Speech Act Theory:
The Philosophical Controversy

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ABSTRACT

This article is intended to critically assess speech act theory from a philosophical perspective. The theory of speech acts has undeniably enriched meaning theory and provided a fresh view for research in the fields of philosophy of language, meaning, pragmatics, and other related areas, thereby further deepening people's understanding of meaning. Speech act theoretic research has to some extent assumed that the theory is firmly grounded and thus mainly focused on evaluating the theory in terms of its development and taxonomies, exploring its application to literature, comparing/relating it with/to other pragmatic notions such as politeness, implicature, inference, etc., or validating its usefulness in language teaching contexts. Speech act theory, however, is not without its share of flaws, such as the inclination to disregard the intrinsic meaning of language components and also the status of the perlocutionary act, terminological confusion, the blurred constative/performative distinction, and the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts, the performative hypothesis and circumstances under which felicity conditions apply.

KEY WORDS: Speech Act Theory, Constative, Performative, Meaning, Philosophy, illocutionary, Felicity Conditions

1. INTRODUCTION:

Speech Act Theory (Henceforth, SAT) is attributed to the Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin in the 1960s in response to what Austin dubbed as the descriptive fallacy. Originally, speech act was used by Austin to refer to an expression and the whole situation in which it is used. Nowadays, it is used to mean the same as illocutionary act. In 1962 Austin introduced his classical speech act theory, "his ideas were later developed by Searle (1969), and Austin revised his original work in 1975" (Williams 2005, p.53). Moreover, when Austin published his '*How to Do Things with Words* (1962)', "It was hailed as an intellectual breakthrough. Austin

pointed out that language involved acts ('speech acts') which in part constitute – rather than simply reflect – social reality" (Hutton 2009, p. 57).

Austin tried to attract the philosophers' attention to how people actually use and understand natural language in everyday life communication based on the context, speakers' intention and hearers' interpretation and reactions (Chapman 2011, pp.47- 57).

The uses of language discussed by Austin became known as 'word plays'. This was an expression which was only used by Austin himself in conjunction with the latter part of his lectures at Harvard. Austin's (1962) theory is concerned with the notion of how to perform acts by uttering words and it was based on three distinctions, viz. constatives / performatives, explicit / implicit performatives, and locutionary / illocutionary / perlocutionary act. Searle's (1969) development of the theory is not concerned with how to do things with words only, but how to describe the words that do those actions. The difference between the two is that Austin's illocutionary act is triadic, i.e., comprising three subsequently related sub-acts: phonetic, phatic and

rhetic, whereas Searle's speech act consists of the utterance act and propositional act which subsumes Austin's phonetic and phatic acts. The prepositional act includes the referential and the predicational acts. The propositional act is equated with the rhetic act.

For Grundy (2008, p.90) a speech act might be viewed as "prototypically pragmatic phenomenon in the sense that they challenge the notion that there is one–to–one correspondence between a form and its function". It cannot be argued, however, that interrogative or declarative sentences have single predictable functions. In fact, "the function of an interrogative sentence when used as an utterance crucially depends on how the context assists the addressee in determining what is meant by what is said". Moreover, Grundy conceives of speech acts as having more than one function which all depend on the context to interpret the intended meaning, and he considers speech acts as a central topic or phenomenon in the development of pragmatics to seek the meaning beyond the sentences.

This article aims to critically assess SAT from a philosophical perspective. While SAT has provided a new perspective for meaning research, and further broadened people's understanding of meaning, it is still subject to criticism from different perspectives. The methodology adopted in the present article is to probe into the philosophical controversy concerning SAT in terms of its philosophical underpinnings; to substantiate the SAT in other philosophical works; to attest its rejection of verificationism and logical positivism; to illuminate the different orientations of both Austin and Searle; to explicate the terminological confusion, viz. the locution / illocution dichotomy, the problematic performative / constative distinction; and to scrutinize the performative hypothesis and circumstances under which felicity conditions apply.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

SAT has aroused the widest interest in linguistics, language philosophy and general theory of language usage. As a result, there is an enormous research body on speech acts. Therefore, this paper should not be expected to address every piece of previous work in this field. Previous works can be categorized into five major research fields. The first field is philosophically oriented theoretic research which examines the status of SAT within language philosophy; the second category is ontological which relates to the studies concerned with the nature and reality of the theory itself; the third field is that of application, i.e., applying the theory to texts and into contexts to validate its usefulness; the fourth field is that of critique that critically assesses the theory from both linguistic and philosophical perspectives, while the fifth field is more about comparing/relating the theory with/to other pragmatic notions such as politeness, implicature, and inference.

