Speech Act Verbs

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Definition and Terminology

The term 'speech act verbs' has variously been defined
as applying either to all verbs used to refer to any type
of verbal behavior or to the much smaller subset
of verbs expressing specific speaker attitudes. Accord-
ing to the first, more encompassing definition, verbs
such as *to claim, to promise, to threaten, to praise,
to boast, to complain, to say, to whisper,* and *to
interrupt* all count as speech act verbs, whereas the
last three of this set are excluded by the second and
stricter definition. The terms 'illocutionary verbs,'
'verbs of communication,' and 'verbs of saying,'
which have been used as synonyms of 'speech act
verbs,' have likewise been defined in either a more
or less inclusive fashion. Because verbs such as *to say,
to whisper,* and *to interrupt* do not lexicalize speaker
attitudes, they are semantically less specific than
speech act verbs in the narrow sense of the term. For
this reason, this contribution is concerned only with
speech act verbs that lexicalize combinations of
speaker attitudes.

Speech act verbs are used to refer to situations
characterized by the following features or situational
roles: a speaker (S), a hearer (H), a set of speaker
attitudes, and an utterance (Utt) mostly containing a
proposition (P). These four elements are part of any
situation referred to by speech act verbs and constitute
the unifying feature of the meaning of these verbs
(Verschueren, 1980: 51–57; 1985: 39–40; Wierzbicka,
1987: 18; Harras *et al.*, 2004: Intro.). They distinguish
them from other elements of the lexicon, especially
from other types of verbs. Adopting the terminology
used by Harras *et al.* (2004) here I call the type of
situation referred to by all speech act verbs the 'general
resource situation type.' Special types of situations
referred to by speech act verbs are called 'special
resource situation types.'

Classes of Speech Act Verbs

Special resource situation types constitute the frame-
work for the classification of different types of speech
act verbs. They are built up from specifications of the
role of the utterance and of the speaker attitudes,
which are both elements of the general resource situ-
ation type. The set of speaker attitudes may be speci-
fied as consisting of the speaker's attitude to the
proposition, the speaker's intention, and the speaker's
presuppositions. The speaker's propositional attitude
may be further specified as S's taking P to be true, S's
wanting P, S's evaluating P positively or negatively,
and so on. Specifications of the speaker's intention

include S's intention to make H believe something or to get him/her to do something. Examples of specifications of the speaker's presuppositions are S's presupposition that H does not know P, that H will do P in the normal course of events, and that H is able to do P. The role of the utterance is specified by properties of the propositional content. These include the event type of P (that is, whether P is an action, event, or state of affairs), the agent of P (in the case that P is an action), and the temporal reference of P (specifically, whether P precedes, coincides with, or follows S's uttering P).

Figure 1 shows the different types of specifications of each of the elements of the general resource situation type. Following a procedure proposed by Baumgärtner (1977: 260–264), the specifications in **Figure 1** are obtained from a comparison of sentences containing speech act verbs. The well-formedness of some of these and the ill-formedness of others shows which elements are relevant to the meaning of the verbs they contain. For example, a comparison of the sentences *I order you to leave the room*, **I order you to have left the room*, and **I order you for me to leave the room* shows that *to order* lexicalizes the specification 'future action of H' for the properties of the propositional content.

