# SPEECH ACT THEORY IN MODERN LINGUISTICS: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

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**Abstract**

Speech act theory is one of the fundamental theories of modern pragmatics, explaining how language functions as a means of performing communicative actions. This article examines the theoretical foundations and development of speech act theory and reviews contemporary approaches to its application in modern linguistics. The study employs qualitative research based on descriptive, analytical, comparative, and literature review methods. The findings indicate that the contributions of J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle established the theoretical basis of speech act theory, while later scholars expanded its scope by emphasizing communicative intention, context, and pragmatic inference. The article also highlights recent developments in digital communication, corpus pragmatics, intercultural communication, and computational linguistics. It is concluded that speech act theory remains an essential framework for analyzing language in use and provides a solid theoretical foundation for further research in discourse analysis, including written advertisements.

**Keywords:** speech act theory, pragmatics, speech acts, discourse analysis, communicative intention, corpus pragmatics.

## Introduction

Language is one of the fundamental means of human communication through which individuals exchange information, express attitudes, establish social relationships, and influence one another's behavior. However, communication extends beyond the transmission of information, as language also enables speakers to perform various social and communicative actions. Understanding how language functions in real communicative situations has become one of the central concerns of modern linguistics, particularly within the field of pragmatics.

Among the most influential pragmatic theories, **speech act theory** occupies a prominent position because it explains how utterances function as actions performed in particular communicative contexts. Since its emergence in the second half of the twentieth century, the theory has developed into one of the principal frameworks for studying language use, communicative intention, and interpersonal interaction. Over the years, speech act theory has been refined and expanded by numerous scholars, resulting in diverse theoretical perspectives and broader applications across different branches of linguistics.

Contemporary research demonstrates that speech act theory is no longer limited to philosophical and pragmatic inquiry but is widely applied in discourse analysis, media and advertising studies, intercultural communication, digital communication, translation studies,

corpus linguistics, and computational linguistics. At the same time, increasing attention has been paid to cross-cultural investigations of speech acts, including comparative studies involving English and other languages. These developments confirm the continuing relevance of speech act theory for understanding the relationship between language, context, and communicative intention in modern society (Huang, 2014; Jucker, 2024).

Although speech act theory has been extensively studied for several decades, ongoing theoretical developments and the emergence of new communicative environments necessitate a comprehensive review of its evolution and current approaches. Such a review provides a clearer understanding of the theoretical foundations of speech act research and establishes an appropriate basis for further investigations in specific types of discourse.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine the theoretical foundations and development of speech act theory in modern linguistics and to review contemporary approaches that have contributed to its evolution.

**Methodology**

The study is based on a **qualitative research approach**. The **descriptive**, **analytical**, **comparative**, and **literature review** methods were employed to examine the theoretical foundations and contemporary developments of speech act theory.

**Results and discussion**

**1. The emergence of speech act theory**

The emergence of speech act theory marked a significant shift in linguistic and philosophical studies by changing the perception of language from a system used solely for conveying information to a means of performing actions. Prior to the development of pragmatics, linguistic research primarily focused on the semantic and syntactic properties of language. However, scholars gradually recognized that the meaning of an utterance cannot be fully understood without considering the speaker's intention and the communicative context in which it occurs. This realization led to the development of speech act theory, which became one of the foundational approaches within modern pragmatics (Levinson, 1983, pp. 5-9).

Speech act theory was first systematically introduced by the British philosopher **John Langshaw Austin** in his influential work "How to do things with words"(1962). Austin challenged the traditional philosophical view that the principal function of language is to describe facts or state propositions. Instead, he argued that speakers frequently perform actions through language, such as making promises, issuing requests, expressing apologies, or giving warnings. This perspective established language as a form of social action and significantly expanded the scope of linguistic inquiry (Austin, 1962, pp. 4-7).

One of Austin's major contributions was the distinction between **performative** and **constative** utterances. While constative utterances describe situations and can generally be evaluated as true or false, performative utterances accomplish an action simply by being uttered under appropriate circumstances. Austin later refined this distinction, recognizing that most utterances possess both descriptive and performative aspects. Consequently, he proposed a more comprehensive framework consisting of three interrelated components of every speech act: the **locutionary act**, referring to the production of a meaningful linguistic expression; the

**illocutionary act**, representing the speaker's communicative intention; and the **perlocutionary act**, describing the effect produced on the hearer (Austin, 1962, pp. 94-108).

Austin's theoretical model laid the foundation for subsequent developments in pragmatics by demonstrating that successful communication depends not only on the literal meaning of linguistic expressions but also on the intentions of the speaker and the contextual conditions in which an utterance is produced. As Levinson (1983, p.226) notes, Austin's work shifted linguistic research toward the analysis of language in use, providing the conceptual basis for later pragmatic theories. Similarly, Huang (2014, pp. 220-223) argues that speech act theory remains one of the most influential approaches for understanding how speakers perform communicative actions in various social and cultural contexts.

Although Austin's theory has received criticism for the ambiguity of certain concepts and the absence of a comprehensive classification of speech acts, his work continues to serve as the starting point for nearly all subsequent research in pragmatics. His theoretical framework inspired later scholars to refine, expand, and systematize the concept of speech acts, thereby establishing one of the most productive areas of modern linguistic research.

