Politeness theory and the classification of speech acts

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Speech acts are utterances that perform actions. Their focus is usually less on their truth value than on their illocutionary effect, the effect that a speaker wishes to have on his or her environment. The study of speech acts initially focused on performative acts such as making a bet, naming a ship (or a person), or declaring two people to be married (Flowerdew, 2013). However, no utterance exists in a vacuum, and all speech can be considered to have illocutionary effects. Therefore, the study of speech acts has broadened to include more or less every kind of utterance, as well as the interpersonal functions of whole texts.
A variety of methods exist for classifying speech acts based on their illocutionary effects. Austin (1975) and Searle (1976) devised two well-known taxonomies of speech act that are still used today to study the interpersonal functions of texts. However, both of these classification systems are incomplete in their description of speech acts. In this paper, I will address the shortcomings of both systems, including Searle's criticism of Austin's taxonomy, and propose a new taxonomy based on Searle's that incorporates features of Brown's (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper et al.'s (2003) impoliteness theory in order to make more precise distinctions among classes of speech acts.
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1   Introduction

Speech acts are utterances that perform actions. Their focus is usually less on their truth value than on their illocutionary effect, the effect that a speaker wishes to have on his or her environment. The study of speech acts initially focused on performative acts such as making a bet, naming a ship (or a person), or declaring two people to be married (Flowerdew, 2013). However, no utterance exists in a vacuum, and all speech can be considered to have illocutionary effects. Therefore, the study of speech acts has broadened to include more or less every kind of utterance, as well as the interpersonal aspects of whole texts.

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politeness theory and Culpeper et al.'s (2003) impoliteness theory in order to make more precise distinctions among classes of speech acts.

2 Speech acts

2.1 Taxonomies of Speech Acts

2.1.1 Austin's Taxonomy

Austin (1975) establishes five categories of speech act based on broad classes of illocutionary force. They are as follows. Verdictives are acts in which a verdict or appraisal is given, usually by someone in a position of power to give that appraisal. Exercitives involve the exercise "of powers, rights, or influence." Austin's examples of exercitives include "appointing…urging… warning, &c." Commissives commit the speaker to an action or intention; they include promises as well as mental commitments like taking one side of an argument (Austin, 1975).

The last two of Austin's categories are broader than the first three, and defined in a vague way that Austin acknowledges as problematic. Behabitives have to do with social behavior, including "apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, and challenging." Austin acknowledges the broad scope of this category, but moves on to describing the even vaguer expositives, which he defines as "mak[ing] plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation, how we are using words, or, in general, are expository. Examples are 'I reply', 'I argue', 'I concede', 'I illustrate', 'I assume', 'I postulate'" (Austin, 1975).

2.1.2 Searle's Taxonomy

Searle (1976) challenges Austin's taxonomy on the basis of the categories that Austin himself admits are problematic. They are too vaguely defined: Searle points out that many of the example words Austin chooses fit into multiple categories; for example, "describe" is listed as both a verdictive (in that it reports findings) and an expositive (in that it is an act of exposition). Searle goes so far as to challenge Austin's claim that his categories are based on types of illocutionary force, claiming that, of Austin's categories, only commissives are "clearly and unambiguously" based on the illocutionary point of the actions they describe (Searle, 1976).

In response, Searle establishes a set of features that vary across speech acts and creates a taxonomy of speech acts based on variation in these features. Searle lists twelve of these features, which he calls "dimensions of variation," but the following three are most significant for his purposes. First is illocutionary point, the purpose of a speech act. Searle illustrates illocutionary point by comparing requests with commands: while they are different speech acts with different amounts of force behind them, they share the purpose of getting the addressee to

do something. Second is direction of fit: whether the words comprising the speech act are intended to match the world, as in assertions and descriptions, or the world is intended to match the words of the speech act, as in promises and requests. Searle's example of world-to-word fit is a shopping list used by a man in a grocery store; his example of word-to-world fit is a detective following the shopper around the store and writing down everything he buys. Third is expressed psychological state, which is less precise but can still be generalized across classes of speech act. If a speech act contains propositional content, the act must also express the speaker's attitude toward that content (Searle, 1976).

