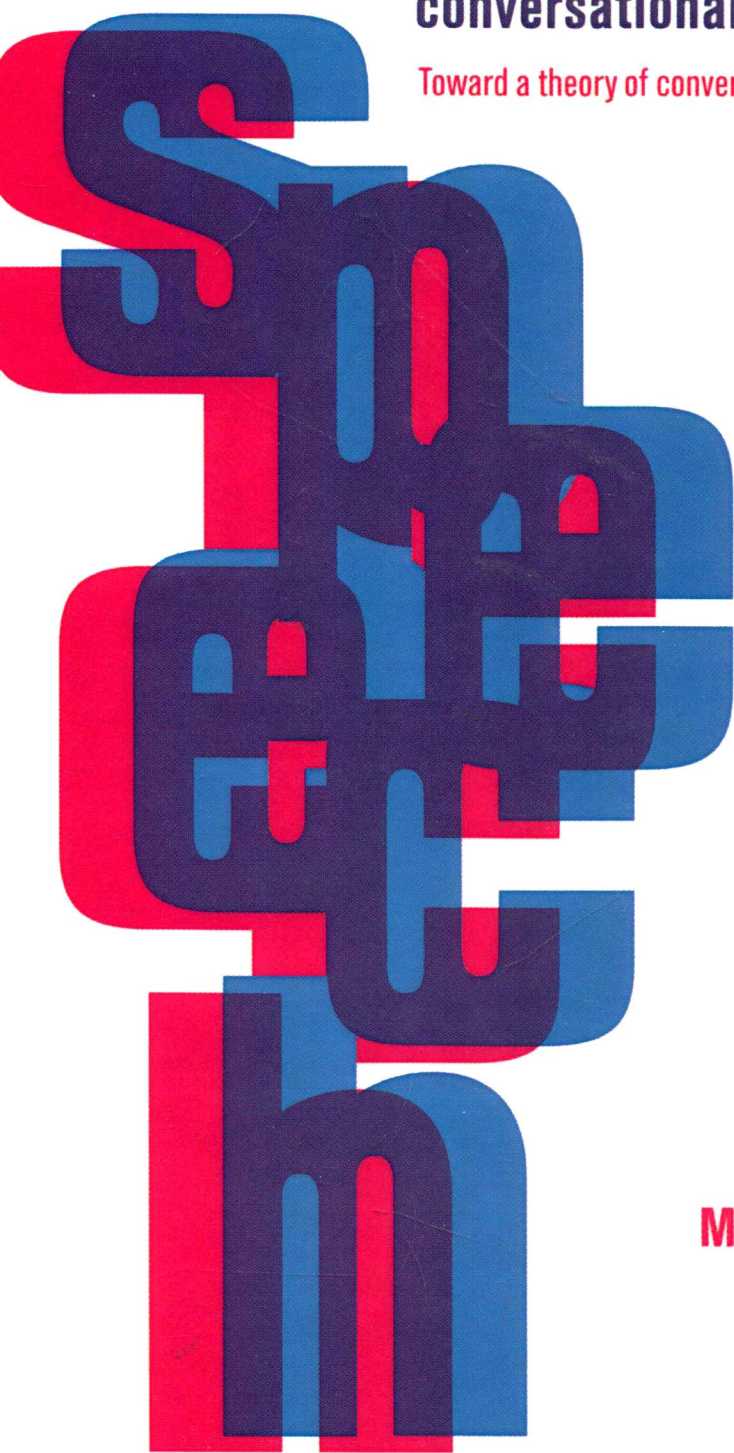


# Speech acts and conversational interaction

Toward a theory of conversational competence



Michael L. Geis

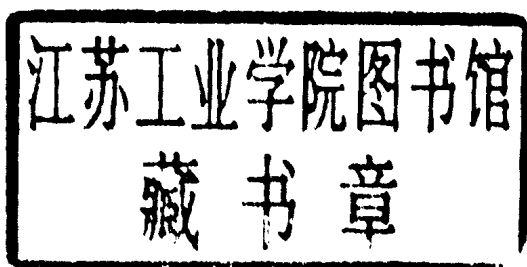
# Speech acts and conversational interaction



MICHAEL L. GEIS

*Department of Linguistics*

*The Ohio State University*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1995

First published 1995

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Geis, Michael L.