**2. Searle's development of speech act theory**

John R. Searle significantly expanded Austin's speech act theory by providing a more systematic framework for the analysis of communicative acts. While accepting Austin's distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, Searle focused primarily on **illocutionary acts**, arguing that they represent the speaker's communicative intention and constitute the core of speech act theory (Searle, 1969, pp. 23-30).

One of Searle's most important contributions is the classification of speech acts into five categories: **representatives (assertives)**, which commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition; **directives**, intended to influence the listener's actions; **commissives**, through which speakers commit themselves to future actions; **expressives**, expressing the speake's psychological state; and **declarations**, which bring about changes in institutional or social reality through their utterance (Searle, 1979, pp.12-20). This classification has become one of the most widely accepted models in pragmatics and discourse analysis due to its clarity and applicability across various communicative contexts.

Despite its considerable influence, Searle's classification has also received criticism. Some scholars argue that the boundaries between certain categories are not always clearly defined and that the same utterance may perform multiple illocutionary functions depending on the communicative context (Levinson, 1983, pp. 240-244). Nevertheless, Searle's model remains fundamental to contemporary pragmatic research and continues to serve as a theoretical basis for studies in discourse analysis, intercultural communication, media discourse, and advertising language (Huang, 2014, pp. 224-228).

**3. The expansion of speech act theory**

Following the contributions of Austin and Searle, speech act theory was further developed by several scholars who expanded its theoretical scope and emphasized the importance of context, communicative intention, and interpersonal interaction. These studies significantly contributed to the establishment of speech act theory as one of the fundamental frameworks of modern pragmatics.

One of the most influential contributions was made by **H. P. Grice** (1975), who introduced the **Cooperative Principle** and the theory of **conversational implicature**. Grice demonstrated that successful communication depends not only on the literal meaning of an utterance but also on shared assumptions and contextual interpretation. His theory complemented speech act theory by explaining how speakers often convey meanings that extend beyond the explicit content of their utterances (Grice, 1975, pp. 41-58).

**Kent Bach** and **Robert M. Harnish** (1979) further developed speech act theory by emphasizing communicative intention as the central element of linguistic interaction. They argued that understanding speech acts requires both linguistic knowledge and the ability to infer the speaker's intended meaning from contextual information (Bach & Harnish, 1979, pp. 15-22).

Another important contribution was made by **Geoffrey Leech** (1983), who incorporated the concept of **politeness** into pragmatic analysis. He proposed that speech acts are closely related to social norms and interpersonal relationships, highlighting the role of politeness strategies in maintaining effective communication (Leech, 1983, pp. 80-104).

Similarly, **Stephen C. Levinson** (1983) broadened the pragmatic perspective by emphasizing the importance of context in interpreting speech acts. His work demonstrated that the meaning and function of an utterance depend largely on situational factors, shared knowledge, and communicative conventions (Levinson, 1983, pp. 226-294).

Collectively, these scholars transformed speech act theory from a philosophical concept into a comprehensive pragmatic framework applicable to various types of discourse and communicative situations.

**4. Contemporary approaches to speech act theory**

Contemporary research demonstrates that speech act theory has evolved beyond its original philosophical framework and is now widely applied in various fields of linguistics. Recent studies investigate speech acts in **digital communication**, **social media**, **advertising discourse**, **intercultural communication** and **artificial intelligence**, confirming the continuing relevance of the theory in modern linguistic research (Assimakopoulos, 2025).

One of the major developments is the application of **corpus pragmatics**, which enables researchers to analyze speech acts using large collections of authentic language data. Corpus-based studies provide more objective evidence of how speech acts function in different communicative contexts and genres (Jucker, 2024). Furthermore, advances in **computational linguistics** and **AI** have led to new investigations of speech acts in human-computer interaction, demonstrating both the potential and limitations of artificial intelligence in producing contextually appropriate communication (Tantucci & Sparvoli, 2025).

Another important trend is the growing interest in **cross-cultural pragmatics**, where researchers compare the realization and interpretation of speech acts across different languages and cultures. Such studies reveal that cultural norms significantly influence communicative behavior while confirming the applicability of speech act theory to multilingual and multicultural contexts (Ali, 2025).

Overall, contemporary approaches indicate that speech act theory remains a dynamic and evolving field, continually adapting to new communicative environments and interdisciplinary research.

**Conclusion**

Speech act theory has developed from a philosophical approach to language into one of the fundamental frameworks of modern pragmatics. The contributions of J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle established the theoretical foundation of the theory, while subsequent scholars, including H. P. Grice, Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish, Geoffrey Leech, and Stephen C. Levinson, broadened its scope by emphasizing the importance of context, communicative intention, and interpersonal interaction. Contemporary research demonstrates that speech act theory continues to evolve through its application to digital communication, corpus pragmatics, intercultural studies, and computational linguistics. The findings of this review confirm that speech act theory remains highly relevant for understanding language in use and provides a solid theoretical basis for further research on speech acts in written advertisements and other forms of discourse.

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