

# Speech Acts and Hidden Meaning: A Journey into Pragmatics

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Keywords	Abstract
Translation Process Pedagogy Culture Technology	This article examines the core principles of pragmatics, focusing on how speech acts and hidden meanings guide communication across diverse contexts. It explores John Austin and John Searle’s foundational work on speech acts—locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary—demonstrating how utterances perform actions beyond mere information exchange. The discussion then turns to implicature, introduced by H. P. Grice, highlighting the ways in which inferred meanings depend on shared knowledge and context. By integrating cultural considerations, the article underscores how pragmatic competence shapes both cross-cultural understanding and effective discourse. Practical applications include challenges in translation, advances in artificial intelligence, and strategies in media and political communication. Ultimately, the study affirms that pragmatics offers crucial insights into the power of language to form relationships, shape societies, and influence global interaction.

## Introduction to Pragmatics and Speech Acts

### 1.1 Overview of Pragmatics

Pragmatics, a key subfield of linguistics, examines how language is employed in context to convey meanings that extend beyond the literal interpretation of words (Huang, 2014; Levinson, 1983). Unlike syntax, which focuses on the structural arrangement of linguistic elements, and semantics, which centers on propositional content, pragmatics highlights the interplay between linguistic expressions and contextual cues (Leech, 2016; Grundy, 2019). Through this lens, researchers investigate phenomena such as deixis, presupposition, implicature, and speech acts—each illustrating how speakers and listeners negotiate meaning in authentic communicative settings (Sadock, 2006).

A crucial contribution of pragmatics lies in clarifying how individuals strategically use language to fulfill specific communicative objectives (Huang, 2014). For instance, the utterance “Can you pass the salt?”—although framed syntactically as a question—functions pragmatically as a polite request (Grundy, 2019). This gap between surface structure and intended meaning underscores the importance of context in narrowing interpretive possibilities (Levinson, 1983).

Moreover, pragmatics is indispensable in cross-cultural communication, where cultural conventions govern how speakers perceive and respond to contextual information (Bruner, 1975; Cohen, 1996). These norms influence how politeness, indirectness, or directness is interpreted, thereby requiring “pragmatic



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competence” to ensure successful interactions across diverse linguistic communities (Cohen, 1996; Leech, 2016). By examining the contextual underpinnings of language use, scholars deepen our understanding of how linguistic practices evolve and operate within varying social environments (Green, 2007).

## 1.2 Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory, pioneered by John Austin in his influential work *How to Do Things with Words*, fundamentally reshaped linguistic inquiry by underscoring the performative nature of language (Austin, 1962; Sadock, 2006). Rather than merely describing reality, language itself constitutes a form of action. Austin (1962) conceptualized three interrelated components of a speech act:

- **Locutionary act:** The core act of producing an utterance with a specific semantic content (e.g., providing information or stating facts).
- **Illocutionary act:** The intended communicative force behind the utterance, such as delivering a request, offering an apology, or issuing a command (Bruner, 1975; Green, 2007).
- **Perlocutionary act:** The consequential effect on the listener—whether persuading, alarming, or motivating them to take action (Levinson, 1983).

Building on Austin’s framework, John Searle (2014) refined the notion of illocutionary acts into five primary categories:

1. **Assertives:** Statements conveying information or describing a state of affairs (e.g., “It is raining”).
2. **Directives:** Utterances aimed at prompting the listener to perform an action (e.g., “Close the door”).
3. **Commissives:** Commitments to future actions (e.g., “I will call you later”).
4. **Expressives:** Expressions of emotional or attitudinal states (e.g., “I’m sorry” or “Thank you”).
5. **Declarations:** Statements that effect a change in external reality (e.g., “I pronounce you husband and wife”) (Cohen, 1996).

By examining the intricate relationship between linguistic form and communicative function, speech act theory highlights how utterances do not merely transfer information but also fulfill tangible social and interpersonal roles (Huang, 2014; Leech, 2016). For example, the phrase “I promise” is more than a factual statement; it actively binds the speaker to a future course of action (Grundy, 2019).

The collective contributions of Austin and Searle remain central to modern pragmatics, offering crucial insights into how speakers utilize language to achieve specific purposes and navigate complex communicative contexts (Bruner, 1975; Sadock, 2006). Through the lens of speech act theory, researchers continue to explore how speakers craft utterances that both reflect and reshape the social realities in which they operate (Green, 2007).