Different combinations of specifications of the different kinds of speaker attitudes and of the properties of the propositional content constitute special resource situation types, which are referred to by distinct types of speech act verbs. The combinations listed in **Table 1** represent situations that are referred to by specific types of verbs. Elements of the situations referred to are also components of the meaning
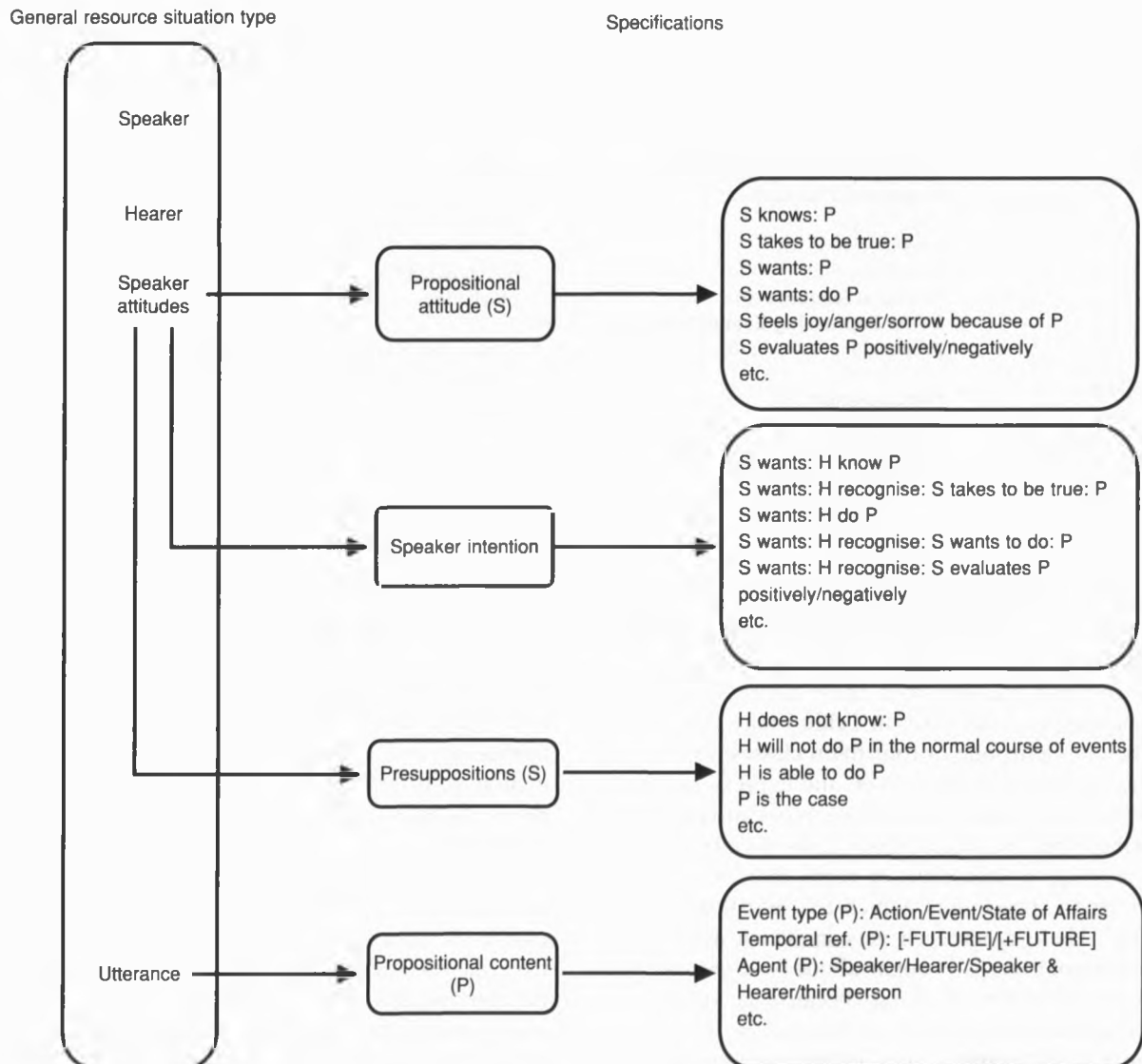
General resource situation type   Specifications

Figure 1 Specification of the elements of the general resource situation type.

