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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Review of Research on Development of Speech Act Theory and Its Application

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**ABSTRACT**

Speech Act Theory has been the focus of linguistic research since its introduction in the early 1960s. This paper reviews the literature on Speech Act Theory collected from core journals at home and abroad and finds that the theory has been constantly revised and supplemented by domestic and international academics in the process of development; it also finds that Speech Act Theory has been well developed and applied in literature, journalism and communication, education and other fields in recent years, but not much research has been conducted in the field of political speech act. The former focuses on speech strategies, while the latter focuses on individual style differences. By reviewing the development of Speech Act Theory at home and abroad, we can help understand its development prospects and provide a theoretical framework for political speech act research; by reviewing applied research in different fields, we can better understand the application value of Speech Act Theory and provide inspiration on research methods for future political speech act research.

**KEYWORDS**

Speech Act Theory; Development; Application; Political Speech Act.

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### 1. Introduction

With the 18th-century Enlightenment in Europe, the revolutionary progress of the natural sciences in the 19th century and the emergence of psychology as an empirical discipline in the early 20th century, philosophers began to explore the logical foundations of mathematics and the meaning of language, opening up new philosophical fields and objects and achieving a 'linguistic turn' in modern philosophy. In 1962, the publication of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* marked the founding of Speech Act Theory. After Austin's theory of speech acts was created, his students, Searle, revised and added to Austin's theory, which became the core of linguistics, especially in pragmatics, due to its problems and imperfections. Many scholars at home and abroad have devoted themselves to the study of Speech Act Theory and its applications, and Speech Act Theory has thus been well developed and even applied across disciplines.

This review is based on Speech Act Theory and provides an overview of its theoretical development and application. By entering the keywords Speech Act Theory, speech act and the terms translation, conversation and discourse in linguistics; literature, journalism and communication; education and so on, 83 papers on Speech Act Theory have been collected in core journals at home and abroad in recent years. After sifting, integrating and classifying, we found that the research directions of Speech Act Theory at home and abroad are different. Foreign studies focus more on exploring the internal laws of language from the perspectives of grammar, semantics and pragmatics; they analyze specific categories of discourse, such as different positions on the same case, and there are many cross-cultural related studies. In contrast, the country is more likely to have integrated research

within larger fields, such as linguistics, literature, education and journalism and communication. As Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory is one of the core elements of modern pragmatics, the objects that can be studied under this theory cover various aspects, among which political discourse is one of the hot topics in recent years. However, the number of domestic studies on political speech acts is relatively small, not deep enough and with limited perspectives. Based on my interest in the political speech act, I will conduct an in-depth study on this aspect in the future, hoping to fill a gap in the study of the political speech act in China.

In the next part of this review, the first chapter focuses on theoretical developments and applications of Speech Act Theory. The second part deals with national and international research on the theory of speech acts in diplomacy. The corpus study is placed in the third part. The final part concludes with a summary and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Development**

The concept of Speech Act Theory was developed by the British philosopher Austin in his 1962 book *How to Do Things with Words*. In that book, Austin argued that not all declarative sentences that can be distinguished as true or false are 'descriptive', so he divided sentences into constative and performatives. In the late 1970s, Xu Guozhang translated Austin's *How to do things with words* into Chinese, introducing Western Speech Act Theory to China for the first time. To date, research on Speech Act Theory has received much attention. Sun Shufang (2012) composed, summarised and concluded the achievements and problems of Speech Act Theory research in the foreign language community in China in order to better understand the current situation and future development trends of this theory research. With the expansion of the scope of research, domestic scholars have also criticized and commented on it. Gu Yueguo (1989) believed that Austin's classification of the act of performative speech has the following three shortcomings: (1) the classification lacks uniform standards; (2) the classification of the act of performative speech is equivalent to the classification of the verb of performatives; (3) the content of the classification is ponderous and confusing. As well as Zhang Chunlong's 'On the Problems of Speech Acts' (1994) and Sun Shufang's 'Some Controversial Issues in the Theory of Speech Acts' (1998), although Austin failed to formulate a complete linguistic theory like Chomsky and Halliday, there is no doubt that he pioneered the study of language use from a behavioural perspective.