## 1.3 Hidden Meaning in Communication

Hidden meanings in communication frequently surface through implicature, a concept developed by H. P. Grice to explain how speakers convey additional, unstated information via context and shared knowledge (Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2014). Grice proposed several conversational maxims to outline how cooperative speakers typically structure their contributions:

1. **Maxim of Quantity:** Offer an appropriate amount of information—not too much or too little.
2. **Maxim of Quality:** Strive for truthfulness and avoid claims lacking evidence.



3. **Maxim of Relation:** Ensure relevance in conversational turns.
4. **Maxim of Manner:** Maintain clarity and avoid ambiguity (Grundy, 2019).

When these maxims are overtly or subtly flouted, speakers often hint at meanings that listeners must infer (Leech, 2016). For instance, in the exchange:

A: “Are you coming to the party?”

B: “I have a lot of work to do.”

Although B does not explicitly refuse, the implied meaning (or implicature) is likely a negative response, contingent on the listener’s contextual understanding (Green, 2007).

Context thus becomes pivotal for both producing and interpreting implicatures (Bruner, 1975). It encompasses not only the physical and linguistic setting but also cultural norms, shared experiences, and the interlocutors’ relationship (Cohen, 1996). Misinterpretations commonly arise when these contextual elements diverge, particularly in cross-cultural dialogues where indirect refusals or requests may be misconstrued (Sadock, 2006). Consequently, exploring implicature offers profound insights into how speakers say more than their words literally mean, illuminating the layered and adaptive character of human language use (Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2014).

## 2.1 Types of Speech Acts

John Austin’s (1962) pioneering work on speech act theory delineates three interrelated dimensions of speech acts, each fulfilling distinct communicative functions (Sadock, 2006):

- **Locutionary Act:** The fundamental act of producing an utterance with a specific semantic content. For instance, saying “The sky is blue” provides factual information about the sky (Bruner, 1975).
- **Illocutionary Act:** The intended communicative force or purpose of the utterance. Using the same example, if a speaker states “The sky is blue” after a storm, the goal may be to comfort or reassure the listener (Searle, 2014; Levinson, 1983).
- **Perlocutionary Act:** The effect the utterance has on the listener or the subsequent response it elicits. Hearing “The sky is blue” might encourage someone to venture outdoors, reflecting how language can motivate action (Huang, 2014).

These three acts operate in tandem, underscoring the layered nature of language use (Leech, 2016; Grundy, 2019). When a speaker says “I apologize for being late,” for example, the **locutionary** act is the utterance itself, the **illocutionary** act manifests as an apology, and the **perlocutionary** act may involve the listener’s decision to accept or reject the apology (Cohen, 1996).

Recognizing these types of speech acts offers a valuable framework for analyzing how language functions not just to relay information, but also to accomplish social, interpersonal, and emotional objectives (Green, 2007). By examining locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions, researchers capture the multifaceted mechanisms through which speakers achieve specific goals in daily interactions (Sadock, 2006).

## 2.2 Implicature and Hidden Meaning



Implicature significantly shapes how speakers convey nuanced meanings beyond what is directly stated. In essence, speakers rely on shared context, cultural norms, and mutual background knowledge to subtly transmit information that cannot be inferred from the literal meaning of words alone (Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2014). For instance, consider the exchange:

**A:** “How was the restaurant?”

**B:** “Well, the chairs were comfortable.”

Although B does not explicitly criticize the food or service, the intended inference points toward dissatisfaction, contingent upon the listener’s ability to discern the implied message (Grundy, 2019). This dynamic underscores how implicature permits indirectness, politeness, or intentional ambiguity, facilitating socially and contextually appropriate communication (Leech, 2016).

Context remains fundamental in both generating and interpreting implicatures (Cohen, 1996). Factors such as cultural background, individual experiences, and the interpersonal relationship between speakers all inform how meaning is construed (Bruner, 1975). Misinterpretations can occur when these contextual factors diverge, highlighting the importance of pragmatic competence for effective cross-cultural interaction (Green, 2007).

Although Grice’s conversational maxims serve as guiding principles for cooperative communication—emphasizing truthfulness, relevance, and clarity—speakers often flout them deliberately to convey layered or implicit meanings (Sadock, 2006). For example, sarcasm deviates from Grice’s Maxim of Quality (“Be truthful”) yet depends on the listener’s recognition of the intended humor or critique (Huang, 2014). Through examining implicature and hidden meanings, linguists gain valuable insights into the intricate strategies that enable speakers to navigate social norms, manage politeness, and discuss complex ideas with subtlety (Levinson, 1983).