Speech acts and conversational interaction / by Michael L. Geis.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Speech acts (Linguistics). 2. Conversation analysis.
3. Communicative competence. 4. Psycholinguistics.
5. Social interaction. 6. Pragmatics. I. Title.

P95.55.G38 1995

401'.41 - dc20 94-48352 CIP

ISBN 0 521 46499 4 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

This book unites speech act theory and conversation analysis to advance a theory of conversational competence. It is predicated on the assumption that speech act theory, if it is to be of genuine empirical and theoretical significance, must be embedded within a general theory of conversational competence capable of accounting for how we do things with words in naturally occurring conversation, and it can usefully be seen as a synthesis of traditional speech act theory, conversation analysis, and artificial intelligence research in natural language processing. Michael L. Geis analyzes a variety of naturally occurring conversations, presenting them within a framework of computational interest and within Discourse Representation Theory. In particular, he offers an explicit mapping of semantic and pragmatic (i.e. speech-act-theoretic) meaning features and politeness features into so-called conventionalized indirect speech act forms.

*For Jonnie*

# Preface



In this study, I propose and defend a new theory of speech acts predicated on the assumption that speech act theory, if it is to be of genuine empirical and theoretical significance, must be embedded within a general theory of conversational competence capable of accounting for how we do things with words in naturally occurring conversation. The theory I shall propose, Dynamic Speech Act Theory (DSAT), can usefully be seen as a synthesis of traditional speech act theory (cf., especially, Searle 1969, 1975, 1979), conversation analysis (cf., especially, the references to Schegloff, Sacks, and Levinson in the bibliography), and artificial intelligence research in natural language processing (cf., especially, the citations in the bibliography to the work of Allen, Cohen, Litman, and Perrault, also Patten, Geis, and Becker (1992)). Important additional influences are the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) on politeness and Halliday and Hasan (1989) on register.

I shall take the position here that the goal of a theory of conversational competence should be specification of the properties of devices capable of engaging in conversational interactions – devices that we might call “conversation machines.” As such, the theory would be a theory of the conversational competence that underlies our ability to engage in goal-achievement and goal-recognition in conversation and our ability to produce and understand utterances (and nonverbal behaviors) appropriate to the context. I shall argue in these pages that correctly conceived, speech-act-theoretic structures will play a critical role in accounting for these abilities.

From conversation analysis, I draw the thesis that the actions participants engage in in conversation – actions like requesting, offering, promising, making assessments, and the like – are social as opposed to linguistic actions. This is a significant departure from speech act theory. Though Austin, Searle, and others noted that there is a social dimension to actions like these, they were – and still are – viewed by speech act theorists as actions we perform “in saying something” (Austin 1962: 91). The importance of this step lies in the fact that once it is recognized that so-called speech acts are social, as opposed to linguistic acts, the temptation to associate the performance of particular speech acts with the uttering of sentences having particular linguistic forms diminishes greatly.

From conversation analysis, I also draw the thesis that the fundamental unit of investigation for speech act theory should be naturally occurring conversational sequences, not the individual, constructed utterances, isolated from actual or even explicitly imagined conversational contexts that traditional speech act theory has been based on. I argue that the focus of our research should be less on how we might make a request or issue an invitation in uttering a single sentence, and more on how we do requesting and inviting in multiturn conversational interactions.

The strength of speech act theory is that it offers a relatively explicit theory of communicative actions, something conversation analysts have resolutely refused to do. Searle (1969), for instance, explicitly connected speech acts and the goals (his “essential conditions”) they are intended to achieve – an essential feature of any theory of action – and laid out sets of necessary and sufficient conditions on the felicitous and successful performance of such acts. What it does not offer is an explicit means of mapping utterances into speech acts. In order to accomplish this goal, I shall argue that Searle’s speech act structures must be revised and we must move from the view that utterances should be mapped into speech acts to the view that utterances should be mapped into elements of speech act structures – into the conditions and domain predicates of such structures. This is the single most important step in the development of a speech-act-theoretic account of conversational interaction.

