Original Paper

A Critique of J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory

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Abstract

This study is a critique of J.L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory which attempts to explain how the total performance of speech acts is determined by the total speech situations. The theory does not ignore the fact that language structure facilitates the understanding of speech acts. According to J.L.Austin (ibid), uttering wrong expressions in certain contexts implies that locutionary acts are neither coherent nor cohesive. Diane Blakemore, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001) avers that 'coherence relations are structural relations which hold in virtue of formal properties of utterances.' Pragmatic use of language is fosterd by linguistic competence on the part of discourse participants. Though a theory that is deely rooted in context-based use and interpretation of language, J.L. Austin's speech act theory aligns with Fowler's (1981) claim that 'linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs.' J.L. Austin holds the view that there are social institutions that language users invoke in the performance of illocutionary acts; this view captures the notion that J.L Austin calls 'felicity condition'. The theory is in tandem with the goals of pragmatics. Hinging on Adegbija's (1982), 'pragmasociolinguistic' approach, this study concludes that J.L. Austin's (ibid) speech act theory explains at a foundational level, the action-potential of language in context. However, the theory does not completely elucidate what language users do with illocutionary acts, which, as acknowledged in the literature, are too intractable to categorize, even though they operate in the explanation of the pragmatic, social and linguistic underpinnings of textual message.

Keywords

Pragmatics, speech act, J.L. Austin's speech act theory, Adegbija's pragmasociolinguistic Approach

1. Introduction

This study explores relevant literature to investigate the 'strong and weak points' of J.L. Austin's speech act theorizing. Scholars such as Searle, Kiefer and Bierwisch, who championed the emergence of pragmatic theories contend that 'the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other

expressions, but rather the performance of certain acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, etc.' Speech act is a core concept in pragmatics. This view had been held from classical times. Pragmatic theories are invariably speech act theories, and they include; Austin (ibid), Searle (1969), Sadock (1974), Grice (1975), Bach and Harnish (1979), Adegbija (1982), Mey (2001) and Acheoah (2015). Austin's speech act theory reveals that language use guarantees choice-making from the perspective of illocutionary acts. Participants of discourse are viewed as domain-specifi users of language. In this sense, there are different kinds of texts where Austin's illocutionary act theorizing can be actualized. A situated instance of language use, a text can be in spoken or written forms whose actors (language users) engage one topic or the other as they transact meaning. In textual language use, participants explore knowledge of linguistic conventions and extralinguistic nuances towards appropriateness. Therefore, text analysts do not ignore normative properties and extrasentential underpinnings in the appraisal of texts. Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid, p. 385) assert that 'we obviously need to think about what our 'text' is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or justify a certain social status quo (and 'racialized', 'nationalized' and 'ethnicized' identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and 'racializing concepts', nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethniticist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse.' In critiquing Austin's speech act theory, this study examines critical perspectives in the theory, not just in relation to notions and postulations in the literature of pragmatics and speech act, but also in relation to the dynamics of natural human communication involving participants, context and the concept of 'meaning'.

2. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is traceable to the expression 'pragma' which means 'deed'. Before the emergence of pragmatics, 'linguistic competence' (mastery of the structure/grammar of language) was placed above communicative competence, which is competence in context-driven use of language. Definitions of pragmatics are numerous in the literature. The *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994) defines pragmatics as 'the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes.' According to Crystal and Varley (1993), pragmatics is 'the study of the factors

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that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involves using language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes.'

To understand the meaning of pragmatics operationally, it is necessary to study pragmatic concepts such as speech acts, presupposition, implicature, shared knowledge, etc. from the perspectives of different theorists. Consider the following tips on pragmatic concepts:

- **Participants** (users of language in context);

- **Speech act** (locutionary act which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; illocutionary act which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and perlocutionary act which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);

- **Context** (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);

- **Non-verbal Communication** (extra-linguistic communication);

- **Inference** (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);

- **Presupposition** (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and

- **Shared knowledge** (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

In addition, Adegbija (1999) comments on the scope of pragmatics;

(i.) the message being communicated;

(ii.) the participants involved in the message;

(iii.) the knowledge of the   world which they share;

(iv.) the deductions to be made from the text on the basis of the context; and

(v.) the impact of the non-verbal aspect of interaction on meaning.

For more insights on pragmatics, see Labov (1970), Levinson (1980) and Leech (1983).