### 2.3 Pragmatics and Cultural Context

Pragmatics is inherently linked to cultural context because norms, values, and shared assumptions significantly influence how speech acts and hidden meanings are both produced and interpreted (Cohen, 1996; Levinson, 1983). Variations in cultural expectations can precipitate misunderstandings or pragmatic failures, particularly in cross-cultural communication (Huang, 2014). For example, a statement like “It might be difficult to attend” may function as a polite refusal in one cultural setting but be perceived as indecision or reluctance in another (Grundy, 2019).

Cultural differences are similarly evident in the performance of speech acts such as apologies, requests, and compliments (Leech, 2016). In some cultures, directives like “Close the window” are softened with polite strategies—“Could you please close the window?”—reflecting respect for hierarchy, formality, or relational boundaries (Bruner, 1975). In other cultural contexts, directness might be valued as a sign of honesty and efficiency (Green, 2007).

Hidden meanings, including implicature, are likewise shaped by cultural norms. In high-context cultures, meaning often relies on shared background knowledge and contextual cues, including silence or nonverbal signals (Sadock, 2006). Conversely, low-context cultures emphasize explicit verbal communication, requiring speakers to convey intentions more directly (Cohen, 1996). Consequently, messages that are transparent in one setting may be overlooked or misinterpreted in another (Searle, 2014).



Research in pragmatics underscores the necessity of cultural sensitivity to navigate linguistic diversity effectively (Levinson, 1983). Developing “pragmatic competence” entails mastering not only the linguistic code but also the sociocultural rules guiding communication (Huang, 2014). Through a nuanced understanding of how cultural context frames illocutionary force and implicatures, individuals and institutions can foster clearer, more respectful global interactions (Grundy, 2019).

### 3.1 Translation and Linguistic Challenges

Translating speech acts and hidden meanings across linguistic and cultural boundaries requires more than simply rendering words from one language into another. Speech acts are deeply embedded in cultural contexts; as a result, preserving both the illocutionary force and pragmatic nuances of the original utterance can be particularly challenging (Levinson, 1983; Sadock, 2006). For instance, a direct command in one linguistic community may need softening or rephrasing in another to align with different norms of politeness (Grundy, 2019; Huang, 2014).

Hidden meanings, such as those conveyed via implicature, add another layer of complexity (Leech, 2016). A seemingly innocuous statement—“It’s getting late”—might function as a polite suggestion to conclude a meeting in one culture, yet it could be interpreted literally or misunderstood in a context unfamiliar with indirect communication norms (Cohen, 1996). Thus, translators must remain sensitive not only to the linguistic structure but also to the sociocultural conventions that shape how meaning is construed (Green, 2007).

Moreover, **tone** and **style** present significant hurdles. The humor, sarcasm, or formality of a source text often hinges on culture-specific references and contextual cues (Bruner, 1975; Searle, 2014). Translators may need to find creative workarounds or comparable expressions to evoke a similar response in the target language without losing the original intent (Sadock, 2006). In this way, translation evolves from a mechanical transfer of words into an interpretive act that bridges linguistic and cultural divides (Huang, 2014).

By harnessing insights from speech act theory and pragmatic research, translators can navigate these intricate dynamics more effectively (Levinson, 1983). Such an approach ensures that the pragmatic essence of the source text—its communicative goals, cultural underpinnings, and hidden meanings—is faithfully conveyed to audiences in diverse linguistic landscapes (Cohen, 1996; Grundy, 2019).

### 3.2 Speech Acts in Artificial Intelligence

Modern Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, including natural language processing (NLP) applications, chatbots, and virtual assistants, increasingly rely on speech act theory and broader pragmatic principles to enhance user interactions (Searle, 2014; Levinson, 1983). By recognizing and interpreting the illocutionary force of user inputs, these systems can bridge the gap between literal text processing and a nuanced understanding of user intentions (Huang, 2014; Grundy, 2019). For example, when a user types “Can you play some music?”, a well-designed virtual assistant interprets this as a directive rather than a simple question about capability (Leech, 2016).