It is noteworthy that after Austin and Searle, SAT seems to have lost much of the prestige it already enjoyed, a great number of scholars and academics have paid considerable attention to SAT and a huge number of studies, both theoretical and empirical, on speech acts have been conducted. Clark (1979, pp. 431-437) outlines a model of how speech acts are understood and what responses there are for them. He categorized six features of indirect speech acts 'multiplicity of meaning', 'logical priority of meanings', 'rationality', 'conventionality', 'politeness', and purposefulness'; and six responses to indirect speech acts; 'multiplicity of moves', 'functions of moves', 'order of moves', 'selection of moves', 'politeness', and 'ellipsis'. Wierzbicka (1987) conducted semantic research on English speech act verbs. Her book *"English Speech Act Verbs: A Semantic Dictionary"* divided more than two hundred and seventy speech act verbs in English into thirty seven groups for semantic original word interpretation, which expanded the research on the Speech Act Theory. Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) conducted a research that analyzed speech acts from a cultural standpoint that compared speech acts cross-culturally. Johnson (1990) adopted a force gestalt theory to analyze the illocutionary force of speech acts and its effect on the listener. Clark and Carlson (1991) studied the "joint act" in speech acts. Marmaridou (2000) attempted to explain speech acts from a cognitive perspective. Mo and Duan (2012) adopted Talmy's (2000) force-dynamics model to provide an effective way to solve the problems existing in the classical speech act theory. Pérez-Hernández (2020) attempted to provide a cognitive model of commissives category of speech acts. Verschueren (2000) provided a comprehensive account of the speech act verbs and discriminated two classes of verbs: general and speech act. He concluded that a verb is a speech act verb if its meaning can satisfy both the 'action condition' and the 'descriptive condition' of the act. But when an action verb conforms only to the 'action condition' then it will not be a speech act verb.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SAT

According to Harris and McKinney (2021, p.2), three theories of speech acts emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. The first theory, initiated by J. L. Austin (1962; 1963; 1970), stipulates that "illocutionary acts are conventional procedures whose conditions of felicitous performance are defined by localized social conventions". Different illocutionary acts"…are performed by acting in accordance with different linguistic or social conventions". The second view is attributed to the work of Paul Grice (1957; 1968; 1969). In that theory, "illocutionary acts are performed by acting with overt, audience-directed intentions. Different illocutionary acts are distinguished by the fact that they are performed with intentions to change others' minds in different ways" (2021, p.2). In the third, that of Sellars' (1954; 1969), "speech acts (along with intentional mental states) should be understood in terms of their functional roles in broader patterns of 'norm-conforming behavior'—activities that are constitutively governed by social norms" (Sellars 1954, p.204). Still a fourth theory of speech acts can be attributed to Wittgenstein (1960, pp.67ff), whose view was that some speech acts are reflections of the speaker's mental states.

Furthermore, SAT can also be traced in Kant's work (1978) where his comments on 'the relation between language and power' and 'the meaning of facial expressions and gestures', all designate 'universal communicative acts' and his explicit comments "…on apologizing and congratulating and other conversation-related verbs" (McHoul 1996, p. 587).

Harnish (2009, pp.9-31) mentions two different yet meticulously correlated versions of SAT, viz. 'Austinian' and 'Gricean' based on what categories they advocate. The basic tenet of the Austinian version of SAT is that illocutionary acts need to be grasped in terms of "illocutionary rules, conventions, or norms, universally accepted by the community of the speakers". The Gricean version conceives of illocutionary acts as communicative, (as a result of the speaker's utterance and the hearer's inferences among complex propositional attitudes. These two versions the 'Austinian' and the 'Gricean' can be categorized as externalist and internalist, respectively, based on "…the nature of conditions set down on the analysis of the force of a successful speech act: externalist conditions constrain the way the social or physical context must be, whereas internalist conditions restrict the mental states of the speaker and/or the hearer" (Witczak-Plisiecka, Witek 2009, p. 2). Moreover, it is the Gricean approach, which "…naturally favours the internalist point of view, not only offers an adequate account of illocutionary communication, but also possesses many of the explanatory merits traditionally ascribed to Austinian and externalist theories"(ibid).