3. Speech Acts

The term 'speech act' suggests two meaning components; that is, 'speech' (words and linguistic stretches) and 'act' (action/to perform). Speech acts are therefore language-driven actions. When words are uttered in specific contexts, actions are performed on receivers. Early language philosophers observed this point, and promoted it in the literature of pragmatics. Language is often used for known illocutionary goals from speaker-end. Speech acts concern the variables for transacting speaker-meaning in discourse. If the dynamics of human communication is put into consideration, it will be observed that speech acts are so

discrete that more speech act taxonomies are needed to explain what language users actually do with language in context-driven communication. These are some of the fundamental principles in speech act theorizing. Indeed, speech acts are focused acts performed with intention. According to Searle as cited in Brenders (1986) 'in the performance of an illocutionary act the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and furthermore, if he is using words literally, he intends this recognition to be achieved…' For tips on language, context and meaning in relation to speech acts, see Allan K. (1986), Ayodabo (1997), Babatunde (1998; 1999), Bach and Harnish (1976; 1994), Ballmer T. and Waltrand B. (1981) and Campbell B.G. (1975).

4. J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory

J.L. Austin's speech act theory initiated and promoted the idea of viewing words as actions. His work *How to Do Things with Words* is instructive in this regard. J.L Austin (ibid) establishes the difference between performatives and constatives. Constatives are statements which are either true or false. On the other hand, performatives are utterances which count as actions. They can be felicitous or infelicitous. In Austin's view, performatives and constatives differ in the sense of 'doing' and 'saying'.

The felicity conditions for performatives are as follows:

- Certain conventional procedures should be fulfilled;

- Certain words have to be uttered in certain circumstances;

- All participants of the discourse must execute such procedures correctly and completely;

- The particular persons and circumstances in a given situation must be appropriate for the particular procedure, and their thoughts and feelings should also be germane to the situation.

If the conventional procedures (felicity condition) for the performance of performatives are violated, such performatives become infelicitous. For example, Adegbija (1982, pp. 8-9) presents the following tips as felicity conditions for the performance of an act of promise (a commissive):

1).　One of the participants in the communication exchange must utter words to the effect that he his putting himself under obligation to do something or to take a particular line of action;

2).　The circumstances must be appropriate. For instance, in a circumstance in which my interlocutor wants to know whether or not I shall be present for his party the next day, I can utter the locution 'I promise to be there';

3).　The particular persons and circumstances must be appropriate for the particular procedure being invoked–thus, usually, you should not promise for me especially if I am not a baby and you would not be able to force me to attend the party. If I promise to attend the party, I am obliged to be present for the party subsequently, or at least intend to be. Failure to be present constitutes a breach of promise.

In J.L. Austin's view, performatives are illocutionary acts. Therefore, 'the act of saying something' is 'the performance of a 'locutionary act'. J.L. Austin (ibid) uses different notions and concepts to explain

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the concept of speech act. For example, he contends that when certain words of particular vocabulary and grammar are uttered, then a 'phonetic act' is performed. When these words (vocables) are used in a certain definite sense and reference, 'a rhetic act' is performed. Thus, 'rhetic' and 'phonetic' acts are aspects of locutionary act. Given the fact that language performs various functions, Austin states that the function of an illocutionary act is called 'illocutionary force'. He points out that it makes a great difference 'whether we were advising or merely suggesting, or actually ordering, whether we were strictly promising or only announcing a vague intention…' J.L. Austin posits that 'perlocutionary acts are the effects on, or thoughts or feelings of the audience or the speaker produced by the act of saying something.' Unlike illocutionary acts, perlocutionary acts are unconventional. They involve either the achievement of a 'perlocutionary object' (e.g. warning, informing, asking, persuading, promising) or the production of a 'perlocutionary sequel'; a teacher achieves the object of 'convincing' before h/she can achieve the perlocutionary sequel of convincing his student that a particular proposition is true. The concept of 'uptake' is crucial in J.L. Austin's speech act theory, as far as the performance of illocutionary acts is concerned. 'Uptake' means 'bringing about an understanding of the meaning and the force of the locution'. By convention, many illocutionary acts bring about a response or a sequel e.g. an order brings obedience as a response, and a promise brings about fulfillment (cf. J.L. Austin (ibid, pp. 117-118). Commenting on attributes of utterances, Austin (ibid: 148) makes the following submissions:

(1) Happiness/ unhappiness dimension (i.e. felicity /infelicity);

(1a) An illocutionary force;

(2) Truth/falsehood meaning (except in perfomatives);

(2a) A locutionary meaning (sense and reference).

