

Analysing Speech Acts



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What Are Speech Acts?

Speech acts are utterances that perform actions rather than simply describe reality. According to Austin (1962), language is performative: when we speak, we do things.

Speech act analysis focuses on:

- Illocutionary force (what action is performed)
- Context
- Social conventions
- Power relations

Example

Utterance: “I apologize.”

→ This does not describe apology. It performs apology.

Why Speech Acts Matter in Discourse Analysis

Speech acts show that:

- Meaning depends on context
- Language changes social relationships
- Communication is interactive
- Words have consequences



Discourse analysis studies how these actions work in real life, not just in grammar.

Context Matters

Interpretation of speech varies based on cultural expectations.

Types of Speech Acts

Austin distinguishes between:

- Locutionary act → The literal utterance
- Illocutionary act → The intended action
- Perlocutionary act → The effect on the hearer

Example:

“You are fired.”

Locution: A statement

Illocution: Dismissal

Perlocution: Shock / fear / anger

The illocutionary act is the most important level



Felicity Conditions

Speech acts only succeed if certain conditions are met.

These are called felicity conditions.

For a speech act to work:

- The context must be appropriate
- The speaker must have authority (if required)
- The hearer must recognize the act

Example:

A friend says: “You are under arrest.”

→ It fails. Why? No authority.

Speech acts depend on social rules.



Speech Acts Are Interactional

Speech acts are not isolated sentences.

They occur in conversation.

They depend on:

- Response
- Recognition
- Turn-taking
- Sequential order

Example:

A: “I’m sorry.”

B: “For what?”

The apology is incomplete.

Speech acts require uptake (acceptance or recognition).

Apologies as Speech Acts & What Makes an Apology Effective?

An apology is a response to an offence.

Its purpose is to:

- Repair social damage
- Restore relationships
- Show responsibility

Example:

A: “You forgot my birthday.”

B: “I’m sorry.”

The apology repairs the offence — if accepted.

Strong apologies usually include:

- Expression of regret
- Acknowledgment of responsibility
- Explanation
- Offer of repair
- Promise not to repeat

Example:

Weak:

“Sorry.”

Strong:

“I’m sorry I forgot your birthday. That was my fault.”

Responsibility makes it stronger.



Failed Apologies (Non-Apologies)

Some statements sound like apologies but avoid responsibility.