Table 1 Classes of speech act verbs

(1a)	**Assertives:** *claim, assert . . .,*	
	Propositional attitude (S):	S takes to be true: P
	Intention (S):	S wants: H recognize: S takes to be true: P
	Presupposition (S):	H does not know: P
	Event type (P):	Action/Event/State of Affairs
	Temporal reference (P):	[-FUTURE]/[+FUTURE]
(1b)	**Information Verbs:** *inform, tell, impart, communicate,* etc.	
	Propositional attitude (S):	S knows: P
	Intention (S):	S wants: H know: P
	Presupposition (S):	H does not know: P
	Event type (P):	Action/Event/State of Affairs
	Temporal reference (P):	[-FUTURE]/[+FUTURE]
(2)	**Directives:** *ask (sb. to do sth.), order, request . . .,*	
	Propositional attitude (S):	S wants: P
	Intention (S):	S wants: H do P
	Presupposition (S):	H will not do P in the normal course of events
		H is able to do P
	Event type (P):	Action
	Agent (P):	Hearer
	Temporal reference (P):	[+FUTURE]
(3)	**Commissives:** *promise, guarantee, pledge, vow . . .,*	
	Propositional attitude (S):	S wants to do P
	Intention (S):	S wants: H recognise: S wants to do P
	Presupposition (S):	P is in the interest of H
	Event type (P):	Action
	Agent (P):	Speaker
	Temporal reference (P):	[+FUTURE]
(4a)	**Verbs Expressing Emotions:** *rejoice, complain, scold . . .,*	
	Propositional attitude (S):	S feels joy/anger/sorrow because of P
	Intention (S):	S wants: H recognise: S feels joy/anger/sorrow because of P
	Presupposition (S):	P is the case
	Event type (P):	Action/Event/State of Affairs
	Temporal reference (P):	[-FUTURE]
(4b)	**Verbs Expressing Evaluations:** *praise, criticise . . .,*	
	Propositional attitude (S):	S evaluates P positively/negatively
	Intention (S):	S wants: H recognise: S evaluates P positively/negatively
	Presupposition (S):	P is the case
	Event type (P):	Action
	Agent (P):	Hearer or Third Person
	Temporal reference (P):	[-FUTURE]

of the corresponding verbs. If the assertives and information verbs in **Table 1** are subsumed under the larger class of representatives and verbs expressing emotions are grouped together with those expressing evaluations, all speech act verbs in **Table 1** may be classified as belonging to one of four main classes: representatives, directives, commissives, and expressives. These correspond to four of the main types of speech acts distinguished by Searle (1975: 354–361). In addition, there exists a fifth class of verbs that may be used to refer to speech acts, which Searle called 'declarations.' These are speech acts in which a particular institutional fact is brought about by a speaker who has the authority to do so because he or she is a representative of a particular institution. The performance of declarations does not involve any particular speaker attitudes apart from the speaker's being

willing to bring about the relevant institutional fact. Accordingly, declaratives, that is verbs used to refer to declarations, differ from other kinds of speech act verbs in that they lexicalize no speaker attitudes other than the speaker's intention to bring about a particular institutional fact. Examples of declaratives include *to absolve, to baptize, to bequeath, to condemn, to excommunicate, to fire, to nominate,* and *to resign.*

Other classifications have much in common with Searle's taxonomy. Austin's (1962: 150–163) classification of speech act verbs, for example, comprises five classes (expositives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and verdictives, which approximately correspond to Searle's representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, respectively). Vendler's classification was based on Austin's. Due

to the fact that Vendler distinguished two types of exercitives (interrogatives and genuine exercitives) as well as two types of verdictives (operatives and true verdictives), his classification consists of seven rather than five classes (Vendler, 1972: 16–25). Bach and Harnish divided speech acts into six general categories. Four of these (constatives, directives, commissives, and acknowledgements) "correspond roughly to Austin's expositives, exercitives, commissives and behabitives respectively, and closely to Searle's representatives, directives, commissives and expressives" (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 40–41). Taken together, the remaining two classes, effectives and verdictives, correspond to what Searle called "declarations." Using H's evaluations as criteria, Allan (1994: 4125; 1998: 10–11) distinguished four types of speech acts. Statements include speech acts such as denials, reports, and predictions (Searle's representatives) as well as promises and offers (Searle's commissives). Invitationals are a subset of Searle's directives and include speech acts such as requests, suggestions, exhortations, and warnings. The rest of Searle's directives are grouped together with his declarations into a class called 'authoritatives.' Expressives, finally, include greetings, thanks, apologies, and congratulations. Table 2 compares the classifications discussed.

Speech Acts and Speech Act Verbs

The examples considered so far suggest that the meanings of speech act verbs may be described in terms of properties of speech acts. The components of speech acts and those of speech act verbs do indeed display substantial overlap. This may be observed from the fact that the components of the meanings of speech act verbs correspond to at least five of the seven components of illocutionary force that serve to determine under which conditions a particular type of speech act is both successful and nondefective (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985: 12–20). These correspondences are summarized in **Figure 2**.

