John Langshhaw Austin (1911-1960) was White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Oxford. He had developed and contributed to several aspects in the area of philosophy, including knowledge, perception, action, freedom, truth, language and the use of language in speech acts. He is still relevant for the development of the theory of speech acts, particularly the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. His scholarship on knowledge and perception secures him in an influential tradition of “Oxford Realism”, from Cook Wilson and Harold Arthur Prichard through to J M Hinton, John McDowell, paul Snowdon, Charles Travis and Timothy Williamson. Moreover his discourse on truth plays an important role in contemporary discussions of the extent to which meaning of sentences can be accounted for in terms of truth-conditions.

**Language and Philosophy**

It appears that J L Austin is concerned about language for two important reasons. First, language use is an essential part of human activity. Second, the study of language is an aide-important preliminary- to track down the philosophical topics. J L Austin has developed a very general approach toward the philosophy of language in Hampshire’s words, “Austin was constitutionally unable to refrain from applying the same standards of truth and accuracy to a philosophical argument, sentence by sentence, as he would have applied to any other serious matter. He could not have adopted a special tone of voice, or attitude of mind, for philosophical question.” (Hampshire 1960:34)

However, what matters most to Austin is an attempt to make and inquire about positions and arguments, according to him philosophers should meet ordinary standard of truth, accuracy etc. Generally, in their hurry to address general philosophical questions, philosophers have a tendency to ignore various hints involved in making ordinary claims and judgments. Hence, Austin views language as well designed structure which is ordinarily put. However, complicated cases require special treatments. Hence, it is important to look for the liability when it comes to
the question whether a sentence can be used in a particular circumstance to state something is true or false.

**Speech Acts**

The speech act theory was introduced by British philosopher J. L. Austin in his 1962 book, *How to do Things With Words*.

**According to Austin a speech act consists of three components;**

![Speech acts diagram](diagram.png)

1. **The Locutionary act** refers to the actual act of saying or uttering something. This is the basic speech act, based on what is said about something. It refers to the literal meaning of the words in language. In linguistics locutionary act is the performance of utterance refers to speech act that gives the surface meaning of an utterance, an actual utterance and its apparent meaning. Austine redefined the notion of Locutionary acts as acts, in and of themselves, they do have meaning, in performing a locutionary act we also perform such an act as;

   - Asking or answering questions
   - Giving information or assurance or warning
   - Announcing a verdict or an intention
   - Pronouncing a sentence
   - Making an appointment, an appeal or criticism
   - Making an identification or giving description

Hence, Locutionary acts are the meaningful utterances we the humans make in order to communicate our needs and desires and to persuade others to their view points. However, we need also to understand that this act is completely dependent on the hearer, if the
hearer fails to understand the sentence uttered by the speaker, then the speaker will fail to do a locutionary act.

e.g. when a person from India (He is in somewhere in Europe for Instance) talks to a European in Hindi App kese ho? In English this utterance will not produce a meaningful linguistic expression as the European will not understand Hindi language. But when the speaker will say, ‘How are you sir?’ then only the European will understand and may give appropriate response to the speaker, it is a form of locutionary act.

It may be understood better with another example. Imagine a situation when we say to our friend, ‘the rain is falling heavily, hence, do not cross the bridge as it will be difficult for you to return.’

The locutionary aspect of this utterance is the surface meaning or the literal meaning that we get easily by the words uttered. We are informing or giving a warning to our friend about the heavy rains falling in downtown, and generally when the rain falls heavily the water reaches to the level of the bridge, and in order to avoid casualties police blocs the bridge from both the sides. And we say the above sentence to our friend when he is about to go to the market form over the bridge. He will understand your warning and act accordingly.