Doerge (2009, pp.53-68) (as quoted in Witczak-Plisiecka, Witek 2009, p.3) advocates Austin's account of the illocutionary act asserts that "theoretical terms should not be re-defined without a profound reason because of the risk of introducing misunderstanding and terminological confusion that could result in a purely verbal dispute". Again, for Doerge, Austin's definition is a "…privileged one and should be maintained unless a better, sufficiently justified alternative account of illocutionarity arises".

While pragmatics deals with linguistic communication as a central topic, it is important to distinguish between using language to do / in doing something. It is a fact that human beings use language in much of their thought which is related to a cognitive life, but the pragmatic concern is with what the speaker intends, aims, and desires by uttering something (Akmajian and et al 2001, pp.361–363).

Ruytenbeek (2021, p.15) shows how indirect speech acts mostly arise from the exploitation of the maxims of relation and quantity. The violation of some maxims would not prevent having a successful communication. This means that a speaker exploits a maxim to convey something implicitly. This happens if the speaker is supposed to follow the cooperative principle. Cooperative speakers convey something beyond what they say by exploiting a maxim.

4. AGAINST LOGICAL POSITIVISM

Logical positivism that flourished during the 1930s is a philosophical doctrine whose basic tenet was that a sentence is meaningless if it cannot be verified in terms of truth and falsity. This issue of truth/falsity distinction has always been a focal point throughout much of the literature on pragmatic notions such as speech acts, presupposition, deixis, and implicature. For the *Logical Positivists*, language is a means of stating what and how things are in the world. They were primarily concerned with logic and truth. As a reaction

against the logical positivists' view about meaningfulness, a new school in language philosophy appeared known as *Ordinary Language Philosophy*. That school laid strong emphasis on the way people use their language. At Oxford University, on one hand, a group of philosophers contributed in that new approach to study language including: Austin, Grice, Strawson, Rhyle, and Urmson. The first two; Austin and Grice had a very significant role in developing the central theories of pragmatics. On the other hand, in Cambridge, Wittgenstein believed in the analogy of language to a game. That is, language users abide by rules to perform things with language, and he became associated with the slogan 'meaning is use'.

Austin (as an ordinary-language philosopher) believes that philosophical problems normally come as a result of misunderstanding of ordinary speech. The performative sentences have no reference to anything in the world and, thus, cannot be conceived of as true or false. Instead, they seem to be getting work done. Austin himself appeared to argue that these performative phrases could not be distinguished as an entirely uncommon class.

Witczak-Plisiecka (2013, p.61) conceives of Austin's theory as "…the first to explicitly reject verificationism as an inadequate and misleading basis for linguistic research". Moreover, for Witczak-Plisiecka, SAT was "…a reaction against the verificationist movement and logical positivism, within which it was assumed that all language could and should be analysed with regard to the truth and falsity of its sentences". Against this mainstream, Austin maintained that "there are linguistic utterances which may be 'factually defective', i.e. non-descriptive and neither true, not false, but simply successful or not successful". Moreover, expressions that are judged as "…felicitous (or not) rather than true or false include non-descriptive uses of language, e.g. commands, requests, questions, promises. Instead of being truth verifiable, they are instrumental in making things happen, which renders language a tool for changing the world". (Witczak-Plisiecka 2013, pp. 43-44),

SAT was, in effect, a philosophically insightful criticism of the positivist hypothesis that a sentence is either true or false. The positivist view represents a "descriptive fallacy," as it assigns priority to the descriptive function of language and disregards the other functions. Austin's view of was accordingly remedial to that trend. In his "A Plea for Excuses"

(1956), Austin argued that the ordinary language should come first and that everyday speech is the focal point in approaching conceptual problems.