In spite of these correspondences, special resource situation types do not suffice to capture the meaning of all speech act verbs. Examples of verbs whose meanings cannot completely be described in terms of elements of special resource situation types are *boast, flatter,* and *lie.* In addition to the attitudes of a resource situation speaker, these verbs lexicalize different types of evaluations by a speaker who uses these verbs to describe the speech act of the resource situation speaker. Following Barwise and Perry (1983: 32–39), here I call the situation in which a speaker describes an act performed by a resource situation speaker the 'discourse situation.' As **Figure 3** shows, the discourse situation comprises the same types of elements as the resource situation: a speaker, a hearer, and an utterance containing a proposition. The meaning of verbs such as *boast, flatter,* and *lie* comprises elements of a resource as well as a discourse situation. For example, *boast* lexicalizes not only a positive evaluation of P (one of S's own actions or properties) by the speaker of the resource situation but also a negative evaluation of the resource situation speaker's positive representation of P by a discourse situation speaker. In particular, a discourse situation speaker describing a resource situation speaker's act of self-praise by means of the verb *boast* thereby indicates that he or she considers the resource situation speaker's positive representation of P to be exaggerated. Similarly, *flatter* and *lie* lexicalize a combination of attitudes of a resource situation speaker as well as a discourse situation speaker's evaluation of the speech act performed by the resource situation speaker as being strategic (*flatter*) or insincere (*lie*). These examples show that for many illocutionary verbs, there is no corresponding speech act. Nor may any type of speech act be referred to by a corresponding illocutionary verb. An example is the apparent lack of

Table 2 Different types of classifications of speech acts/speech act verbs

Austin (1962)	Vendler (1972)	Searle (1975)	Bach & Harnish (1979)	Allan (1994)
Expositives	Expositives	Representatives	Constatives	Statements
Commissives	Commissives	Commissives	Commissives	
Exercitives	Interrogatives	Directives	Directives	Invitationals
	Exercitives			Authoritatives
Verdictives	Operatives	Declarations	Effectives	
	Verdictives		Verdictives	
Behabitives	Behabitives	Expressives	Acknowledgements	Expressives

Source: Allan (1998: 11).

Components of illocuationary force   Components of the meaning of speech act verbs
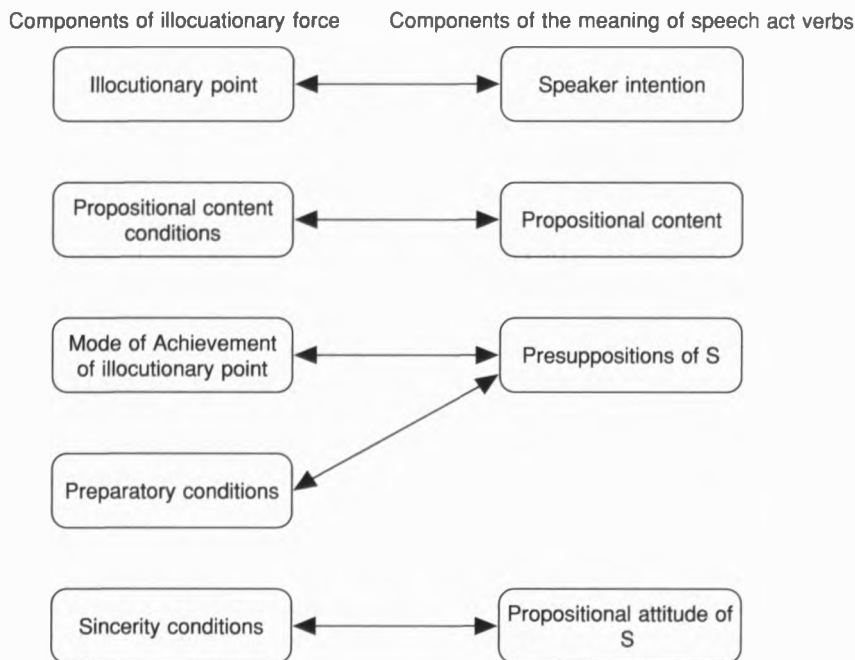

