1 Introduction: The Philosophical Foundations

In the first section, I describe the rationale and structure of the Element. It is based on a careful look at research issues and methods and how they have developed in recent years. In order to contextualise the recent developments, this section provides a brief outline of the philosophical foundations of speech act theory and gives an outline of the four waves of speech act theory. The first wave of philosophical approaches started with the work of the language philosophers Austin and Searle and their interest in the pragmatic nature of individual utterances. This work inspired the empirical approaches of the following three waves. The second wave was interested in how different groups of people produce different speech acts and relied mostly on experimental approaches including discourse completion tasks, role plays and, more recently, perception experiments. The third wave switched from elicited to already existing data and searched for specific speech acts across large corpora. The fourth and most recent wave focuses on speech act sequences and the interaction between speakers and listeners in local contexts.

1.1 Setting the Scene

Speech acts have always been a central concern for pragmatics. In fact, they were one of the distinctive features of the discipline when pragmatics established itself as an independent field of study back in the middle of the last century. At that time, linguists were mainly concerned with the structure of words, phrases and sentences with little concern for their uses. But the early pragmaticists wanted to know how language was actually used to communicate or – to put it differently – how speech was used to act. For this, they relied on the work by the language philosophers John Austin and John R. Searle. Austin had developed a framework for the investigation of speech acts in a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955. These lectures were published posthumously in 1962 and they still provide a fascinating insight into the development of these new ideas as Austin developed them in the course of the lecture series. The starting point for his theorising had been the observation that many utterances could not in any straightforward way be classified as true or false because they were not used to report a certain state of affairs. Instead, they were used to do things. Hence, the programmatic title of his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Searle (1969, 1979) developed Austin's seminal ideas into a more elaborate and complex theory (see Section 1.2).

It is the work by these two language philosophers which inspired the first generation of pragmaticists to think and theorise about speech acts. But, as I will show in the following sections, the framework proposed by Austin and Searle

provided some basic assumptions that persisted for much longer and still influence a considerable amount of analytical and theoretical work on speech acts within pragmatics. And this is why I would like to use the metaphor of waves to describe the development of speech act theory over the last half century or so. The wave metaphor has been used by other fields in linguistics, notably in sociolinguistics and in politeness theory. It helps to understand how new ideas develop on the basis of earlier thinking and how different theoretical perspectives blend into each other without hard and fast boundaries between them. The defining criteria of the waves that I will introduce in what follows are the basic assumptions about the concept under investigation, the research questions that are asked by the scholars working in the field and above all by the research methods that are employed for their investigation.

As a result of these changes, the notion of a speech act itself has changed somewhat. Initially, the term focused squarely on individual utterances that were used to perform certain actions, for instance how words can be used to greet, to promise, to apologise and so on. In more recent work, as I will show, the focus is regularly extended to include social and multimodal aspects. Sometimes speech acts are performed without any speech at all or with a combination of speech and gestures. A request to keep silent, for instance, may be performed by an appropriate gesture only; a greeting may be performed silently by a nodding of the head or a hand wave; and an apology may be performed by an apologetic smile. Such examples are the topic of Section 5. More recent research also focuses more consistently on the interactive nature of speech acts. The object of investigation is no longer a single utterance, but utterances in sequence.

Against such extensions of the analytical perspective, the term ‘speech act’ seems increasingly inadequate. Terms like ‘communicative act’ or ‘pragmatic act’ (Culpeper and Haugh 2014) may be more appropriate. The title of this Element still uses the traditional term, but in the following I will also use the term pragmatic act, especially when I want to draw attention to the multimodal aspects of what communicators do.

1.2 The Philosophical Beginnings of Speech Act Theory

Initially, Austin was interested in a small class of utterances that he thought behaved in a very special way. The philosophers at the time were mainly interested in sentences that could be classified as true or false and if they defied such classification, they were considered to be meaningless. But Austin identified a class of sentences that he called ‘performatives’ because in a very real sense they perform something and thus in some way change the world, as for

instance 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' or 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow' (Austin 1962: 5). He noted that in contrast with 'constatives' such performative utterances cannot be judged as either true or false. Instead they can be judged as more felicitous or less felicitous, depending on who uses them with what authority and intentions and in what context. By the end of his book, however, the two types of utterances, the 'constatives' and the 'performatives', were merged again because he realised that statements could be seen as the performance of an assertion. He also distinguished between three different aspects of each speech act, the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary aspect, which describe the making, or pronunciation, of the utterance itself, its intended purpose and the effect it has on the audience.