5. CRITICISM AGAINST SAT

While SAT has been a very powerful theoretical paradigm in current research in pragmatics due to its being a special case of a general theory of human action, it can be evidently seen that this theory is not without its own share of controversy, flaws and shortcomings as research has reported terminological confusion, concerns and inaccuracies.

According to Witczak-Plisiecka, SAT suffered from "the terminological confusion which originated with Austin and has been accumulating along with the emergence of new models and approaches based on Austin's thoughts". Moreover, two components demand some consideration "understanding of the nature of the speech act, its relation to the phenomenon of 'performativity', and the understanding of the concept of convention, especially while taken in opposition to intention". Moreover, research and literature on speech at theory abound with references to '*performative speech acts*' or even '*virtual performative speech acts*' (e.g. Ross 2003; and Charnock 2009). These references "…seem to suggest that there may be at least two types, viz. performative and non-performative speech acts" (2013, p.61).

Austin (1962/1975: 45ff) (following Aristotle's dichotomy of apophantic and non-apophantic logos), proposed two general classes of utterances: constatives and performatives (the former can be judged as truth-verifiable utterances while the latter being understood as neither true, nor false, but as felicitous/ successful /productive or not). However, Austin later realised that a flawless division between constative and performative utterances cannot be maintained and thus the distinction was eventually abandoned by Austin himself when he stated: "It is time to make a fresh start on the problem" (Austin 1962/1975: 91). Therefore, utterances which are taken to *constate* something –e.g. "There is a bull behind you." can still implicate some action, such as a warning, a directive, etc.; other utterances which are conceived of as performing an act like *apology* or *promise*, and which are analysed as felicitous or not, can still be perceived of as true in terms of what they refer to (Austin 1962/1975, p. 141).

Leilei and Chunfang (2023, p. 26), find that though SAT promoted meaning theory and effectively expanded the dimension of meaning research, "[it] has various shortcomings, such as the tendency to despise the inherent meaning of language elements and the lack of research on the perlocutionary act". Birner (2013, p. 107) argues that although the main insight of SAT is that speaking is an act, "…there is another matter that should be explained which is the hearer/addressee's ability to determine the speaker's intention".

According to Harris and McKinney (2021, p.1), the locution/illocution is itself problematic as by merely uttering an expression, it is hard to tell what someone is doing as "it does not determine the illocutionary act that one thereby performs". For instance, by uttering "*You can't park your car there*", one might be "…describing local bylaws or issuing a command. For that matter, they may be joking around, speaking sarcastically, or acting in a play".

Despite the prevalent status within both linguistics and the philosophy of language, research findings, according to Janson and Woo (1996, p.302), report issues associated with SAT, mainly: "Utterances may lack a one-to-one mapping to a single speech act category (Bowers & Churcher, 1988; De Michelis & Grasso, 1994)"; further, "speech act interpretations may conflict (Reiss, 1985; Auramaki et al., 1988)"; another issue is that "speech acts are often part of a discourse and, hence, are related to previous and future utterances and cannot be studied in isolation (Bowers & Churcher, 1988; Habermas, 1981; Guinan, 1988)"; still another point is that "some aspects of human discourse, such as common social experiences and contextual complexities, are not adequately addressed by speech act theory (Argyris et al., 1985; Barrett & Davis, 1986; Bogen, 1991; Suchman, 1994; Voss, 1992)"

Furthermore, a good number of researchers still draw a sharp distinction between performative and constative utterances. For those researchers, performatives do actions, have illocutionary aspect, can be either happy (felicitous) or unhappy (infelicitous), and have a performative verb, whereas constative utterances state / describe affairs, have no illocution, can be either true or false, and have no performative verb. Surprisingly, that distinction was abandoned by Austin who came to realize that even the constative utterances have illocutionary aspects as the performatives one (Riemer, 2010, p. 113; Culpeper and Haugh, 2014, p. 214).