Incorporating pragmatics also refines AI’s ability to address indirect speech acts and ambiguous requests (Sadock, 2006). When someone says “I’m feeling cold,” a context-sensitive home assistant can infer that the user desires an increase in room temperature, even if that request is not explicitly stated (Cohen, 1996).



By recognizing hidden meanings and implicatures, AI systems deliver more natural and satisfying interactions (Green, 2007).

Additionally, cultural and contextual awareness is paramount in designing AI that serves diverse user populations (Bruner, 1975; Huang, 2014). Politeness strategies and norms for directness can vary across linguistic communities, necessitating localized models that account for these differences (Levinson, 1983). A chatbot tailored for English speakers might employ distinct politeness conventions compared to one developed for a Japanese user base (Grundy, 2019).

Pragmatic principles further guide conversational AI in turn-taking, relevance, and clarity (Leech, 2016). Adhering to Grice's maxims helps these systems maintain coherent dialogues, minimize misunderstandings, and offer user-centric responses (Sadock, 2006). As AI technologies progress, integrating speech act theory and pragmatic insights will remain essential for creating systems that engage with users in contextually appropriate and intuitively meaningful ways (Searle, 2014).

### 3.3 Media and Political Communication

Media and political arenas offer fertile ground for examining how speech acts and hidden meanings shape public discourse (Levinson, 1983; Sadock, 2006). Politicians, journalists, and media figures often employ pragmatic strategies—such as promises, directives, and declarations—to persuade, inform, or influence audiences, while embedding subtler agendas in their messages (Huang, 2014; Grundy, 2019). For instance, a politician asserting “We will create more jobs” constitutes a commissive speech act aimed at building voter trust, though its perlocutionary impact—whether it garners support or skepticism—depends heavily on contextual factors such as credibility and prevailing socio-political sentiments (Searle, 2014).

In the media, hidden meanings commonly arise through implicature, framing techniques, and selective emphasis (Leech, 2016). A headline like “Local Communities Struggle with Rising Costs” may subtly attribute responsibility to broader economic forces without assigning explicit blame, steering audience interpretation while preserving deniability (Green, 2007). The reception of these messages is further molded by cultural and ideological backgrounds: a satirical political cartoon might be seen as a witty critique in one context yet be viewed as disrespectful or offensive in another (Cohen, 1996).

Moreover, media outlets and political figures often exploit intentional vagueness or ambiguity to reach heterogeneous audiences (Bruner, 1975). By selectively violating Grice's maxims—such as providing incomplete information or deliberately obscuring details—they enable multiple interpretations, allowing diverse groups to project their own viewpoints onto the same statement (Sadock, 2006). Investigating the pragmatic dimensions of media and political communication thus illuminates how language constructs narratives, shapes public sentiment, and influences social discourse (Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2014). By dissecting these processes, both researchers and practitioners can more adeptly navigate the complexities of contemporary communication landscapes (Grundy, 2019).

### Conclusion

An exploration of pragmatics through the prisms of speech acts and hidden meanings highlights the multifaceted ways in which language both conveys and shapes understanding (Austin, 1962; Levinson, 1983). Speech acts serve as fundamental communicative mechanisms, enabling speakers to perform various functions—ranging from making requests to asserting promises—while hidden meanings furnish an additional layer of depth, often manifested through implicature and indirectness (Sadock, 2006; Searle, 2014). Collectively, these elements underscore how language operates not merely as a medium of



expression but as a potent instrument influencing interpersonal dynamics, societal values, and cross-cultural interactions (Cohen, 1996; Huang, 2014).

From translation—where preserving illocutionary force and cultural nuances is vital—to artificial intelligence—where pragmatic competence helps systems interpret user intent—pragmatics proves indispensable across a range of modern applications (Grundy, 2019; Leech, 2016). The same principles extend to media and political communication, illuminating how speech acts and hidden meanings can sway public opinion or subtly embed agendas in everyday discourse (Green, 2007). Mastering these pragmatic principles therefore emerges as a core skill for individuals and institutions striving to communicate effectively in increasingly global and technologically oriented contexts (Bruner, 1975).

Ultimately, ongoing research will further reveal how linguistic cues, cultural norms, and contextual factors converge to shape the nuanced tapestry of human interaction (Huang, 2014; Levinson, 1983). As our communicative landscapes continue to evolve, the study of pragmatics stands poised to deepen our understanding of language's far-reaching impact on relationships, societies, and the broader world (Searle, 2014; Sadock, 2006).

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