Based on these features, Searle creates the following five categories of speech act. Representatives commit the speaker to the truth value of a proposition. Their fit is word-to-world, and their psychological state is belief in a proposition; examples include suggesting, insisting, complaining, and deducing. Directives try to get their addressee to do something. Their fit is world-to-words, and their psychological state is a desire "that the hearer…does some future action." Examples include requesting, inviting, and challenging. Searle borrows his third category, commissives, from Austin's system, but defines it more tightly than Austin on the basis of his own system of features. Commissives fit world-to-word, and their psychological state is an intention that the speaker do "some future action" (Searle, 1976).

His fourth category, expressives, describes the speaker's attitude toward the propositional content of the speech act, and includes many of Austin's behabitives, such as apologies, thanks, and congratulations. They are presupposed to be true and therefore have no direction of fit. His fifth category, declarations, is essentially performative utterances: speaking a declaration causes it to become true. Searle describes declarations as having bidirectional fit: the words fit the world at the same time as the world is caused to fit the words (Searle, 1976). The descriptions of the direction of fit of expressives and declarations are not entirely satisfactory, for reasons that will become clear in the following section.

2.1.3 Criticism of Searle's Taxonomy

Searle's criticism of Austin's taxonomy as insufficiently rigorous is a valid one: as we have seen, Austin's categories overlap to the extent that verdictives and expositives are essentially the same category repeated, and his main criterion of classification, the illocutionary force or purpose of an act, is vaguely defined except in the case of commissives, a category Searle borrows for his own taxonomy (Searle, 1976).

Searle's taxonomy is superior to Austin's in that it begins with a strict set of organizational principles and holds to them. However, the application of these principles to his categories is not without fault. He acknowledges one shortcoming himself: that directives and commissives seem, under his rules, to be one category, except for the fact that directives impose on the hearer and commissives on the speaker. In fact, though he reports three colleagues of his suggested to him that this fact is sufficient to combine directives and

commissives into one category, Searle brushes off these suggestions, saying that "[he has] been unable to make [them] work" (Searle, 1976, p. 12) without explaining why they do not work.

The greater flaw in Searle's analysis is his insistence on giving each of his categories a unique direction of fit. This is an impossible task, as he admits in his definition of direction of fit, but his attempts to do it anyway weaken his theory by expanding a reasonable binary feature into one with multiple unnecessary values. Searle describes his expressives as having no direction of fit because the truth of the utterance is presupposed (Searle, 1976); however, the truth of his representatives can be assumed in the same way, given the Sincerity Condition of speech acts, which requires that the speaker of a speech act sincerely intend the probable illocutionary force of that act. In the case of representatives, this means that the speaker is describing the world honestly and accurately as he or she sees it. As a result, representatives have an unambiguous word-to-world fit.

In the case of expressives, the Sincerity Condition also requires that the speaker describe a state of being honestly and accurately as he or she perceives it. Under Searle's rules, expressives and representatives should therefore be a single category, and yet Searle insists on giving expressives their own direction of fit because they describe expressions of emotion and not tangible features of the speaker's environment.

A similar problem occurs in Searle's description of declarations as having two directions of fit. Describing declarations as world-to-word makes sense: a speaker performs an act, such as taking an oath of office, and the world changes so that the propositional content of the utterance is true. But describing them as simultaneously word-to-world is inappropriate, as can be seen in Searle's definition of mistakes in word-to-world utterances. Imagine a detective following another man around a grocery store and writing down everything that man buys:

> If the detective gets home and suddenly realizes that the man bought pork chops instead of bacon, he can simply erase the word 'bacon' and write 'pork chops'. (Searle, 1976, p. 3)

A change in the state of the world (the man bought pork chops instead of bacon) causes a change in the propositional content of a word-to-world utterance (the report that reads "bacon" is now untruthful). This is not the case for declarative speech acts. Barack Obama took the oath of office that made him President of the United States in 2009 and again in 2013. When he leaves office in 2017, the American presidential oath of office will not suddenly become false. In fact, it has no truth value, which is what drew Austin's attention to speech acts in the first place (Austin, 1975, p. 5). Since declarations have no truth value, they can only have a world-to-word direction of fit as directives and commissives do. Not only is it impossible for Searle to give each of his categories a unique direction of fit, it is also unnecessary. Direction of fit can be used as a simple binary feature to separate Searle's representatives and expressives from his commissives, directives, and declarations.