Flowerdew (1990, p.79), spots seven major concerns inherent in the SAT. These concerns relate to "(1) how many speech acts there are; (2) indirect speech acts and the concept of literal force; (3) the size of speech act realization forms; (4) the contrast between *specific* and *diffuse* acts;" moreover, there are two more issues. These are "(5) discrete categories versus scale of meaning; (6) the relation between locution, illocution, and interaction; and (7) the relation between the whole and the parts in a discourse". [Emphasis in Original]

Although Austin provided a clear basis for understanding the linguistic meaning of a sentence in terms of SAT of language, "…he was not very clear in his distinction between the different shades of illocutionary acts". Moreover, though Searle provided a clearer picture, "his idea of speech acts, in principle, limits or narrows human communication to the use of verbs only without given consideration to other parts of speech" (Isaac, Gwunireama, and Ogan 2020, p.50).

According to Leilei and Chunfang (2023, p.28), Austin's distinction between constatives and performatives, is "…a bit inadequate, as the three Happiness Conditions he proposed for performatives apply to constatives as well". For instance, the sentence "The cat is on the mat" is equivalent to "I tell you that the cat is on the mat". It is because of flaws like this that, Austin abandoned that distinction in favour of speech acts which imply that in most cases, "…a person is performing three acts at the same time as speaking: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act".

Cruse (2006, p.88) categorizes indirect speech acts into two types. The first is a highly *conventionalized act* whose indirectness is only of historical relevance. This type can be exemplified when there is incongruity between the utterance structure and its communicative purpose, as in (*Would you mind if I closed the window*?) which is a question functioning as requesting permission. The second types can be conceived of as a case of *conversational implicature*, as in

Daughter: Mom, Janet and her sisters are going swimming today.

Mother: You're sick, right?

which is a clear case of a conversational implicature.

Verschueren (1999) believes that while speech acts were restricted to the sentence level, they can appear in the form of utterance components rather than complete sentences. Speech acts are not always identified by speech act verbs. For example, "I promise I will hurt you", the act involved in this situation is not of a promising rather of threatening. In other words, there is no exact match between a speech act and its performative verb all the time, which Searle describes such as the "*Illocutionary Verb Fallacy*" (Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2007, p.110).

Austin (1962, pp.150-162) classifies illocutionary force into five categories, each category, according to Austin, is identified by a verb; Allan (1997, p. 448) describes his taxonomy as "lexically- based approach". Moreover, despite the attempt to neatly categorize the verbs in this way, the categories show overlap, as Austin himself finds the last two classes are most troublesome, i.e., "Behabitives are troublesome because they seem too miscellaneous altogether: and expositives because they are enormously numerous and important" (Austin, 1962, p.151). on this point, Leech (1983: 206) argues that expressive verbs are of the pattern "SV (Prep) (O) (Prep) XN" as in the following examples:

-I acclaim you for your great work as a masterpiece.

-I praise you for making a good progress.

Bach and Harnish (1979, p. 40), in line with Searle, say that speech acts classification should be principled and the categories should not overlap. Furthermore, they point out there should be correspondence between the entry of category and its criterion.

For Simon (2020, p.20) "the assumptions about intentionality and perception that form the basis of the proposition-based analysis and classification of speech acts are insufficient as a basis for a general theory of speech acts"; and that "Searle's analysis implies that one of the two components of a simple speech act is a proposition, but many speech acts do not contain a proposition". Moreover, he finds that "Searle's analysis and classification of speech acts are misleading when applied to three simple, ordinary speech acts in everyday language use"; and that "an informative and accurate analysis of certain types of commonly used speech acts requires an alternative basis" (ibid, 21).

Although there is agreement on what felicity conditions are about, there are some views that consider felicity conditions as a part of rationality that allows the hearer to infer what is implied by the speaker. This is an important point that relates felicity conditions to what is implied and what is inferred. Bach and Harnish (1979, p. 53-5), for instance, do not view felicity conditions as the circumstances that should be met in order for an utterance or a particular speech act to be genuine. They deal with felicity conditions as a part of Grice's theory of conversational implicature. That is to say, speakers use rational principles for language to be used effectively and their ends to be achieved cooperatively. In line with this view, (Levinson, 1983, p. 241) affirms that hearers can infer what is implicit in the speaker's utterance which may include felicity conditions. Furthermore, Holtgraves (2008, p.210), claims that felicity conditions are not enough to determine the performance of an illocutionary point. He justifies that by arguing that even if the speech acts have the same illocutionary point, they can still be governed by different felicity conditions (while both threat and promise are commissives, threat is conditional, whereas promise is not).