In his book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Searle (1969) set out to systematise Austin's insights into a larger and more coherent theoretical framework. He developed a set of felicity conditions that helped to identify specific speech acts. A request, for instance, must concern a future act of the hearer which the hearer might not have done without being asked and the speaker must have some interest that the hearer actually does what he or she is being asked to do. A promise, on the other hand, must concern a future act of the speaker him- or herself, which the speaker believes to be in the hearer's interest and which the speaker actually intends to carry out. If some of these conditions are not met, the speech act is not felicitous.

Searle identified these conditions as constitutive rules. They are similar to the rules of a game. Chess, for instance, consists of a set of very specific rules about the ways in which each of the six different pieces can be moved on the chessboard and what they are allowed to do. If people ignore these rules and move the pieces in different ways, they may be playing around with chess pieces, but they are not playing chess. Playing chess consists of following the rules. And in the same way, the felicity conditions constitute the act of performing a specific speech act. If someone says, 'I'll return the book tomorrow' and has no intention of doing so, he or she, in a crucial sense, has not felicitously promised.

Searle (1979) proposed a classification of five different types of speech acts. Representatives commit the speaker to the truth of what he or she says. This class largely corresponds to Austin's initial original class of 'constatives'. Typical examples are assertions. Directives are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. This can happen with more or less authority and includes such actions as begging, suggesting, advising, requesting or commanding. Commissives, on the other hand, commit the speaker to a future course of action as in promising or threatening. Expressives express the speaker's psychological state. Complimenting, apologising, thanking and

congratulating are relevant examples. The final type of speech acts consists of declarations. They tend to rely on institutional contexts for their successful performance and effect an immediate change in the state of affairs, as for instance in a declaration of war, the christening of a ship or the appointment of a new committee member.

The groundwork provided by the language philosophers Austin and Searle was soon adopted into the new and emerging field of pragmatics and, in fact, one of the early textbooks in pragmatics, Levinson (1983: chapter 5), still provides one of the best introductions into this early version of speech act theory. For a more recent overview, the reader is advised to consult Culpeper and Haugh (2014: chapter 6) or Assimakopoulos (in press). Many of the concepts developed by Austin and Searle continue to be used as analytical tools up to today in spite of the numerous changes in research interests, methodologies and theoretical underpinnings.

Much of the subsequent work on speech acts inherited the original emphasis on the illocutionary aspect, that is, on the speaker and what he or she tries to do by uttering a string of words. This is usually called the illocutionary force of an utterance, but I prefer to follow a distinction proposed by Holmes (1984; see also Searle 1976) between the illocutionary point and the illocutionary force of an utterance. The illocutionary point refers to the function or purpose of a speech act, that is, whether it is an apology, a threat or a warning, while the illocutionary force refers to the strength with which the illocutionary point is presented, that is, whether it is a heartfelt and sincere or a casual and perfunctory apology, for instance. I shall come back to this distinction in Section 4.

1.3 The Four Waves of Speech Act Studies

The 1980s saw a growing interest in the newly emerging field of pragmatics with several important textbooks (in addition to Levinson 1983 mentioned in the previous section, for example, Leech 1983 or Green 1989) and the founding of the International Pragmatics Association. This was a time when linguistics was still dominated by formalist approaches that focused on linguistic structures and analytical tools that relied on native speaker intuition and invented sentences that were used as the basis for theorising. Against this background, pragmaticists began to ask questions about actual language usage. Speech acts were no longer seen as abstract entities that could be dissected with philosophical rigour into a set of constitutive felicity conditions. Instead, they came to be seen as performance phenomena whose realisation could be investigated across different groups of speakers. In the context of a move away from philosophical

methods and introspection to more empirical methods, experimental tools were developed in order to collect data on how different groups of speakers produce specific speech acts. Section 2 will review some of these tools in more detail, in particular discourse completion tasks, role plays and perception studies.

In spite of this turn towards empirical methods based on systematic data elicitation and careful observation, many of the first wave assumptions about speech acts continued to inform these investigations. The focus continued to lie on individual utterances and on well-defined speech acts. The experimental designs were carefully created to elicit apologies, complaints or requests (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, Trosborg 1995), for instance, and therefore the nature of these speech acts and what they were supposed to achieve appeared to be clear. What was at issue was merely their specific realisation.

In the 1990s, computers became more easily accessible. They were no longer restricted to IT departments and a few early pioneers in corpus linguistics, but they became available to more and more linguists. At the same time, more and more language corpora became available. With the *British National Corpus* for the first time a corpus became available that contained not only a few million words but 100 million words (see Landert et al. 2023). And this led to the third wave of speech act theory. It is probably fair to say that much of the early work in corpus linguistics was dominated by lexical and morpho-syntactic investigations. It took more time for these methods to be adopted for pragmatic entities. Early pioneers were Aijmer (1996) and Deutschmann (2003). With corpus-based approaches, the interest in speech act studies shifted from individual instances of performed speech acts to patterns of occurrence across large corpora. Some of these approaches set out to retrieve instances of the speech acts themselves while others focus on the expressions that are used to talk about them, the so-called meta-illocutionary lexicon (Schneider 2017, 2022).