2.2   Politeness and Impoliteness Frameworks

Another type of framework for examining speech acts focuses on the effect a speaker intends to have on a listener's self-image, or face. Brown (1987) describes two types of face: negative face, which represents a person's desire to act unimpeded by the desires and actions of others, and positive face, which represents the desire to be appreciated and valued by others. The purpose of many speech acts involves balancing a speaker's positive and negative face desires with those of his or her interlocutor (Brown, 1987).

Brown (1987) focuses on requests, a type of speech act that is considered inherently threatening to the negative face of its addressee: the speaker of a request limits the addressee's freedom to act by trying to commit the addressee to an action. Assuming that the speaker is aware of this imposition, Brown outlines three strategies for mitigating the face threat it causes: negative politeness, which acknowledges and downplays the magnitude of the imposition to show respect for the addressee's negative face ("if it's not too much trouble, could you…"); positive politeness, which builds up the addressee's positive face (a request prefaced with a compliment); and indirectness, which can give the speaker plausible deniability in case the addressee objects to the request ("it's chilly in here" as a request that someone close a window). They also list bald on record requests, that is, requests without any mitigating face work, as a politeness strategy (Brown, 1987).

Brown's politeness framework describes facework well enough when everyone is trying to be nice to each other, but, aside from its description of bald on record requests, it does not account for situations where cooperative conversation breaks down and face threats are made intentionally. Among the theories that attempt to extend politeness theory to cover impoliteness is that of Culpeper et al. (2003), who outline a set of impoliteness strategies that mirror Brown's politeness strategies. Bald on record impoliteness is similar to the bald on record politeness described in Brown's theory, in that the speaker does nothing extra to mitigate the face threat the speech act represents. The difference between bald on record politeness and bald on record impoliteness is that the former is used when it will incur the least possible face cost to either speaker or addressee, while bald on record impoliteness is used when the speaker wishes to make it obvious that he or she is threatening someone else's face. Negative impoliteness intensifies a threat to the addressee's negative face by associating him or her with an undesirable trait or simply cutting the addressee off to restrict his or her freedom to speak. Positive impoliteness, on the other hand, threatens an addressee's positive face by making him or her feel excluded or unvalued, while indirect impoliteness is often achieved through insincere politeness, sarcasm, or simply not performing an expected polite speech act (Culpeper et al., 2003).

2.3 Discussion

	Austin (1975)	Searle (1976)	Brown (1987)	Culpeper et al. (2003)
Categories	(1) Verdictive (2) Exercitive (3) Commissive (4) Behabitive (5) Expositive	(1) Representative (2) Directive (3) Commissive (4) Expressive (5) Declarative	(1) Bald on record (2) Negatively polite (3) Positively polite (4) Indirect	(1) Bald on record (2) Negatively impolite (3) Positively impolite (4) Insincerely polite (5) No politeness
Organizational principles	Illocutionary force	(1) Illocutionary point (2) Direction of fit (3) Expressed psychological state	(1) Positive/ negative face (2) Degree to which face support is desired	(1) Positive/ negative face (2) Degree to which face threat is desired

Table 1: Comparison of speech act frameworks

The four theoretical frameworks for classifying speech acts described above are summarized in Table 1. Searle's taxonomy can be improved by the inclusion of politeness and impoliteness theory. While politeness theory as it stands only truly applies to Searle's directives, Culpeper et al. show that it can be applied to other types of speech act as a mirror to impoliteness theory. A directive that uses negative politeness to mitigate its face threat is a fundamentally different speech act from one in which the face threat is intensified through positive impoliteness; likewise, representatives can be used in support of face or to attack face. In the following section, I will demonstrate this distinction, and provide evidence for the necessity of a new taxonomy of speech acts that combines politeness and impoliteness theory with my proposed modifications to Searle (1976).

3 An alternate taxonomy of speech acts

My taxonomy of speech acts builds on the principles laid out by Searle, applied in a manner that I believe is more internally consistent than Searle's own taxonomy. I begin with his favorite feature of speech acts, direction of fit, which I apply as a binary feature separating word-to-world speech acts from world-to-word acts. I will divide these classes of speech act based on their expressed psychological state and possible propositional content, and define further subcategories based on the illocutionary force and face effects expressible by members of each category.