Whereas his student Searle argued that although Austin proposed the performative act, he did not link the performative act of a sentence to its content, and in the classification of performative speech acts, Austin again only classified performative verbs rather than acts. He then distinguished between 12 aspects of individual performative acts, classifying performative speech acts into five main categories: representative, directive, commissive, expressive and declaration (Searle 1968). Sun Shufang (1999) pointed out that Searle's analysis is clear, comprehensive, relatively well-developed and operational but not infallible. Searle's classification is more scientific than Austin's, but with so many speech acts grouped into several broad categories, it is difficult to ensure that each is right (Zhang Lijie 2007). In the view of Marina Sbiṣā (2002), contexts were also continuously changing, not only because non-verbal actions or events make actual circumstances change but also because speech acts themselves brought about changes in the conventional contexts are also continuously changing, not only because non-verbal actions or events make actual circumstances change, but also because speech acts themselves brought about changes in the conventional features of the context, notably those regarding rights, obligations, entitlements, commitments of the participants. So a conception of context as at least in part constructed, limited, and objective enables us to describe speech acts as context-changing social actions.

## **3. Application of the Theory**

As we enter the 21st century, the study of Speech Act Theory is diversifying, and the following review will reveal that Speech Act Theory has been widely and maturely applied in the fields of literature, journalism and communication, as well as education. However, there is a lack of research in the field of political speech acts at home and abroad, with the amount of literature and perspectives on political speech acts in China differing from those abroad. The purpose of this paper is to review the application of Speech Act Theory in literature, journalism and education in order to learn how to use theoretical frameworks and research methods, such as how to collect a large number of authentic and reliable speech texts and how to combine corpus and speech analysis in order to conduct future speech act research in the field of politics.

### **3.1 Speech Act Theory in the Field of Literature**

By studying the characteristics of discursive strategies in political communication in Olarotimi's play *Owen Ramwin Nobaisi*, Wale Adegbite (2005) argued that although some of the main characters in the play use various discursive strategies to achieve successful communication, the play's tragic ending mainly stems from a breakdown in communication between some of the other main characters. Some domestic scholars used the introduction of Dalian in the book *The World is Peaceful* as a corpus, starting from the nature and characteristics of urban political discourse and applying Speech Act Theory to the analysis of public political

discourse in the specific introduction of the city of Dalian (Li Heming and Liu Zhuangming 2017). Meanwhile, Yongmei He (2018) used Speech Act Theory as the basis for a preliminary exploration of the expression of power beyond words in the political language of *Zuo Zhuan*. Regarding the unique linguistic features of *Zuo Zhuan*, many scholars have explored them from different perspectives, and this paper analyzes them from a pragmatic perspective.

For the art of irony, some scholars have interpreted masterpieces such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* as corpus-based on Speech Act Theory, from which it can be seen that language is the life of literary art and combined with Speech Act Theory; it is more helpful for readers to accurately grasp the character, story clues and development of the plot, and to empathize with the author. Eli Rozik (2000) intended to illustrate a particular type of stage metaphor through speech acts in Ionesco's *Exit the King*. Theoretically, the existence of speech act metaphor would appear to be impossible in the theatre; however, in the so-called Theatre of the Absurd in particular, there are many cases that can only be The speech act performed by literary discourse can be understood as a real speech act that takes place between the real creative act of the author and the real interpretative act of the reader, when viewed in the context of the macrocosm of literature (Wang Wencheng 2016).

