misfires or abuses. Interactional evidence suggests a more dynamic view: participants treat felicity as a negotiable matter, using accounts, upgrades, and modifications to re-align situational fit. This dynamicity explains how institutional talk stabilizes certain conditions through procedures and roles while everyday conversation flexibly adapts to local contingencies.

A third issue is the nature of indirectness. Rather than treating indirect speech acts as derivations from a primary literal act through implicature, it is more accurate to treat many indirect formats as conventionalized resources with their own distributional ecology. The interrogative form can be employed as a default device for low-threat requests because it mobilizes cooperative inference about ability and willingness while preserving deniability. The choice among formats signals stance, negotiates alignment, and manages costs. This account reconciles the pervasiveness of indirectness with the speed of recognition observed in processing studies; hearers are not solving ad hoc riddles but exploiting entrenched mappings supported by pragmatic reasoning.

A fourth theme is the embedding of speech acts in sequential and multimodal structure. Force is not fully determined at utterance completion; it emerges as the

next turn displays understanding. Backchannels, gaze, and timing collaborate with lexical and syntactic cues to build and ratify the action. The sequential model explains the centrality of repair and the asymmetry between first and second pair parts. It also links speech acts to project management, since sequences organize joint tasks, distribute rights and obligations, and track progress toward completion. Multimodal integration is crucial; pitch accents, lengthening, gesture, and facial expression distinguish questions from challenges, apologies from excuses, and invitations from announcements even when words remain constant.

A fifth implication concerns normative and institutional dimensions. Speech acts are vehicles of power in courts, classrooms, clinics, and bureaucracies because institutions codify felicity conditions and uptake mechanisms. The same words spoken by different actors have different effects because roles and procedures confer authority and fix pathways for challenge and appeal. Understanding this embedding helps account for cross-linguistic elaborations of honorifics and evidentials that encode relative status and information source in ways that transform force and accountability. It also illuminates contemporary media practices where platform affordances alter uptake: likes, replies, and algorithmic amplification recalibrate what counts as acceptance, refusal, or sanction.

A sixth domain is acquisition and pedagogy. Second language learners often master grammatical forms before pragmatic routines, leading to misalignments in force and unintended face threats. Instruction that foregrounds speech act variation, indirectness, and commitment management improves intercultural communication and fosters repair strategies that preserve rapport. Clinical interventions benefit from explicit modeling of turn-taking contingencies and the use of visual supports for projecting next actions. These applications underscore the social stakes of speech acts and the value of explicit pragmatic literacy. Finally, computational systems pose both challenges and opportunities. Current dialog models excel at mapping intents to templates but struggle with commitment tracking and accountability. Implementing apology and promise as state-changing operations with conditions for fulfillment or redress yields more trustworthy behavior. Integrating politeness costs and user models into policy learning helps systems choose indirectness appropriately and avoid blunt refusals. Evaluation must move beyond surface appropriateness to measure whether commitments are honored over time and whether repair is initiated when misunderstandings arise. These directions require corpora annotated for force,

commitment transitions, and politeness strategies across cultures and genres, together with reproducible benchmarks.

Speech acts remain the central currency of pragmatics because they make visible how language becomes action in social life. The integrative account presented here shows that force recognition depends on conventional markers, rational inference, sequential placement, and multimodal cues, and that speech acts change public commitments that organize discourse and institutional processes. Indirectness emerges as a resource calibrated to face and power, not a deviation from rationality, and repair mechanisms display the collaborative nature of action recognition. Developmental, clinical, and cross-cultural findings highlight both the learnability and variability of speech act competence, while computational models that encode beliefs, goals, politeness, and commitments demonstrate practical gains in dialog quality.

Future work should prioritize multimodal, cross-linguistic corpora with reliable force and commitment annotation, experimental paradigms that manipulate authority, risk, and accountability, and computational implementations that manage commitments and politeness under uncertainty. Theoretical progress will depend on bridging formal accounts of force with interactional and sociocultural analyses, and on grounding claims in open, replicable resources. By treating speech acts as interface phenomena, pragmatics can continue to connect grammar, cognition, interaction, and institutions, providing a comprehensive account of meaning-in-use that is descriptively rich, cognitively plausible, socially attuned, and computationally realizable.

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