3.1 Descriptives

The class of speech acts whose direction of fit is word-to-world contains one category, which I will call descriptives. The psychological state expressed by descriptives is the belief that their propositional content is true. There are two subcategories of descriptives: objective descriptives, whose propositional content describes the speaker's environment as in (1), and subjective descriptives, whose propositional content describes the speaker's mental state as in (2). (These and subsequent examples, except where marked, are drawn from the January 2, 1971 episode of the BBC television drama Doctor Who, on which I have previously performed speech act analysis.)

(1)   Steady-state micro-welding always produces more smoke than fire.
(2)   I said I don't want any tea today, thank you. (Holmes, 1971)

The main illocutionary point of both objective and subjective descriptives is to provide descriptive information. However, this can be done using a variety of politeness and impoliteness strategies that may support or attack the addressee's face, or elevate or denigrate the speaker's face. Subcategories of both types of descriptive speech act can be defined by the face effects they produce. For example, Sentence (1) is an objective descriptive speech act that uses positive impoliteness to attack the addressee's face. It is uttered during an argument between the Doctor, an alien scientist, and Jo Grant, a young woman who has been assigned to the Doctor as his assistant (Holmes, 1971). The Doctor knows that Jo will not understand what steady-state micro-welding is, and that introducing this new information will damage her positive face by making her feel ignorant. He has the option to mitigate this face threat by presenting the information in a way she will understand, but instead he phrases it in a way that ignores her face wants and lets her feel bad.

Descriptive speech acts can also be used politely to defend a speaker's face or support an addressee's face. During the same argument, Jo utters several examples of the former, including (3).

(3)   I'm not the tea lady.…I'm your new assistant.

The Doctor has threatened Jo's positive face by assuming that she is a servant and by insisting on the truth of his assumption as in (2). Jo's presentation of the fact that she is actually someone the Doctor should care about falls under Culpeper et al.'s (2003) category of defensive responses to impoliteness (Holmes, 1971).

Some speech acts may have multiple face effects simultaneously. Sentence (4), uttered by Jo late in the argument would be classified by Austin as behabitive (Austin, 1975) and by Searle as expressive (Searle, 1976). In the taxonomy I am developing, it is an example of a subjective descriptive speech act used to decrease the speaker's positive face and support the addressee's positive face.

(4)   I'm sorry I ruined your experiment.

Earlier in the scene, Jo put out an electrical fire in the Doctor's scientific apparatus, causing some damage to a project in progress. At first, Jo defends her actions, but late in the scene she admits to wrongdoing in order to make peace with the Doctor (Holmes, 1971). An apology has the primary face effect of decreasing the speaker's positive face, since it associates the speaker with some improper or disallowed action; however, it has the secondary face effect of subordinating the speaker to the addressee and thus making the addressee feel more important, boosting his or her positive face.

3.2   Obligatives and Performatives

The class of speech acts whose fit is world-to-word is broader than the word-to-world class, containing two subclasses, obligatives and performatives. I will discuss these two subclasses and their politeness categories in turn.

3.2.1 Obligatives

The expressed psychological state of obligatives is the desire that a person perform some future action. Obligatives can be subdivided into commissives, in which action is desired of the speaker, and persuasives, in which action is desired of the addressee. Commissives have the primary face effect of reducing the negative face of the speaker, while persuasives have the primary face effect of reducing the negative face of the addressee. However, both persuasives and commissives can be performed using a variety of politeness and impoliteness strategies. On the one hand, speakers can mitigate the face threat using Brown's (1987) positive or negative politeness strategies. Prefacing a request with "would you be so kind," is an example of this: it lessens the overt obligation of the request by suggesting that it the speaker is merely asking a favor, not giving a command.

On the other hand, speakers can make bald on record requests or use Culpeper's (2003) impoliteness strategies to increase the negative face threat or add a positive face threat. In Doctor Who, the Doctor's archenemy, the Master, provides an example of this when he catches Jo Grant spying on him and hypnotizes her to do his bidding.

(5)   You will return to UNIT with a negative report. You found nothing suspicious … When you leave this room you will have no memory of meeting me…. Your instructions are already implanted. You will obey them without a further word from me.

Each of the statements in (5) is a bald on record command when taken alone. Taken together, they build on each other to limit Jo's options, decreasing her negative face repeatedly in a manner described by Culpeper et al. (2003) as a face attack strategy.