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Adegbija's Pragmatic Theory

This study is anchored by Adegbija's (ibid) pragmatic theory. Adegbija contends that his theory fills up the gaps in predating pragmatic theories. A central concept in the theory which is the 'pragmasociolinguistic concept' refers to the pragmatic, social and linguistic aspects context which facilitates effective communication. The pragmasociolinguistic approach concerns the understanding of the historical, personal, environmental, sociocultural and linguistic contexts that underlie any communication activity.

The Master Speech Act notion is crucial in Adegbija's pragmatic theory. Adegbija posits that the meaning of utterances can best be explained at a super-ordinate level known as the Master Speech Act level.

Like Austin (ibid), Adegbija (ibid) submits that when participants and circumstances are appropriate in the performance of speech acts, speech acts are felicitous. Contending that utterances are decoded at various layers of meaning, Adegbija (1988b) cites the utterance, 'My friend, where is Anini' uttered by a President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to an Inspector-General of Police (about to retire from active service) during a meeting of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC). At the primary level, meanings

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assigned to linguistic elements in the utterance are decomposed. Such linguistic elements include stress, intonation, pitch, rhythm and other prosodic features (cf., p. 152). However, no satisfactory meaning can be derived at this level. But it is a means of interpreting meaning at the secondary and tertiary levels, where the pragmatic backgrounds play a very crucial role.

The secondary layer of interpretation of an utterance yields an indirect speech act when nothing in the immediate world gives a satisfactory interpretation of the utterance at the primary level. At the tertiary level of the interretation of an utterance, addressees expore presupposion and shared knowledge regarding the utterance (background asumptions).

Within the framework of the pragmasociolinguistic approach, an indirect speech act is an utterance 'in which one says one thing and means another, or says one thing and means what one says and also means another illocution with a different propositional content' (cf. Adegbija 1988b, p. 34). In this sense, a question can be a rebuke, a directive or an assertive based on contextual considerations. Adegbija points out that a speaker's motive for uttering an utterance is very crucial in arriving at the right interpretation of the utterance. Adegbija notes that the relationship that obtains between 'discourse participants', the 'topic' engaged and the 'context' of the ongoing communication facilitate textual interpretation. As Adegbija exemplifies, a father can use 'Hello' to warn his little boy based on father-child relationship. Adegbija submits:

> When a well-formed, non-semantically deviant utterance appears to be irrelevant or not sufficiently relevant to the immediate context of an utterance,
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> the relevant, non-immediate, global context of the utterance and of the speech community in which
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> the utterance is made is readily invoked and used to infer meaning.

6. A Critique of J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory

In this section of the paper, strong and weak points of J.L Austin's speech act theor are examined.

6.1 Strong Points of the Theory

6.1.1 Language Use as Actions

Contending that language use is essentially actions, J.L. Austin distinguishes five general classes of illocutionary acts identified by their illocutionary forces. He does not provide a clear basis for his taxonomy but states that illocutionary forces concern the purpose or function of a particular utterance: whether it attempts to alter the state of things or the world; whether it is seen as an effort to make the hearer do something; or whether the speech act commit the speaker to a particular course of action or involves an exercise of the speaker's authority. He proposes five classes finally: Verdictives, Exercitives, Commissives, Behabitives and Expositives.

He notes that Verdictives is typified by the giving of a verdict by a jury, arbitrator, or umpire. They may be an estimate, reckoning, or appraisal (p. 153). Examples include: acquit, convict, reckon, diagnose, and analyze.

Exercitives involves 'the exercising of powers, rights, or influence (p. 151). Examples include: appointing, advising, warning, ordering etc.

Commissives, which is Austin's third class, is characterized by promising or undertaking: According to J.L. Austin (ibid), 'the whole point of Commissives is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action' (p. 157). Examples include: promise, undertake, contract, convenant, etc.

Behabitives concerns attitudes and social behaviors." They include 'the notion of reaction to other people's behaviors and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else's past conduct or imminent conduct' (p. 160). Verbs in this category include: apologize, thank, condole, sympathize, etc.

J.L. Austin submits that 'Expositives makes plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation, how we are using words, or in general, are expository' (p. 152). Verbs in this category include: reply, argue, concede, illustrate, etc.