### **3.2 Speech Act Theory in the Field of News Communication**

#### **3.2.1 Online News Communication**

Speech Act Theory has been actively applied in the news communication community. The expressive speech acts used in online interactions are also different for each group due to certain contextual variables such as multiculturalism, age, language level and group size (Marta Carretero, Carmen Maíz-Arévalo, M. Ángeles Martínez 2015). Some domestic scholars have conducted an empirical study on the effect of emoji use on information communication in social media based on Speech Act Theory (Song Xiaokang, Zhu Qinghua, Zhao Yuxiang 2019), and their findings are more helpful in gaining insight into the role of emoji in information communication. Jean Mathieu Tsoumou (2020) has developed a great interest in the speech act in politically oriented Facebook interactions. To the best of our knowledge, some discourse studies conducted on Facebook, particularly those applying Speech Act Theory, have only examined Facebook updates separately and, specifically, ignored Facebook reviews, which apparently have the same communicative role as updates in Facebook communication. With the presence of fake reviews on e-commerce platforms, the reliability of reviews becomes questionable. Based on the Speech Act Theory, Sana Ansari and Sumeet Gupta (2021) developed a theoretical framework that explains how the linguistic style (both at the word and the structural level) acts as a cue for assessing a reviewer's (in)sincere intentions. (in) sincere intentions.

Nowadays, online socialization is very developed, and Ran Yongping and Lei Rong (2022) have generated great interest in the study of cultural pragmatics of online suggested speech acts. Ren Wei and Guo Yaping (2022) also conducted an in-depth study of self-aggrandizing speech acts in the WeChat friend circle. The corpus of these studies is derived from daily life and has high pragmatic value.

#### **3.2.2 Offline News Communication**

In opinion discourses like newspaper editorials, written arguments demonstrate an interesting interplay between linguistic features and strategies for the communicative purpose of persuading the audience, which is worth studying, especially in a cross-cultural context. Farzana Masroor and Ummul Khair Ahmad (2017) studied and analyzed instructions in 90 English-language electronic datasheets that directives from two Asian newspapers (Dawn and New Straits Times) and one American newspaper (New York Times) to analyze the strategies behind their use of directive speech by looking at their form, frequency and common texts. Some scholars abroad have explored a pragmatics perspective by drawing on the framework of expressive class speech acts to analyze the signs displayed on the closed doors of businesses in Athens and London during the first lockdown of the New Coronary Pneumonia epidemic, thus revealing a culture-specific perspective on the dual function of expressive speech acts (Eva Ogiermann, Spyridoula Bella 2021); Nguyen Van Long, Nguyen Thi Thanh Thanh, M.A.(2022) et al. used the promise class speech act to analyze Hillary and Trump's discourse during the 2016 Presidential election discourse.

Conversation analysis has always been one of the hot spots in linguistic research. Xiang Chengdong (2006) used Speech Act Theory to analyze the structure of conversation in "The Use of Speech Act Theory in Conversation Analysis and the Problems that Exist", pointing out that Speech Act Theory can be applied to conversation analysis, but the problems of sequence combination and interpretation must be solved. Fang Jinxia (2008) used Speech Act Theory to analyze the phenomenon of silent questioning in non-verbal communication. Feng (2014) illustrated the basic principles and methods of conversational intelligent agents in natural language processing based on Speech Act Theory, and this paper contributes to further understanding of Paul Drew's

conversational analysis. In recent years, the combination of Speech Act Theory and Chinese corpus has gradually deepened. Yu and Wu Yaxin (2016) used Chinese natural real conversation as a corpus source and conducted a systematic study on the language, and paralinguistic means of performing speech acts, etc., to give an explanation for the orderliness of everyday conversation.

In the common law system, judges are said to be bound by precedents decided in courts of the same level or above. However, in higher courts, under certain conditions, they have the right to overrule. Overruling declarations may be analyzed as performative speech acts, having the effect of changing the law. This analysis raises both linguistic and legal problems, discussed with reference to English and American law and language. However, this relation does not in itself provide a satisfactory explanation of the normativity of judicial discourse (Ross Charnock 2009). Juliane House (2021) provided an integrative model which brings together interactional structures, speech acts and rituals and illustrates the operation of this model through a study. However, in this study, they have not considered the paralinguistic and non-verbal features of the ritual. But they have not considered the paralinguistic and non-verbal features of the ritual practice under investigation. Sharif Alghzao (2021) aimed to investigate the pragmalinguistic realisations of the speech act of congratulating in Kabyle and Jordanian Arabic (JA). This study was a contribution to the variable pragmalinguistic literature, particularly as it explores the use of the speech act of congratulating in two languages that have rarely been studied. It also provided insights into cross-cultural and linguistic cross-cultural differences in order to better use language and speech acts when communicating across cultures.