3.2.2 Performatives

Performatives correspond more or less to Searle's class of declarations and Austin's class of verdictives. They are utterances that alter the world to fit their content, not by committing a person to an action, but simply by being uttered. Their psychological state is the desire of the speaker to effect an immediate change in their environment. Performatives are heavily context-dependent: most of them, such as christening a ship (or a person), issuing a verdict in court, or declaring two people married, require a speaker whom society has given the authority to cause these changes (Austin, 1975). Others, such as bequeathing or betting, simply require a specific context.

Performatives in general can be said not to have face effects, since they are pronounced to the world at large and not to a specific listener. However, certain types of performative can affect the face of a listener by changing his or her social status. Examples of performatives that decrease face include guilty verdicts, which damage the positive face of the addressee by giving him or her the label of "convicted criminal," and decrease his or her negative face by imposing a sentence of punishment. Performatives which can increase the face of the addressee include the conferring of an honor or reward.

3.3 Discussion

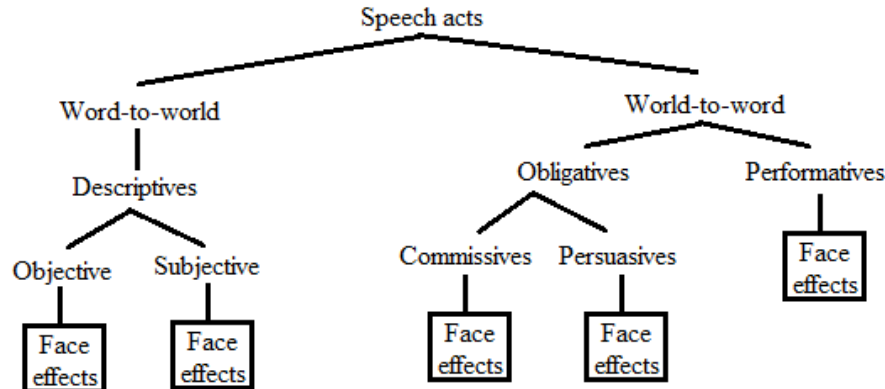Figure **1** summarizes my taxonomy of speech acts.

Figure 1: Taxonomy of speech acts

Like any classification system, this one is not without its borderline cases. For example, an accusation such as "you're wrong" may be either an objective or a subjective descriptive act depending on context, and is often used subjectively to give the speaker's beliefs the force of objective truth. Likewise, the act of betting is usually classified as performative (Searle, 1976), since it expresses the desire that a sum of money be attached to the outcome of an event. However, it can also be considered commissive, since it obligates the speaker to pay the wagered

amount in the event that he or she loses, or persuasive, since it also places the addressee under an obligation accept the bet, and to pay up should the speaker win. However, these can be addressed on a case-by-case basis in the context in which they are used more easily and precisely than would be possible using Searle's or Austin's less precise taxonomies. In addition, the hierarchical structure of my taxonomy limits the number of categories any speech act can belong to in the infinite number of possible contexts in which it might appear. An accusation can be objective or subjective, but it cannot be persuasive, commissive, or performative because its direction of fit is incompatible with those categories. Likewise, betting cannot be descriptive in either an objective or subjective way because of its direction of fit prohibits it from being descriptive. In this way I have given Searle's favorite category the special status it deserves without his unnecessary requirement of a unique direction of fit for every category.

4   Conclusion

I have adapted Searle's taxonomy to systematically apply the features Searle defines as characteristic of categories of speech acts. Where Searle gives each of his categories its own direction of fit and expressed psychological state, I have used these features as binary features to distinguish speech act categories. I have also integrated face work into the definition of illocutionary force, using Brown's politeness strategies as well as Culpeper et al.'s impoliteness strategies to further distinguish between subcategories of speech act. These modifications to Searle's taxonomy will allow the integration of politeness and impoliteness theories into the study of speech acts, as well as permitting increased precision in the definition of speech acts.

Some complications may arise from the greater granularity of my taxonomy; for example, it can be shown that some speech acts, such as betting and accusing, fall into multiple categories. However, I believe that since my taxonomy defines speech acts more precisely than either Austin's or Searle's, it can address the possible context-based changes in the illocutionary effect of speech acts while limiting the categories to which a single speech act can belong based on the top-level feature of direction of fit.

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