J.L. Austin contends that:

(i) The performer of an act (e.g christening a ship,) should be in the position to do so;

(ii) Participants execute discourse procedures correctly and completely for performatives to be felicitous;

(iii) Persons and circumstances in speech situations must be appropriate for the procedures being invoked, if performatives are to be happy;

(iv) The conduct of the participants should be in line with the procedures (i.e. their thoughts and feelings) for effective performative

6.1.2 Speech Act Taxonomy

Austin's speech act taxonomy is foundational to subsequent theorists' taxonomies. This explains why some of the speech act categories in Searle (1969) and Bach and Harnish (1979) are subsumed in J.L. Austin's speech act theory. The influence of predating theories on subsequent theories is not just typical in the literature of language and linguistics, but also in the literature of other disciplines of knowledge. J.L Austin's speech act theorizing gave those of Searle and Bach and Harnish sound theoretical base and direction.

Searle's seminal book, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* – which was developed in subsequent works such as Searle (1979) – was a speech act proposal.

J.L. Austin's notion of 'felicity condition' portrays human communication as a rule-governed activity. Adegbija's theorizing on intention, use of direct and indirect speech acts, shared knowledge and presupposition are in tandem with the perspective that language use is rule-governed, and involves speaker-hearer cooperative behaviour; discourse participants' use of the illocutionary act categories in J.L. Austin's speech act taxonomy brings this claim to the fore. J.L Austin's speech act theory reveals speech act as the core of human communication, and projects the notion of 'intention' as being very operational in communication activity. In J.L. Austin's view, obeying communication rules is intentional on the part of the participants of discourse.

Like J.L. Austin, Searle distinguishes 'illocutionary acts' which he regards as the 'complete speech acts, from 'perlocutionary acts which concern the consequences or effects of illocutionary acts on hearers. He further distinguishes 'utterance acts' (the act of uttering words, which Austin calls 'Phatic Acts'), from 'propositional acts, which are used to refer and predicate. But Searle disagrees with Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. See Searle (1969, pp. 22-25) for insights on this point.

Projecting language use as actions J.L. Austin's notion of 'felicity conditions', implies that rules regulate communication activity. Searle's speech act taxonomy is one of the attempts to refine Austin's and this taxonomy is based on 'illocutionary point', 'direction of fit' and 'sincerity conditions (as well as other features including the role of authority, discourse relations, etc.). See Searle (1979, pp. 1-12) for instructive perspectives in this regard. By 'illocutionary point', Searle means the 'purpose' of the speech act in question. The second criterion is 'direction of fit'. It concerns the match between our words and the world. While some speech acts try to get the words (or, more specifically, their propositional content) to match the world, others try to get the world to match the words. Assertions for example, try to get our words to match the world while promises and requests try to get the world to match our words (cf. Searle 1979, p. 3). Searle notes that 'direction of fit' is always a consequence of 'illocutionary point'. A third major criterion concerns differences in the psychological states expressed. Thus, a person who 'states, explains, asserts, or claims that P', expresses the belief that P. a man 'who promises, vows, threatens, or pledges to do A', expresses a desire (want, wish) that H do A. A man who 'apologizes for doing A', expresses regret at having done A' (cf. 1979:4). The psychological state expressed in the performance of a speech act is therefore the 'sincerity condition' of the act. Apart from these three major criteria, which Searle considers the most important, he also examines other important aspects of a speech act in his taxonomy. These include the role of authority, discourse relations, the force or strength with which the illocutionary force is presented, differences in the status of speaker and hearer, differences in the way the utterance relates to the interests of the speaker and hearer, differences between acts that are always speech acts and those that can be but need not be performed as speech acts, differences between acts that require extra-linguistic institutions for their performance and those that do not. Like Austin (ibid), evolves five categories of illocutionary acts: Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives and Declarations.

Bach and Harnish (ibid) also corroborate the claim that language use counts as actions. They recognize two broad categories of illocutionary acts: communicative illocutionary acts and non-communicative illocutionary acts. While the former requires the recognition of S's R-intention, the latter does not. There are four main categories of communicative illocutionary acts: Constatives, Directives, Commissives and Acknowledgements. These four main categories correspond roughly to Austin's Expositives, Exercitives, Commissives, and Behabitives respectively and closely to Searle's Representatives (Assertives), Directives, Commissives and Expressives, differing mainly in their characterizations. There are two classes of non-communicative illocutionary acts: Effectives and Verdictives, corresponding roughly to Searle's Declarations. A detailed account of the categories established by Bach and Harnish are speech acts which express the speaker's belief and intention, or, at least the implication or desire, that the hearer

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form (or continue to hold) a like belief (ibid, p. 42). Fifteen subcategories of this group are recognized as follows: Assertives, Informatives, Confirmatives, Concessives, Retractives, Assentives, Dissentives, Disputatives, Responsives, Suggestives and Suppositives (ibid, pp. 42-46). According to Bach and Harnish, Assertives is characterized by 'S's expression of belief that the hearer (H) also believes that P'. Verbs in this category include: affirm, allege, assert, aver, avow, declare, and deny (ibid, p. 42).