One of the major flaws of virtually all research on conversation – on discourse generally – is its lack of explicitness. Though I cannot claim that what I offer here is fully explicit, an earlier version of this theory has been partially implemented computationally in work with Terry

Patten and Barbara Becker (Patten, Geis, and Becker 1992). This paper reported on an effort to simulate the travel agent side of an interaction with a client. Our simulation covers little conversational ground, but does demonstrate that a speech-act-theoretic approach to conversational interaction of the sort I shall advance here is sufficiently precise to be implementable and is computationally attractive in other respects.

There is one important exception to the claim that approaches to discourse are inexplicit and this is Discourse Representation Theory (DRT) (Kamp and Reyle 1993) and other similar semantic approaches. A signal virtue of Discourse Representation Theory is that it allows inclusion of pragmatic information. In chapters 6 and 7, I show how the present theory of speech acts can be implemented in Discourse Representation Theory.

In chapter 1, I provide a brief survey and critique of traditional speech act theory, including the argument that so-called speech acts are social as opposed to linguistic acts. In chapter 2, I argue that we must turn our attention away from the actions we perform in uttering single sentences to the examination of multiturn interactions in which we do requesting, inviting, and the like. I shall argue that we should concern ourselves not with what action is performed in uttering individual sentences but with what utterances contribute to the work of interactions, that is, with what they contribute to the satisfaction of speech act conditions and instantiation of domain predicates. In chapter 3, I sketch the architecture of DSAT, show how it is like and different from the speech act structures posited by Searle, and illustrate how it applies to the analysis of request and invitation routines in conversation. In chapter 4, I discuss the interactional effects of acts, developing in the process a variant of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. In chapter 5, I provide a critique of a number of theories of indirect speech acts, arguing that the focus on how we (imagine that we) use single utterances in constructed contexts to perform speech acts has led to an over-simple view of the nature of conventions of use and of the conditions in which individual utterances can be used to do such things as make requests, give invitations, make offers, etc. In chapter 6, I provide an alternative treatment of conventions of use that accounts for a variety of colloquial English request forms, including typical indirect speech act forms, that is based on the thesis that the colloquial forms of interest are pragmatically compositional. In chapter 7, I contrast two views of



## *Preface*

the structure of conversation – the largely text-oriented approach of conversation analysis and the cognitive approach of DSAT. It is in this chapter, that I demonstrate how DSAT can be incorporated in DRT. And, in chapter 8, I offer a sketch of utterance generation from the perspective of DSAT.

This work owes a very great deal to my former collaborator, Terry Patten, with whom I have worked on the computational implementation of my views. I am also greatly indebted to William Lycan (philosopher), Georgia Green (linguist), David Good (psycholinguist), and Ken Turner (linguist), and two anonymous Cambridge University Press reviewers for comments on earlier drafts. I am also indebted to a number of students who have provided very useful criticisms of earlier views, including, in particular, Kate Welker (especially), Lindsay Amthor, Barbara Becker, Charles Miracle, Jay Moody, Jack Rouser, Nicole Schrickel, Michela Shigley-Giusti, and Todd Yampol.

# Contents



<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<b>1 The nature of speech acts</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction	1
A brief sketch of speech act theory	3
Dynamic Speech Act Theory	9
A critique of speech act theory	12
Psychological reality	31
Conclusion	32
<b>2 Meaning and force</b>	<b>33</b>
Introduction	33
The meaning of “meaning”	33
Arguments for a level of <i>S</i> -Meaning	39
Conclusion	53
<b>3 The structure of communicative interactions</b>	<b>54</b>
Introduction	54
Conversational competence	55
A critique of Searle’s speech act structures	58
A DSAT alternative structure	67
Commercial service encounters	84
Conclusion	95