The fourth wave brought a more radical shift away from Austin and Searle's original conception of individual utterances with specific communicative functions. Speech acts are now seen as fuzzy entities whose function is often negotiated in context ('Is that a request or a command?'). The focus, therefore, shifts from the speaker who performs a certain speech act to the interaction between two or more speakers. The illocutionary point of a speech act emerges in the interaction and depends on the degree of conventionalisation of a specific speech act and the way it is (implicitly or explicitly) interpreted by the interlocutor(s). The perspective turns away from speech act labels assigned by the researcher on the basis of felicity conditions, so-called second order definitions. Instead, it focuses on the way the interlocutors conceptualise specific speech acts and deal with them, that is, on first order

definitions. The speaker may feel the need to stress his or her sincerity and thus increase the illocutionary force of the utterance ('I solemnly promise that I will never . . .'), or the speaker may be urged to issue a particularly sincere promise ('Do you really promise?'). And speakers often negotiate the precise illocutionary point of a speech act ('Is that supposed to be an insult or a compliment?'). In the context of speech act research, the perspective on the interactional aspects in meaning-making were relatively new. In other fields, notably in Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics, the focus on the discursive nature of language functions has a much longer tradition (see Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018 for an overview).

At the same time, the analysis of speech acts is no longer reduced to their verbal content. They are seen as multimodal communicative acts that can be performed by a combination of words, facial expressions and gestures. Such modalities can be combined or used individually. A simplified overview of the four waves can be found in Table 1. The categories across the four waves are not watertight.

1.4 Outline of the Element

This Element does not presume to introduce all aspects of the vast field of speech act research. For the more philosophical aspects of the field, readers are referred to its sister Element (Assimakopoulous in press). Instead, I will focus on what I see as particularly exciting developments in current speech act research, that is, their fuzziness, their multimodal nature and their historicity. And at the same time, I want to give a brief outline of how speech act research has reached this point by focusing on the developing research questions and research methodologies over the last few decades. In Section 2, I will review some of the relevant literature that introduced empirical methods into Austin and Searle's conceptualisation of the nature of speech acts back in the 1980s and 1990s, in particular the early methods of discourse completion tasks and role plays. Both methods have been criticised for some of their undoubted weaknesses, but they also have their strengths, and recent work continues to adapt and modify the methods in various ways. Section 3 provides an outline of four different ways of using corpus-based methods to investigate speech acts in large corpora. In Section 4, I will focus on the different ways in which pragmatic acts, as they will be called in the context of this section, can be analysed as fuzzy entities and thus no longer as theoretical constructs but as actual utterances whose communicative impact is negotiated (implicitly or explicitly) by the interactants. Section 5 will shift the focus to the multimodal nature of pragmatic acts and extend the analysis from the verbal aspects to gestures and facial

Table 1 Four waves of speech act research

	First wave: Philosophical	**Second wave: Experimental**	**Third wave: Corpus-based**	**Fourth wave: Discursive**
Timing	1960s/1970s	1980s –	1990s –	2000s –
Method	Philosophical	Empirical	Empirical	Empirical
Data	Introspection	Elicitation	Large corpora (incl. historical data)	Small corpora (incl. historical data)
Main focus	Felicity conditions	Speaker variation	Dispersion across corpora	Local contexts and the interaction between speaker and addressee
Definitions	Second order (i.e., academic)	Second order (i.e., academic)	Partly second order, partly first order	First order (i.e., participants' perspective)
Research questions	What are the essential features of specific speech acts?	What are the differences in the speech acts produced by different types of speakers?	Where and in what forms and functions are specific speech acts likely to occur?	How are speech acts co-constructed over several turns? How are they produced multimodally?

expression. Section 6 will then combine many of the elements of the previous sections and use them for an exploration of the historicity of pragmatic acts. The main question to be explored concerns their persistence or development in the course of language history. How did people in Anglo-Saxon England apologise, for instance? Or did they apologise at all? And how has this changed over the centuries since then? On a meta level, I will also be concerned with the analytical difficulties of tracing such developments. The final section of this Element will briefly discuss open issues and provide an outlook into future research opportunities in connection with pragmatic acts.

