



## Speech Acts: Discursive, Multimodal, Diachronic

**Andreas H. Jucker**

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Speech act theory has long been a cornerstone of pragmatics, shedding light on how language shapes social interactions to achieve specific purposes. As language use evolves, the field has shifted from abstract theorization to the analysis of actual, interactional, and contextually grounded language, addressing contemporary concerns in an era of globalization and digitization (see Culpeper and Haugh, 2014 for an overview). Against this backdrop, Andreas H. Jucker's *Speech Acts: Discursive, Multimodal, Diachronic* provides a comprehensive synthesis of speech act theory, tracing its development through four successive waves –from its philosophical origins, through the empirical turn and corpus-based approaches, to its most recent discursive, multimodal, and diachronic perspectives.

Drawing on his extensive expertise, Jucker demonstrates how speech acts, as performative phenomena, vary across different methods and contexts, offering fresh insights into their flexibility and negotiation in interaction. The book thus serves as an invaluable reference for researchers, practitioners, and students of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) engaged with speech acts in specialized discourses, broadening promising avenues for further exploration in a world characterized by the growing complexity of professional interactions across diverse sectors, such as business, law, medicine, and education (e.g., Ho, 2021; House & Kádár, 2023; Ren et al., 2020; Wei & Ran, 2024).

The book is structured into seven sections, each building upon the last to progressively deepen the understanding of speech act theory. Section 1 introduces the “wave” metaphor to frame the field’s four developmental stages, highlighting the enduring influence of its philosophical foundations. It revisits Austin’s distinction between constative and performative utterances and Searle’s development of illocutionary acts, marking a shift from sentence meaning to utterance meaning. While recognizing the rigor of early work, the section critiques its reliance on philosophical introspection

and lack of real-world engagement. It then outlines the successive waves of speech act theory explored in Sections 2-6 and provides a roadmap of the book's overall structure and key themes.

Section 2 reviews the empirical turn in speech act research that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, highlighting the use of data collection methods such as discourse completion tasks, role plays, and perception studies. This shift reflects a growing interest in how speech acts are performed across different social contexts and speaker groups, demonstrating the crucial role of contextual variables like power dynamics, social relationships, and cultural backgrounds in shaping their production and interpretation. The section also critically addresses the challenges of experimental methods, noting that the controlled manipulation of variables often results in responses that may not accurately reflect natural language use, thereby raising concerns about data authenticity and ecological validity.

Section 3 covers the rise of corpus-based approaches in speech act research since the 1990s, shifting from small-scale experiments to large-scale, data-driven studies utilizing corpora (e.g., BNC, COCA, London-Lund Corpus). This enhances data authenticity by analyzing natural language use. The section underscores the focus on broader patterns, including speech act manifestations via illocutionary force indicating devices (IPIDs) and typical patterns, as well as meta-illocutionary expressions (MIEs) via their distribution and proximity to speech acts. Despite these advances, it acknowledges challenges such as retrieving unconventional speech act forms and the labor-intensive manual annotation process.

The first three waves of speech act research, presented in Sections 1-3, establish the groundwork for the fourth wave—discursive, multimodal, and diachronic perspectives—explored in Sections 4-6. Section 4 introduces the discursive perspective, viewing speech acts as flexible, “fuzzy” entities whose meanings emerge through interaction. This marks an evolution from second-order (felicity conditions) to first-order (how interlocutors conceptualize) perspectives. The section discusses two continua, illocutionary indeterminacy and illocutionary force, with examples from the COCA corpus, aligning with the corpus-based methods in Section 3. It sets the stage for the multimodal and diachronic analysis in Sections 5 and 6, emphasizing that this fuzziness is a communicative strength that enables understanding and meaning negotiation.

Section 5 explores the multimodal dimension of speech acts, underscoring that they involve both verbal expressions and non-verbal cues, such as facial

expressions and gestures. The traditional term “speech act” is seen as insufficient, prompting the use of broader terms like “communicative act” or “pragmatic act”. The section introduces a gesture continuum, from spontaneous gesticulation to conventionalized sign language, and demonstrates how collocation searches in COCA can examine specific apologetic gestures (e.g., *apologetic* and *apologetically*). It further investigates how non-verbal cues, such as *frown*, *nod*, and *shrug*, accompany or perform pragmatic acts in narrative texts, revealing the varying illocutionary force of multimodal communicative acts.

Offering rather a different angle, Section 6 delves into the diachronic dimension of speech acts, examining how their forms and functions have evolved over time. Using the COHA corpus, it traces the development of *apologies* across Early Modern, Late Modern, and Present-day English, highlighting historical shifts in pragmatic conventions. The section also addresses the methodological challenges of studying long-term trajectories in speech act development, including limitations of historical data and the difficulty of balancing manual annotation with automated identification. These challenges complicate efforts to fully understand the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and historical factors that shape the evolution of speech acts.

Section 7 concludes the book by synthesizing key developments and reflecting on the current state of speech act research. It identifies open questions and suggests future research directions, particularly in multimodal and diachronic analysis. By foregrounding the negotiable, multimodal, and evolving nature of speech acts, this final section encourages further exploration of their complexities across time, modes, contexts.

The book’s strengths are evident in several key aspects. Jucker’s reconstruction of speech act theory’s four waves –philosophical, experimental, corpus-based, and discursive– transcends mere historiography, providing a critical synthesis of its evolution across different methodological approaches. This makes the book an invaluable resource for researchers at all levels, from newcomers seeking an overview to advanced scholars looking for an integrated, nuanced framework. Moreover, Jucker’s exploration of multimodal and diachronic aspects of speech acts opens new research avenues, particularly in today’s digital and globalized world, where communication is increasingly multimodal and transnational. This bridges the past and present, enhancing our understanding of communicative

dynamics in a rapidly changing professional and global context. Additionally, the book is well-structured, with each section building on methodological tensions while maintaining conceptual continuity. This is supported by empirical cases and a thorough literature review, allowing readers to systematically follow the development of speech act theory.

Despite its strengths, the book has several limitations that hinder its broader impact. While offering a comprehensive overview of speech act theory, it engages minimally with recent pragmatic advances, such as socio-pragmatics, conversation analysis, and relevance theory. They are essential for understanding real-time interaction and social dynamics, and their absence limits the book's ability to explore how they challenge or refine traditional models of speech act theory. Furthermore, the book largely relies on English-language corpora, particularly American English, which limits its cross-linguistic and cross-cultural applicability. Though it addresses multimodal and diachronic aspects, it does not explore speech act variation across languages and cultures, particularly in non-Western traditions. Finally, the book emphasizes traditional corpus-based methods, such as collocation searches and manual annotation, which, while valuable, cannot capture the full complexity of multimodal communication or real-time interactions. The lack of advanced techniques like machine learning for automated pattern detection or multimodal corpus analysis using video and audio data restricts its ability to address the evolving landscape of communication in the digital age.

Overall, *Speech Acts: Discursive, Multimodal, Diachronic* resonates with contemporary concerns in pragmatics, offering fresh perspectives that encourage further exploration of speech acts for LSP researchers, practitioners, and students. By emphasizing the dynamic, multimodal, and context-dependent nature of speech acts, it paves the way for deeper investigation into their performance in various contexts, such as business negotiations, legal proceedings, or medical consultations. Studying speech acts in these specialized settings could bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering real-world case studies that demonstrate how speech acts function in time-sensitive and high-pressure environments where precision and clarity are paramount. Such an approach would not only deepen our understanding of speech acts in professional communication but also provide practical strategies for applying these insights in real-world contexts, particularly in a world where the complexity of professional interactions is continually evolving.

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