Figure 2 Correspondences between components of illocutionary force and components of the meaning of speech act verbs.
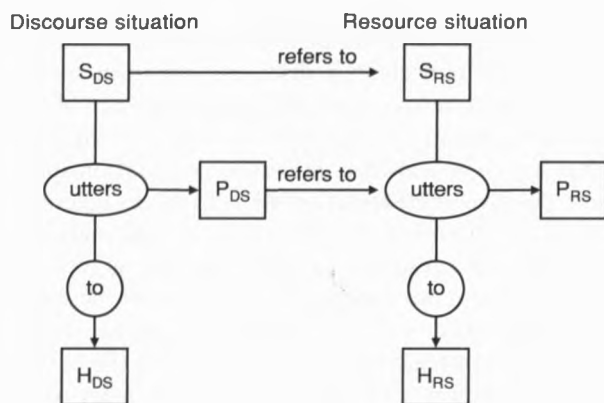

Figure 3 The inventory of situational roles of the discourse and the resource situation (S_{DS}, discourse situation speaker; S_{RS}, resource situation speaker; P_{DS}, proposition uttered by S_{DS}; P_{RS}, proposition uttered by S_{RS}; H_{DS}, discourse situation hearer; H_{RS}, resource situation hearer). From Harras et al. (2004: 10); used with permission of Walter de Gruyter, GmbH. & Co.

a special illocutionary verb in English to refer to an act in which a speaker predicts a future event that he or she considers to have negative consequences. Although there are special illocutionary verbs to describe such acts in German (e.g., *unken*) and Russian (e.g., *karkat*), the relevant act has to be referred to in English by less specific verbs such *predict*, *foretell*, and *prophesy*, whose meanings do not include an evaluative component.

The lack of a one-to-one correspondence of speech acts and speech act verbs also becomes evident from the fact that some verbs are systematically ambiguous

among several illocutionary points (Vanderveken, 1990: 168). For example, *to promise* may be used to refer to acts of threatening (as in *I promised him that he would be punished if he did not come back in time*), acts of promising (as in *I promised to help him*), and acts of assuring somebody of something (as in *I promised her that she would be free tomorrow* uttered by a speaker who is not the agent of P but only a confident news bearer). Other examples are *warn* and *advise*, which may both be classified as being either representatives (verbs used to denote an act of telling somebody that something is the case) or directives (verbs used to refer to an act of telling somebody to do something to avoid an imminent danger) (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985: 183). In spite of Austin's claim that speech act verbs are a good guide to speech acts (Austin 1962: 148–149), the absence of a one-to-one correspondence between speech acts and speech act verbs indicates that differences in the meaning of speech act verbs are "a good guide but by no means a sure guide to differences in illocutionary acts" (Searle, 1975: 345).

Performativity

Some speech act verbs can be used not only to denote but also to perform a particular speech act. To test whether a given speech act verb may be used in this way, Austin suggested that it be substituted for the variable x in the formula 'I (hereby) x …'. Any verb that may be used as a part of this formula may be used performatively (Austin, 1962: 67). Examples of

performative verbs are *to order, to promise, to inform, to criticize,* and *to assert.* The performative formula is often part of the institutionalized procedure by which a speaker brings about a particular institutional fact. Consequently, declaratives may generally be used performatively as in *I hereby name this ship the 'Queen Elisabeth'* and *I appoint you chairman.* Other types of speech act verbs can be used performatively only if they may be used in utterances that do not require an additional linguistic or nonlinguistic action for a particular speech act to be performed. For example, a speaker may promise a hearer to help him or her solely by uttering a sentence such as *I promise to help you tomorrow.* By contrast, an act of convincing somebody that something is the case requires more than a speaker's uttering a sentence such as *?I convince you that Beowulf is the single most important work of English literature.* This difference accounts for the fact that *to promise* may be used performatively, whereas *to convince* may not (Harras 2004: 152–154).

See also: Frame Semantics; Lexical Fields; Lexical Semantics; Lexicology; Performative Clauses; Situation Semantics; Speech Acts; Speech Acts and AI Planning Theory; Speech Acts and Grammar.

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