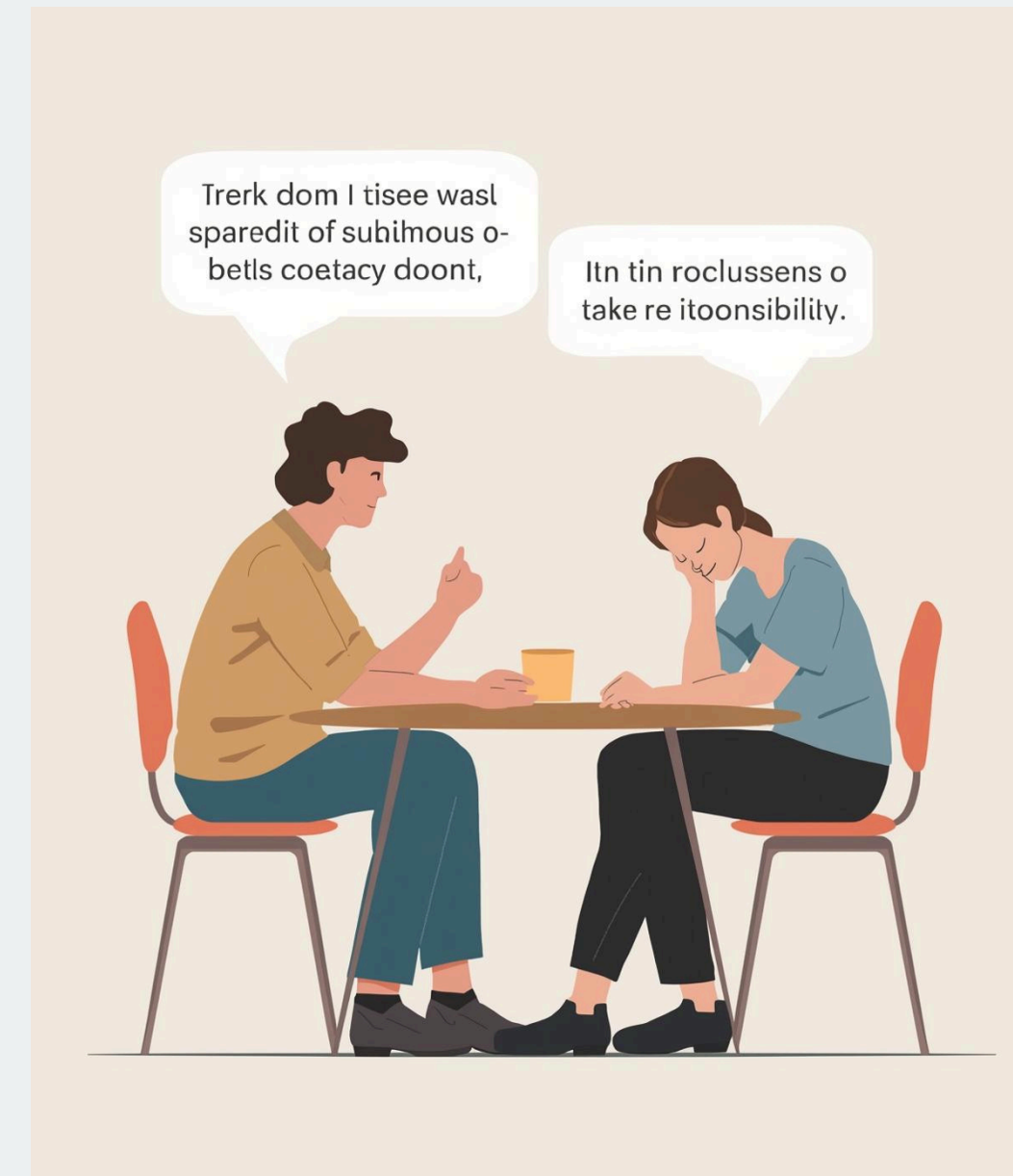
Examples:

- “Mistakes were made.”
- “I’m sorry if anyone was offended.”
- “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Why they fail:

- No clear responsibility
- Passive voice
- Blame shifting

These protect the speaker, not the relationship.



Refusals as Speech Acts

A refusal happens when someone rejects a request, invitation, or offer.

Refusals are socially sensitive because they:

- Threaten relationships
- Risk hurting feelings

Example:

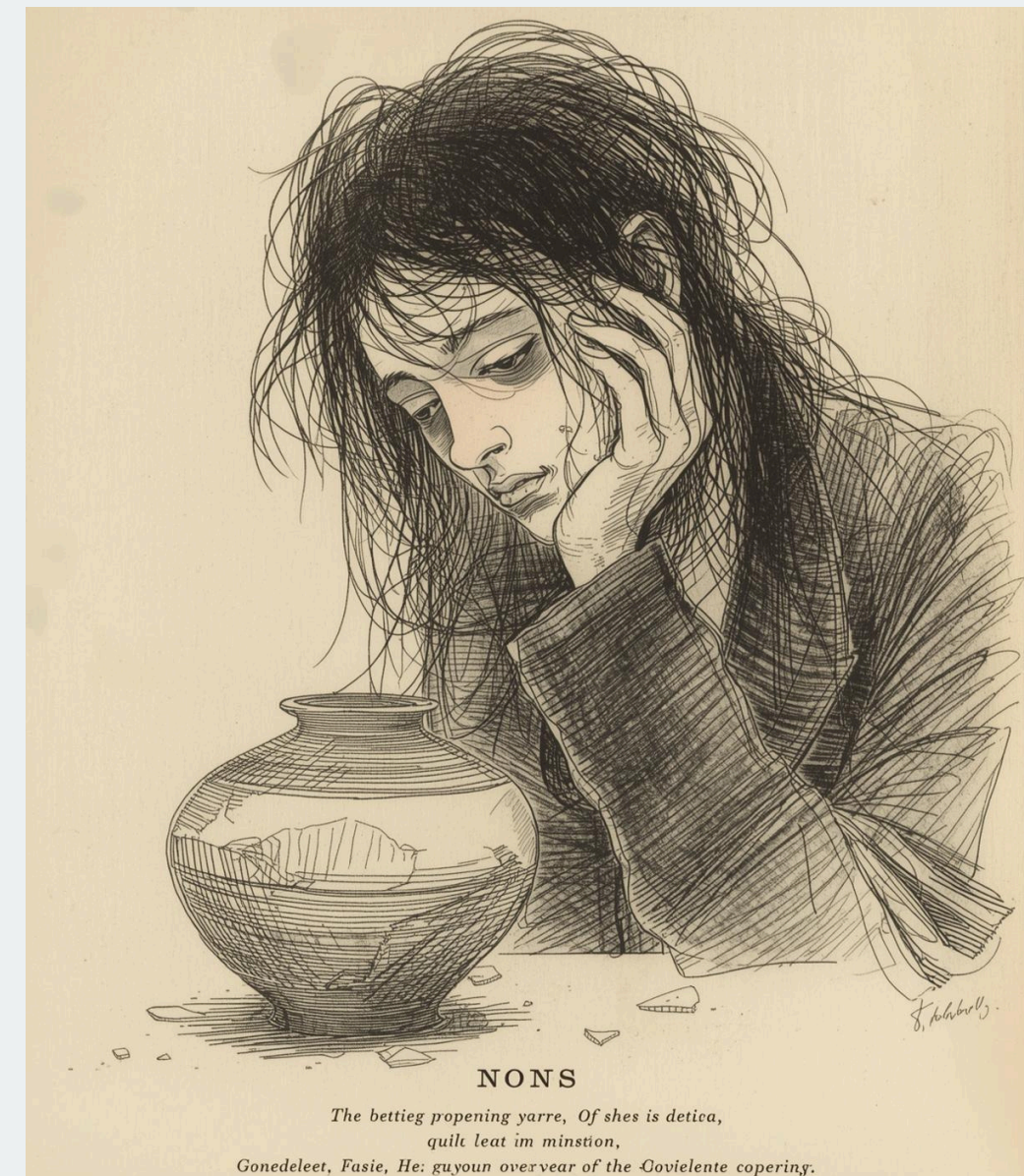
Direct refusal:

“No.”

Indirect refusal:

“I’d love to, but I have an exam.”

Indirect refusals are more common.



Why Refusals Are Indirect

Refusals are often softened using:

- Apology
- Hesitation
- Explanation
- Alternative suggestion

Example:

“I’m really sorry, I can’t tonight. Maybe next week?”

This protects the other person’s feelings.

Refusals are called dispreferred responses in conversation analysis.



Cultural Differences in Speech Acts

Speech acts vary across cultures.

Some cultures prefer:

- Direct communication

Others prefer:

- Indirectness

Example:

“I’ll try.”

In some cultures, this means “no.”

Misunderstandings happen when cultural norms differ.



Consent as a Speech Act

Consent is agreement expressed through language.

It must be:

- Clear
- Voluntary
- Explicit

Silence does **NOT** equal consent.

Example:

“If you don’t say no, I’ll assume yes.”

→ This is problematic.

Consent depends on context and power.



Power and Authority

Some speech acts require institutional authority.

Examples:

“I now pronounce you married.”

“You are expelled.”

“You are under arrest.”

These only work if spoken by someone with authority.

Speech acts reflect power structures.



Pragmatics vs Conversation

Two approaches help us understand speech acts:

Pragmatics:

- Focus on intention
- Meaning in context

Conversation Analysis:

- Focus on sequence
- Turn-taking
- How responses shape meaning

Example:

A: “I’m sorry.”

B: “That’s okay.”

→ The apology is completed.



Conclusion

Analyzing speech acts teaches us that:

- Language performs actions
- Meaning depends on context
- Apologies, refusals, and consent are negotiated
- Power shapes interpretation
- Communication is interactive

Speech acts show that discourse is social action.