### ***3.3 Speech Act Theory in the Field of Education***

#### ***3.3.1 Interpretation and Translation***

From the educational perspective, Speech Act Theory focuses on the development of students' pragmatic skills, i.e. listening, reading and writing. In the application of translation studies, Fu Hongjun and Liu Min (2003) explored the role of extra-textual factors in the translation process in constraining the understanding and interpretation of texts with the help of Speech Act Theory. Jiang Haiqing explored the use of Speech Act Theory to guide the translation of ancient Chinese poetry in his article Speech Act Theory and Translation (2004). Speech Act Theory can also be used in the context of discourse equivalent translation for the film (Shi Chuanlong 2007); translation of legal texts (Jiang Linlin, Yuan Lili 2008); and translation strategies for advertising texts (Liu Jing, Feng Lin 2013).

In addition to the translation of textual discourse, some scholars have also begun to focus on related research in interpretation. Zhu Chunshen and Yanxiu (2015) identified interpretation as a form of human speech act, explored the speech act nature of interpretation from Speech Act Theory, and discussed how training could develop from passive learning to active learning for learners with the support of the theory. This review also covers theoretical topics such as extra-verbal meaning, the post-verbal effect of language information organization, and the relationship between information transfer, which is a more innovative combination of linguistic theory and interpreter training.

#### ***3.3.2 Discourse Analysis***

The Speech Act Theory was first introduced by philosophers and then approached by pragmatists and discourse analysts. While philosophers and pragmatists deal with speech acts in fabricated texts, discourse analysts focus on their occurring in real discourses. Miao Xingwei, who has been researching Speech Act Theory and discourse analysis since 1999, argued that there is a close relationship between Speech Act Theory and discourse and that speech acts do not exist in isolation but perform their communicative functions through various coherence relations that constitute discourse and that the two complement each other. For the coherence of discourse at different levels of speech acts, in conjunction with Austin's Speech Act Theory, Chen, Haiqing and, Zhang, Shaojie (2004) pointed out that discourse coherence is divided into tangible, invisible and intangible theoretical models.

The courtroom discourse of 17th-century England is amenable to an analysis in terms of Speech Act Theory as conceived for Modern English usage. Court trial records are particularly suitable for such analysis due to their linguistic characteristics (an abundance of illocutions and perlocutions, as well as question-and-answer exchanges and interpretable indirect speech acts) (Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky 2009). Simona Simon (2015) identified, classified and analyzed speech acts in Written Advertisements. The findings point out the advertisers' preference for using some speech acts over others with the aim of obtaining the intended effect on the target audience.

Some scholars have also used Speech Act Theory to analyze maritime discourse, i.e. conversations between native and non-native English speakers on maritime assignments (Peter John, Benjamin Brooks, Ulf Schriever 2019); however, this study only considered verbal communication and ignored any non-verbal communication that may contribute to disambiguating speech acts, such as

indirect Apology as a multifunctional speech act in students' e-mails to their lecturer was also worth taking seriously. Pavla Chejnová (2021) addressed students who used multiple strategies to create a positive self. Students use multiple strategies to create a positive self-image of a committed and reliable student, combining direct expressions of apology, explanations, and acknowledgement of responsibility.

Chen Xinxin, Li Chunguang, Wang Lu, Liu Lei and Nie Ying (2019) conducted a review of the research on English teachers' classroom discourse in the context of Speech Act Theory, comparing and examining English teachers' classroom discourse at home and abroad, in which domestic classroom discourse research was mainly divided into several directions: linguistic research, pragmatics research and effectiveness, although not all important aspects of teachers' discourse were mentioned and strategies to improve teachers' discourse was lacking. However, in general, the study has great reference value for education and teaching.