Austin (1962) divides the speech act into three separate constituents: *Locutionary, Illocutionary* and *perlocutionary acts.* The first act represents the sentence meaning of the utterance with the determination of sense and reference. The second act reflects the speaker's communicative intention in uttering the message. Lastly, the perlocutionary act is the effect the speaker wishes to achieve in the mind of the interlocutor. For instance,

> *Locutionary act*   stop or you'll fall!
> *Illocutionary act*   warning to the addressee
> *Perlocutionary act*   urges the addressee to remain motionless

The success and failure of the three segments of speech act are governed by different sets of *felicity conditions*. Furthermore, the success of the three stages is not consecutive and automatic, that is, the success of one does not guarantee the success of the next stage.

For instance, in the above example, the locutionary phase may fail if the addressee's hearing is impaired or does not understand English, or a loud noise overtakes the addresser's words. In case the locutionary phase was successful, this does not ascertain that the illocutionary phase achieves success because the addressee might think that the addresser is joking or mocking him. Finally, illocutionary success is not directly followed by perlocutionary success. The addressee might be fully aware of his situation and might have made up his mind about his next move. The first two stages of speech act are essentially

conventional; they are associated with the area of linguistic knowledge shared by both interlocutors. Conversely, the perlocutionary act is associated with the private world of the addressee; it is realized in the mind of the addressee. Therefore, the addresser is helpless to discover the success or failure of the perlocutionary effect (Bara, 2010). Emike (2013, p.243) asserts that "linguistic meaning tends to capture some theses that are erroneously used to argue 'that language is basically an instrument for communication, and that the communicative functions of language are the basis for understanding its functions and meanings'."

The numerous issues that can be detected in Austin's theory can be attributed partly to the distinction between the circumstances of reality and felicity conditions. Considering the types of logical relationships that might occur between claims, that there are more ways in which the result may be incorrect or in Austin's terms 'outrageous,' than merely being wrong. For example, making a statement means a conviction in that statement. To say that 'the cat is on the mat' because you don't agree that the cat is on the mat is insincere, and thus miserable in the same sense that an insincere pledge is unhappy. Likewise, the presupposition in 'all Jack's kids are bald' because Jack doesn't have any children is not false. Austin described this as a form of unhappiness, equivalent to what happens when 'I call this ship...' is pronounced without a suitable institutional environment.

It can be firmly claimed that Austin came to realize issues with the performative hypothesis. Moreover, while his observations remain important to his work and subsequent research on speech acts, some of the distinctions along with the performative hypothesis have been eventually abandoned.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The following points can be drawn after reviewing the philosophical underpinnings of SAT, its inherent controversial issues, and the criticism targeted against it.

A speech act should be conceived of in terms of four focal points: the speaker's intended effect, the actual explicit action executed by the speaker through the utterance, the concrete context where the communicative action is performed; and the tangible effects echoed in the receiver.

Three correlated versions of speech acts can be identified: the Austinian, convention-conforming (speech acts are conditioned and defined by conventional and social conventions); the Gricean intention-conforming (speech acts are performed with audience-directed intentions in mind), and Sellarrs' norm-conforming (speech acts are governed by social norms).

Research on SAT can be categorized into five major fields. The first field is the philosophically oriented theoretic research which examines the status of SAT within language philosophy; the second category is ontological relating to the studies concerned with the nature and reality of the theory itself; the third field is that of application, i.e., applying the theory to texts and into contexts to validate its usefulness; the fourth field is that of critique that critically assesses the theory from both linguistic and philosophical perspectives; while the fifth field is more about comparing/relating the theory with/to other pragmatic notions such as politeness, implicature, inference.

Surprisingly, most researchers still draw a sharp distinction between performatives and constatives that distinction was abandoned by Austin himself.

Numerous issues can be detected in SAT that can be attributed partly to the distinction between the circumstances of reality and felicity conditions. The different shades of illocutionary acts are not very clear, the inclination to disregard the intrinsic meaning of language components, the status of the perlocutionary act, lack of research on the perlocutionary act, terminological confusion, the blurred distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts, speech act interpretations may conflict.

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