## *Contents*

<b>4</b>	<b>Interactional effects</b>	<b>97</b>
	Introduction	97
	Some general remarks on politeness	102
	Interactional effects in DSAT	104
	Conclusion	120
<b>5</b>	<b>Indirect speech acts</b>	<b>121</b>
	Introduction	121
	Direct versus indirect speech acts	122
	Three theories of indirect speech acts	124
	What utterances do	132
	A cognitive approach to indirect speech acts	136
	The question of conventionalization	139
<b>6</b>	<b>Conventions of use</b>	<b>141</b>
	Introduction	141
	The nature of the problem	143
	A mini-treatment of communicative actions	151
	Utterance form	178
	Conclusion	181
<b>7</b>	<b>The structure of conversation</b>	<b>184</b>
	Introduction	184
	The CA view of the structure of conversation	186
	A cognitive approach to discourse structure	193
	Conclusion	213
<b>8</b>	<b>Utterance generation</b>	<b>215</b>
	Introduction	215
	Utterance planning	217
	Utterance generation	223
	Conclusion	231
	<i>References</i>	233
	<i>Index</i>	240



## *The nature of speech acts*

### **Introduction**

In this study, I propose and defend a new theory of speech acts predicated on the assumption that speech act theory, if it is to be of genuine empirical and theoretical interest, must be embedded in a theory of conversational competence that is grounded in naturally occurring and experimentally derived conversational data. My approach is therefore quite different from that of traditional speech act theorists, who have focused almost exclusively on intuitive assessments of isolated, constructed examples like those in (1), as opposed to analysis of naturally occurring multiturn request sequences like (2).

- (1) a. I request that you give me hot chocolate with whipped cream.  
 b. Please give me hot chocolate with whipped cream.  
 c. Can I have hot chocolate with whipped cream?

(2) Merritt (1976: 337)

CUSTOMER:	Do you have hot chocolate?	T <sub>1</sub>
CLERK:	mmhmm	T <sub>2</sub>
CUSTOMER:	Can I have hot chocolate with whipped cream?	T <sub>3</sub>
CLERK:	Sure ((leaves to get)).	T <sub>4</sub>

Interestingly, Searle (1992: 7), the originator and principal

proponent of traditional speech act theory<sup>1</sup> has recently taken a pessimistic view of the possibility of giving “an account of conversations parallel to our account of speech acts,” claiming that there cannot be “constitutive rules for conversations in a way that we have constitutive rules of speech acts.” I would concede that traditional speech act theory does not provide a particularly promising platform for development of a theory of conversational competence. However, if modified in certain critical respects, speech act theory can, in fact, provide constitutive rules for conversation – not for conversations as a whole, of course, but for specific types of multiturn interactions – that facilitate identification of actions and account for how actions are performed in multiturn interactions.

The weaknesses of speech act theory as an approach to the analysis of conversation have been recognized by others, most notably by the conversation analysts, Schegloff (1984, 1988) and Levinson (1981, 1983). Levinson (1981: 475) argues correctly, for instance, that “speech act types are not the relevant categories over which to define the regularities of conversation” and (Levinson 1983: 289) challenges the twin theses that there is some specifiable function from utterances to speech acts and that sequences of utterances in conversation can usefully be described in terms of sequences of speech act types.<sup>2</sup> Before considering the conversation analytic criticisms of speech act theory,<sup>3</sup> and those of my own, let us first briefly review those features of speech act theory that will be of greatest interest here.

<sup>1</sup> The idea of a speech act goes back to Austin’s (1962) concept of an illocutionary act. Speech act theory itself – the theory of the constitutive rules for speech acts – must be credited to Searle.

<sup>2</sup> He associates these theses with Labov (1972), Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), Longacre (1967), Labov and Fanshel (1977), Coulthard and Brazil (1979), and Edmondson (1981). Searle (1992) himself is skeptical about the possibility of accounting for conversational sequences as sequences of speech act types, as was just noted in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation analysts view actions like requesting, offering, inviting, and the like as communicative social actions, not speech acts, if what is meant by the term “speech act” is an act necessarily performed “in saying something,” to use Austin’s (1962) phrase. In this, they are clearly correct. However, their criticisms of speech act theory ring hollow, for they have themselves offered no theory of communicative actions at all, much less one that is comparable in sophistication to speech act theory, nor have they even addressed the issue of constructing a mapping from communicative actions to utterances. Their notion of an “action in interaction” is therefore ultimately no better founded than the notion of a speech act.