2. The Illocutionary Act refers to the performance of the action saying something specific. It is based on the intention of the speaker. Hence, it is an act that is accomplished with the help of utterance with a communicative intension. Illocutionary act offers an instance of culturally-defined speech act type characterized with illocutionary force. With this act we have speakers performing to make a promise, offer, explanation etc. It is the intention of the speaker that produces such utterance. The sentences producing illocutionary acts not only give information to be analyzed by literal or surface meaning but also make the listener think of it as a form of warning or advice etc. e.g in a sentence that we used above, ‘the rain is falling heavily, hence, do not cross the bridge as it will be difficult for you to return.’ We give an unambiguous and specific warning to our friend. It is very apparent that our statement, even though it did not begin with the words such as ‘I warn you’ or ‘I advise you’ or I suggest you’- had a specific purpose. We are trying to do something with our speech. With this statement we are trying to persuade our friend to
cross the bridge. Hence, illocutionary acts is where we perform or do something with our speech.

3. **The Perlocutionary Act** refers to the consequence of what is said to the listener. It is an action or state of mind brought about by, or as a consequence of, saying something. It is also known as perlocutionary effect. This act is the consequent effect that happens on the hearer which the speaker intends to see in though his utterance. Perlocutionary act too is performed by saying something, and not in saying something. E.g to persuade someone, to angry on someone, to incite against someone, to give comfort to someone or to inspire someone are the acts of perlocutionary acts. E.g. Lets us go back to our previous example; *the rain is falling heavily hence, do not cross the bridge as it will be difficult for you to return.*

Now, in order to give a response to this act your friend must have multiple choices either to accept that whatever you are saying is true and stay home or to disregard or ignore your warning. However, if your friend will be scared and refuses to go on the road and cross the bridge, then the illocutionary act of warning will be successful. This consequence on the side of the listener (your friend) refers to the perlocutionary act.

**Performative Verbs:**

Having understood the basics of speech it is essential to understand further the performative verbs. In English grammar and speech act theory performative verbs are used to explicitly convey a specific speech act. It is a verb that specifically expresses the type of speech act being performed. We already know that a speech act is an expression of our intension. Hence, performative verbs are also called speech act verbs or performative utterances, that is to say, an action that conveys intent. Such speech acts can include verbs such as promise, invite, apology, predict, vow, request, warning, insistence, forbiddance, bet, dare, resign, welcome, approve, demand, nominate etc. Austin estimated that a ‘good dictionary’ contains around 10,000 speech act verbs (Austin 2009).

**Take a look at the following sentences:**

1. He promises to be there at five. (promises)
2. You must sign the report now (order)
3. I suggest you to read (suggest)
4. I apologize if you were hurt by anything I said (apologize)
5. I admit that I was wrong (admit)
6. I confess that I lie (confess)
7. Thank you for giving me this opportunity (thank)
8. I declare, Joseph and Mary as husband and wife (declare)

The above statements explicitly express the intention of the speaker by using the performative verbs. The performative verbs used in the statements above make the speaker do something by saying something. These verbs have something to do with convening something the speaker intents to.

**Take a look at these performative verbs that describe a person to perform an action;**

1. Promise: to assure someone that you will do something in future
2. Order: to tell somebody to do something
3. Suggest: to put something forward for consideration
4. Apologize: to express to somebody that you feel sorry about something
5. Admit: to confess something
6. Confess: to disclose that you made a mistake or something wrong or right
7. Thank: to express gratitude about something
8. Declare: to announce something

Hence, in the statements above, the speaker does much more than that of saying something. He either makes a promise, order, suggest or declare etc. The meaningful and grammatically correct sentences with we perform such speech acts are called **Performative Sentences.** Performative sentences represent the speech acts. i.e. the actions of the speakers are represented by the performative verbs and so the performative sentences. However, there are sentences which do not use performative verbs, but the sentence with which we use performative verb we simply restrict or control the meaning of our intention. Thus, we need to understand that when we do not use performative verb our utterances are open for interpretation by the listeners.

Hence, speech acts not only describe a given reality, but also can be able to change the social reality that they describe through our utterances. J L Austin develops this theory in order to describe truth and falsities attached in language, because according to him language either states the truth or lie. Instead of describing words in language Austin believes that language actually
did things in the world, e.g. when the couple who are marrying say, “I do,” then it is obvious that they do not merely describe the event of their marriage, but they do or perform through their action of speaking.

References