In Informatives, 'S expresses the belief that P' and 'the intention that H form the belief that P'. Examples include: advise, announce, apprise, disclose, inform, insist, notify, point out, report, reveal, tell, and testify.

In Descriptives, 'S declares that a particular quality is possesed by a person, place or thing'. That is, 'S expresses the belief that O is F' and 'the intention that H believes that O is F' (p. 42). Verbs in this category include: appraise, asses, call, categorize, characterize, classify, date, describe, diagnose, evaluate, etc.

Directives expresses 'the speaker's attitude toward a future action by the hearer (H) and the speaker's intention or desire that H consider his utterance as reason to act (A)' (ibid, p. 47). Six subcategories of illocutionary acts are listed under this category: Requestives, Questions, Requirements, Prohibitives, Permissives, Advisories. See Bach and Harnish (ibid) for more insights on illocutionary act classifications and verbs that belong to each classification.

6.1.2 Shared Knowledge

Felicity conditions in J.L. Austin's speech act theorizing is in tandem with Adegbija's 'pragmasociolinguistic' concept in the sense that it concerns the pragmatic, social and linguistic nuances that are deployed when participants of discourse use discrete illocutionary acts in discrete context of speech and context of situation. A proper perspective of J.L. Austin's speech act theory accentuates the fact that shared knowledge concerns linguistic and extralinguistic underpinnings in ongoing communication.

6.2 Weak Points of the Theory

6.2.1 The Intractable Nature of Speech Acts

Considering the intractable nature of speech acts, it is logical to state that J.L. Austin's speech act categories are too general to capture the multiple dimensions of language use in real life communication. Arguably, Bach and Harnish (ibid) is quite useful in terms of 'breaking down' J.L. Austin's illocutionary act typologies into multiple forms such as assentives, dissentives, ascriptives, disputatives, informatives desriptives, assertives, etc., there is still need for research in the investigation of illocutionary act typologies. In this regard Acheoah (2018) germane. In a study, 'Towards a Typology of Illocutionary Strategies: A Case Study of Selected Nigerian Film Discourses', Acheoah (2018) contends that the performance of direct and indirect illoutionary acts can be construed in terms of different labels, including 'using a constituent of a whole'. See Acheoah (2018) for the underpinnings and pragmatic implications of each of the illocutionary strategy.

6.2.2 Meaning as Context

The use of speech act verbs outside their denotative sense weakens J.L. Austin's theorizing on felicity conditions for the performance of speech acts. For example, a student can say 'I stole my ball from teacher's office' to mean it was taken without the knowledge of the teacher'; the owner of an item cannot be the one who stole it. Linguistic patterning also determines meaning of illocutionary acts. This fact weakens some of Austin's speech act theory. In a study, 'The Illocutionary Frames Principle (IFP) and Austinian Postulations: A Clause-structure Investigative Discourse, Acheaoh (2014) examines linguistic patterning as determinants of illocutionary forces (meanings of illocutionary acts).

In fulfilling felicity conditions for the performance of speech acts, the features of context are taken into consideration. For example, the performer considers the context features mentioned by Butari Nahum Upah (2018:19) citing NOUN (2010):

(i)   Participants, e.g. boys, girls, men, traders

(ii)   Ongoing activity, e.g. playing, chatting, debating

(iii)   The place, e.g. church, class, stadium, diningtable

(iv)   The time, e.g. time of the day or season.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the eommunicatie potency of J.L Austin's speech act theorizing. Austin's speech act theory is informed by the understanding that the surface structure of a sentence cannot account for principle-driven use of language which concerns the pragmatic of communication. In responding to illocutionary acts performed in line with Austin's stipulations, such as guidelines for performing commissives or directives, participants of discourse invoke shared knowledge; that is, knowledge about value systems of the larger society, as in cognitive pragmatics. According to Chilton (2005a, p. 23), 'cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions … produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another … If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals.' Indeed, Bach and Harnish's work on shared knowledge do not predate that of Austin.

This study concludes that J.L. Austin's speech act theory provides the fundamental and basic knowledge of how words and linguistic stretches translate to actions in human communication, as they become utterance acts. However, the theory will not suffice in the complete explanation of language use and interpretation, particularly because illocutionary acts have not been fully investigated; see Savas L.T. (1994) for critical perspectives on this claim.

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