### **A brief sketch of speech act theory**

In his very influential book, *How to Do Things with Words*, the philosopher, John Austin (1962), observed that in **saying** something that has a certain sense and reference, one is normally also **doing** something other than just saying something – making a request, as in the case of the sentences of (1), or making a promise or offer, or an apology, etc.

According to Austin, in uttering a sentence like (1a) the speaker performs the **locutionary** act of vocalizing a sentence with a certain sense and reference, and also, of necessity, performs an **illocutionary** act (or what has come more commonly to be called a “speech act”) as well, in this case the act of making a request. Austin also noted that uttering a sentence to perform a particular illocutionary act will normally have some sort of effect on the addressee. He writes that “saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them” (p. 101). Acts of this sort Austin called **perlocutionary** acts. Austin provides the following example, illustrating these three types of acts (p. 102):

(3) Act (A) or Locution

He said to me, “You can’t do that.”

Act (B) or Illocution

He protested against my doing it.

Act (C.a) or Perlocution

He pulled me up, checked me.

Act (C.b)

He stopped me, he brought me to my senses, &c.

He annoyed me.

It is clear from this that Austin recognized that illocutionary acts can have a variety of effects ranging from what might be called their “transactional effects” (cf. (C.a) and “He stopped me” in (3)), which is the usual ostensible goal of an act, to what might be called their “interactional effects” (cf. “He annoyed me” in (C.b)).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The interactional effects of an act include threats to the addressee’s negative face (the addressee’s desire not to have her freedom of action restricted) and positive face (the addressee’s desire to be valued and to have what she values valued), among other things. See Brown and Levinson (1978) and chapter 4 below for a discussion of positive and negative face, of the notion of a face threat, and for a discussion of how participants redress face threats.

Austin (1962) focused a good deal of his attention on what he called performative sentences – sentences like (1a), utterance of which normally counts as performing the action named by the verb. Such sentences typically are nonnegative, present tense, auxiliariless sentences containing a performative verb, first person subject, a sometimes optional second person direct or indirect object, and a clausal or infinitival verbal complement of some sort. Other examples are

- (4) a. I order you to turn out the lights.
- b. I promise to turn out the lights.
- c. I bet you five dollars that Bill will turn out the lights.
- d. I propose that we get someone else to turn out the lights.

Austin argued that sentences like (1a) and (4) do not have truth-values and are therefore not subject to truth-conditions.<sup>5</sup> However, he noted that utterances can misfire or go wrong in ways other than being false. Thus, were I to see a new boat about to be launched into a lake, run up to it as it is being lowered into the water, and smash a bottle of champagne over its bow and say, *I hereby christen thee, "The Albatross,"* the boat would not thereby be christened "The Albatross," for I did not have the authority to christen this boat. However, what I said was not false. Austin would have said that my attempt to christen this boat was "infelicitous," and, since then, conditions on the successful and appropriate performance of an act have usually been referred to as "felicity conditions."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> There is a vast literature on the question whether performative sentences have truth-values. Some of this literature was prompted by the claim of R. Lakoff (1968), Ross (1970), Sadock (1974) and others, who worked within the framework of Generative Semantics, that every sentence must be assigned a "performative prefix" in underlying structure. According to this hypothesis, pairs like *Bill Clinton is President* and *I declare that Bill Clinton is President* have the same underlying linguistic representation. One of the great difficulties with this analysis is that it entails that a sentence that manifestly does have a truth-value (e.g., *Bill Clinton is President*) might be semantically identical to one that does not (*I declare that Bill Clinton is President*). See Lycan (1984) and references therein for a discussion of what he and his colleague Boër (Boër and Lycan 1976) call the "performatadox." See also Recanati (1987) for a useful discussion of these issues.

