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### Speech Act Theory

**Speech act theory** is a theory of language based on a book called "How to Do Things with Words" by the Oxford philosopher John L. Austin. The theory states that language is as much a mode of action as it is a way of conveying information.

**Speech acts include:**
locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

In the **locutionary act** we are simply 'saying something' that has meaning. In other words, a locutionary act produces an understandable utterance.
- Locutionary meaning includes **sense** and **reference**.
- There is a concentration on the locutionary aspect of the speech act in **constative utterances**.

- In addition to simply saying something meaningful, we may also use utterances for particular purposes, e.g. to answer a question, to announce a verdict, to give a warning.. etc. as we do when making performative utterances. In this sense, we are performing an **illocutionary act.**

- Thus, **the illocutionary act** is the performance of an act in saying something.

- Through the illocutionary act (or simply the **illocution**), an utterance made by a speaker has significance within the conventional system of social interaction (this system includes conventions of thanking, promising.. etc).

- One way to think about the illocutionary act is that it reflects the intention of the speaker in making the utterance in the first place.

- Other examples of **illocutions** defined by social convention (in addition to promising and thanking) include acts such as: accusing, greeting, admitting, apologizing, challenging, complaining, offering, congratulating, praising, giving permission, proposing marriage, and others.

**E.g. Saying:**
"I'm very grateful to you for all you have done" performs the illocutionary act of thanking, which is the speaker's intention in making this utterance.

The **perlocutionary act** (or just simply the perlocution) carried out by a speaker making an utterance is the act of causing a certain effect on the hearer and others through that utterance (in Latin "per" means: "through").

**For example**, if someone tells you "There's a bee in your left ear", it may cause you to panic, scream and scratch your ear.

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Causing these emotions and actions is the **perlocution** of this utterance, or the **perlocutionary act** someone performs by making that utterance.

- The perlocution of an utterance is the causing of an effect to happen, perhaps <u>even without the intention of the speaker</u>, through the utterance.

- Thus, the point of carefully distinguishing the perlocutionary aspect of the speech act from others is that <u>perlocutions can often be unintentional</u>.

- **Illocutionary act vs. perlocutionary act:**
  **The illocutionary act of an utterance is:**
1- intended by the speaker,
2- under his full control,
3- and if the illocutionary act is evident, it is evident <u>when</u> the utterance is made.

  **On the other hand, the perlocutionary act performed through an utterance is:**
1- not always intended by the speaker,
2- not under his full control,
3- and is usually not evident until <u>after</u> the utterance is made.

- For example, the act of <u>thanking</u> someone is **illocutionary** because it is something that a speaker can decide for himself to do, and be sure of doing it when he decides to do it. The hearer in a speech situation cannot decide whether to be thanked or not. On the other hand, the act of <u>persuading</u> someone, is **perlocutionary**, because the speaker cannot be sure of persuading the hearer, no matter how hard he tries. The hearer can decide whether to be persuaded or not.

- A **locutionary** act has <u>meaning</u>; it produces an understandable utterance. An **illocutionary** act has <u>force</u>; it is performed with a certain tone, attitude, feeling, motive, or intention. A **perlocutionary** act has <u>consequence</u>; it has an effect upon the hearer.

- These three components are not always separable. <u>An utterance can have all these components at the same time</u> as in the following example.

  **E.g.** "There is a car coming."

  By describing an imminently dangerous situation (**locutionary** component) in a tone that is meant to have the force of a warning (**illocutionary** component), the speaker may actually frighten the hearer into moving out of the way (**perlocutionary** component).

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