### **3.3.3 Second Language and Intercultural Learning**

Indirect speech acts are a more commonly used pragmatic strategy in the Chinese cultural context, and Duan Suyi and Jin Xiaoyan (2016) studied the teaching of listening to Chinese as a foreign language and gave related teaching strategies based on this theory. Xu Murfan (2017) argued that ideally, speaking instruction should be based on basic speech act types, with the constitutive and regulatory rules of specific speech acts as the teaching content. His research has brought a new perspective of thinking about spoken language teaching. Ying Jieqiong (2021) studied the choice of Chinese request strategies and the motivations of eight European students from a social-cognitive perspective, which has important implications for intercultural communication and foreign language teaching. Course Books and ESL Learners Pragmatic Needs from the perspective of Speech Act Theory. Leyi Qian (2022) paid attention to "Not" as an evaluation and speech-act trigger in Mandarin Chinese negative markers. Observations and analysis in the study will make effective contributions to a better understanding of the rationale and occurrences of EN cross. Findings in this study also have implications for both L2-Chinese learners and instructors.

### **3.3.4 Special Education**

In addition to normal social activities, people with social communication disorders have also gained the attention of researchers. Jinning et al. (2020) also reviewed the research on teaching speech acts in children with autism, and through the division of the developmental patterns of children's speech acts and the combining of different speech act teaching methods abroad, they aimed to make relevant suggestions for the research on teaching speech acts in children with autism in China.

## **3.4 Speech Act Theory in the Field of Politics**

### **3.4.1 Research on Political Speech Act at Abroad**

Domestic scholar Chen Xinren (2009) pointed out that pragmatics research needs to focus not only on the subjectivity and the interpersonal meaning brought about by language use in specific socio-cultural contexts but on the discourse in the public sphere, which is also of great practical value. The study of pragmatics places great emphasis on context, examining the influence of language users and context on linguistic communication, but in the process, ignores the values and ideologies of language users themselves (Mey 1993). It has been argued that the gender of political speakers has an influence on their choice of speech acts, and comparing the political speeches of Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, it confirms that Clinton and Kerry's political speeches behaved similarly in terms of linguistic style, but there are gender differences at the thematic and conceptual levels (Shih-chan Dai, Navida Chun-Han Wang 2021).

However, there are also differences in political personal or national language styles, and by examining John Kerry's political speeches during his 2004 presidential campaign and George W. Bush's 2001 inaugural address, it was found that Kerry used more promise-like speech acts and Bush used more sentences with assertive speech acts (Suhair Safwat Mohammed Hashim 2015). Former US President Barack Obama used sentences in his speeches that exhibited aphoristic speech acts, while other speech acts used assertive extraverbal acts as persuasive factors, demonstrating the important role of persuasive speech acts in political audiences and their impact on audience behaviour (Sahar Altikriti 2016). The tendency of Turkish politicians to pause less in their debate speeches validates their clear, open-minded view of political communication, using silence to achieve certain hidden speech acts, thus making the conversation flow (Nuray Alagötlü, Sevgi Sahin 2011). Daria Dayter's (2021) study aimed to investigate the presence of self-praise in Russian and English political speech acts and the choices made by simultaneous interpreters when the paper breaks new ground by providing a comprehensive literature review, making the existing pragmatic theories of self-praise relevant to interpreting this speech act. This paper broke new ground by providing a comprehensive literature review, making the existing pragmatic theories of self-praise relevant to interpreting contexts.