<sup>6</sup> There are two types of conditions, constitutive conditions and regulative conditions. Constitutive conditions are necessary conditions on successful performance of an act; if they are not satisfied, the act simply does not get performed. Regulative conditions are not conditions on the successful performance of an act, but are concerned with how happily or how well it is performed. If I say, *Let me make you a sandwich*, to you, I will have made an offer even if you do not need food and I know that you do not need food and will not accept my offer. It is a defective offer, in that it is insincere, but is an offer nevertheless.

Performative sentences can go wrong because someone does not have the status required to perform the act (only certain persons can say, *I hereby pronounce you husband and wife* and thereby marry others), does not have a necessary belief (as when someone says, *Sandy has gotten married to Terry*, while believing that Sandy has not gotten married to Terry),<sup>7</sup> or does not have a necessary intention (as when someone says, *I'll be there*, when he has no intention of being at the place in question), or some precondition on initiation of the act is not met (as would be true if a landlord were to demand a rent payment from someone who is merely visiting a tenant in her building), among other things.

Austin made a distinction between what he called "explicit" performatives and "implicit" or "primitive" performatives. Compare the explicitly performative *a*-forms of (5)-(6) with their more colloquial implicitly performative counterparts.

- (5) a. I order you to turn out the lights.  
b. Turn out the lights.
- (6) a. I promise to be there.  
b. I'll be there.

Austin notes (p. 33) that an implicit performative like (6b) "may or may not be a promise," whereas it would be difficult to maintain that (6a) is not. Promises are normally uttered in contexts in which the promisor believes that the addressee has some need or desire that she wishes the promisor specifically to satisfy. Suppose, in this light, that someone, who has not been invited to a particular party, idly asks me who is going to be at this party and I provide her a list of names, ending with *...and I'll be there as well*. In this context, this utterance would not count as a promise to my addressee to be at this party because she has no need or desire for me to be there that I am proposing to satisfy. On the other hand, should my interlocutor have been invited to the party and say to me that she will go to the party if and only if I go and I say (6b), then I will have made a promise to her to go to the party, for she has expressed a desire for me to go to this party. Unlike explicit performatives, then, the force that utterance of a declarative sentence like (6b) has depends critically on context; in this case, whether it has been established, not just that the addressee has

<sup>7</sup> In such a circumstance it could be that Sandy and Terry are actually married and that the sentence is therefore true.



some need or desire, but that the addressee wishes the speaker specifically to satisfy it.

*Searlean felicity conditions*

One of Searle's (1969) most important contributions to speech act theory was his development of the Austinian concept of felicity. Searle argued that speech acts, which is the term he preferred for Austin's illocutionary acts, are subject to four types of felicity conditions: preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, propositional content conditions, and essential conditions. The felicity conditions he gave for requests are given in (7).

- (7) Searle's conditions on requests (H is the hearer and S is the speaker)

Propositional content: Future act A of H.

Preparatory:

H is able to do A. S believes H is able to do A.<sup>8</sup>

It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord.

Sincerity: S wants H to do A.

Essential: Counts as an attempt to get H to do A.

In this formulation, what Searle calls the "essential condition" corresponds to what I shall be calling the "transactional effect." What is missing from this account (but not from Austin's treatment) is reference to possible interactional effects of making a request.<sup>9</sup>

*Indirect speech acts*

In discussions of speech acts, it is common to make a distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. As Austin noted, a request to turn out the lights can be communicated **directly**, not only by using an explicit performative sentence like (4a), but also by employing an implicit performative sentence such as (8).

<sup>8</sup> Searle's providing alternate characterizations of this condition – one in "objective" terms and one in terms of speaker beliefs – will not do. In this study, I shall argue that conditions should be stated objectively, with the issue of speaker beliefs arising in utterance planning.

<sup>9</sup> Searle (1969) seems to have accepted Austin's views on perlocutions. Nevertheless his speech act structures do not reflect this.