Whereas political spokespersons from different cultures differ in the importance they attach to ethical issues and the emphasis they seek to place on them: Americans consider incivility to be the most pressing threat to society, while Israelis emphasise national security and loyalty; on the ethical level, American interviewers show greater tolerance for non-mainstream views, and Israelis vice versa (Zohar Kampf 2021). In political communication, conversational norms are both abused and violated, and discursive failures can be observed in exchanges between cross-national participants, mainly due to misunderstanding the power of discourse and misinterpreting the beliefs and cultural traditions of others (Wale Adegbite 2005). While political speakers in Western countries mainly use rhetorical devices to indirectly invite their audience, speakers in East Asian countries prefer to use the explicit, a form of dialogue whose behavioural details need to be understood in a specific cultural context (Peter Bull, Maurice Waddle 2021).

### **3.4.2 Research on Political Speech Act at Home**

In recent years, domestic attention to speech acts embodied in political discourse has continued to grow, such as analyzing the order of discourse through the perspective of political speech act patterns, showing the conditions, rules, forms, procedures and values of political discourse (Wu Aigua 2013); warning, refusal speech acts in political discourse (Han Dan 2021), offensive political metaphors (Wenyu Liu, Yingjie Wang 2020), metonymy (Meng Hong, Guo Huanping 2020), and power beyond words (Yongmei He 2018) focus on the analysis of various speech acts in Chinese political discourse. The comparative study of Chinese and foreign political speech acts is also of great relevance in itself, with domestic scholarship comparing the speech acts of political apologies in China and the US (Liu Guangming, Deng Yaochen, Zhao Yingru 2016); the speech acts of political refusal (Han Dan, Liu Guangming, Deng Yaochen 2020); and the speech acts of political proposals (Liu Guangming, Shi Wenrui, Deng Yaochen 2019), aiming to compare and analyze the similarities and differences between domestic and foreign political speech act, and The aim is to compare and analyze the similarities and differences between domestic and international political speech acts and to explore the ideology and value orientations behind them. While the analysis of political language in the pragmatics dimension has already achieved certain results, the domestic research on speech acts in political discourse is still at its initial stage.

However, there are few domestic studies of political speech acts under Speech Act Theory, and neither is the literature on this topic under specific speech acts is also scarce at home and abroad. Based on my interest in the study of political discourse under Speech Act Theory, and with some minor research, I will conduct a more in-depth study of political speech acts in the future.

## **4. Conclusion**

Linguistics is the study of communication situations in a particular field in which language is used to convey a particular meaning or produce a communicative effect. Successful verbal communication must be based on two conditions: the speaker can express his or her intentions smoothly, and the listener is able to understand exactly what the speaker is saying. This paper reviews the development and application of Speech Act Theory. Foreign research has focused more on the internal laws of language from grammatical, semantic and pragmatic perspectives; it has analyzed specific categories of discourses, such as different positions on the same case, and there have been many cross-cultural related studies. In contrast, scholars at home are more likely to have integrated research within larger fields, such as linguistics, literature, education and journalism and communication.

Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory is one of the core elements of modern pragmatics and can be studied in a variety of contexts, of which political discourse has been one of the most popular topics in recent years. Political discourse itself is an expression of language and naturally involves Speech Act Theory, indirect speech acts, the principle of cooperation, the principle of politeness and other pragmatic theories. The study of political speech act under Speech Act Theory reflects the different perspectives of domestic and international research, with the latter tending to focus on individual or comparative studies between different countries, while the former focuses on the discursive strategies used by spokespersons in answering journalists on public occasions, where spokespersons flexibly use strategies such as indirect instructions, vague restrictions and indirect speech acts are flexibly used to subtly safeguard China's image and interests. The study of political discourse has important theoretical and practical implications. However, there are only a few studies on political speech act under the Speech Act Theory in China, and few studies on specific speech act at home and abroad, even fewer studies on political discourse under the specific Speech Act Theory, which focus more on the linguistic characteristics and realization of political speech acts and less on the implementation and effectiveness of speech acts. In the future, we will study the explanatory power of speech acts in dynamic political communication contexts, combine Speech Act Theory with multiple outputs and multiple interpretations of political communication, and explore the theoretical and practical paradigms of political speech acts. The study of Chinese political speech act from this perspective will contribute to the theoretical and practical study of the political discourse system with Chinese characteristics.

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