2 The Empirical Turn in Speech Act Studies

The early empirical work on speech acts set out to find experimental ways of eliciting specific speech acts in order to compare their realisation across different contexts and different groups of speakers. Initially, many of these approaches were based on an interest in the politeness potential of specific speech acts. Discourse completion tasks and role plays, for instance, were designed to elicit speech acts with specific face-threatening potentials in order to compare the strategies used by different groups of speakers when performing them. Other methods that were developed to compare speech acts across contexts were the creation of realistic situations or the observation of naturally occurring comparable contexts and ethnographic data collection methods. More recently, these methods have been extended to explore reactions and attitudes of addressees or bystanders when confronted with specific speech acts.

2.1 The Empirical Turn in Linguistics

The 1970s and 1980s saw a number of paradigm shifts that altered some of the basic tenets of linguistics in general and some of these shifts were foundational for the emerging field of pragmatics (see Traugott 2008: 207–10; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2013: 5–10). In the 1970s and earlier most linguists were interested in language as a coherent and homogeneous system. They were concerned with generalisations across entire languages and therefore ignored or backgrounded what they considered to be 'irrelevant deviations'. In their view, generalisations could only be accessed through the intuition of a native speaker while actual language production was considered to be contaminated by irrelevant factors, such as distraction, lack of concentration or tiredness of the speaker. The first wave of speech act theory clearly aligns with this kind of approach. The language philosophers Austin and Searle were concerned with generalisations about specific speech acts and they used the philosophical tools of introspection to determine the relevant sets of felicity conditions for specific speech acts.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s an increasing number of linguists started to explore the 'irrelevant deviations' of actual language use. They became increasingly interested in the heterogeneity of language and, as a result, the research methods changed from introspection to empirical investigation. The heterogeneity of language could only be investigated through careful observation of how people actually use language and how different groups of speakers systematically differed in their linguistic behaviour. The search for generalisations across entire languages shifted to searches for regular patterns in the variability of language. In the process, many linguists expanded from the core areas of linguistics, that is, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, to sociolinguistics and pragmatics. 'What was marginal in the 1970s has come to be of central interest, above all pragmatics' (Traugott 2008: 207). The native speaker's competence was no longer an adequate basis for linguistic theorising. Instead, detailed transcriptions of everyday interactions, large corpora of conversational data and other texts and carefully elicited experimental data became the object of investigation.

It was against this background that the second and third waves of speech act theory emerged in the form of elicitation experiments and corpus-based research. These methods were used to show how different groups of speakers differed in the ways in which they produced specific speech acts. The following subsections briefly review some of these early studies, the criticisms that were subsequently levelled against them and some more recent modifications and adaptations of these methodologies.

2.2 Discourse Completion Tasks

According to Ogiermann (2018: 229), the discourse completion task is probably one of the most widely used methods of data collection in cross-cultural pragmatics as well as in interlanguage pragmatics. It facilitates the collection of large amounts of systematically comparable data across different groups of speakers. The best known and most influential study was the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) carried out in the 1980s by an international team of researchers under the lead of Shoshana Blum-Kulka (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989). They focused their attention on requests and apologies because these two speech acts were seen as good examples of face-threatening acts in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987). Requests are impositions on the addressee and, therefore, threaten his or her negative face, that is, the wish of every person to remain free from imposition, while apologies acknowledge a minor or major misdeed by the speaker and thus threaten the speaker's own positive face, that is, the wish of every person to be

liked by others. The project explored the different strategies used by speakers of Canadian French, Danish, German, Hebrew and three different varieties of English (American, Australian and British).

Discourse completion tasks typically consist of a brief description of an everyday situation, an utterance by a first speaker that makes a certain type of response highly expectable, an empty slot for the participant to fill in and a rejoinder by the first speaker which typically indicates that the speech act in question has been accepted. The participants are asked to fill in how they would react in this situation. Extract 2.1 provides a relevant example taken from Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989: 274).

2.1 In the lobby of the university library.
Jim and Charlie have agreed to meet at six o'clock to work on a joint project. Charlie arrives on time and Jim is half an hour late.
Charlie: I almost gave up on you!
Jim: . . . . . .
Charlie: O.K. Let's start working.

In this situation, Jim is very likely to apologise for being late to the meeting. Such scenarios can be translated into different languages and therefore allow the researchers to quickly and easily collect large numbers of apologies by speakers across different linguacultures (cross-cultural pragmatics) or across native speakers and language learners (interlanguage pragmatics). The method also allows for systematic variations of contextual factors. The scenarios can be designed to involve friends or strangers as speakers. They can create symmetric or asymmetric relations between the speakers in terms of power, age, status and so on.

The methodology has proved to be popular because of the ease with which large amounts of contrastive data can be collected and the many ways in which contextual factors can be manipulated, but it has also been widely criticised. People write what they think they would say or perhaps even what they think the researcher would like to hear or what would make them look good rather than what they really say. They formulate these speech acts in artificial situations which do not have any real-world consequences. Some situations may be more or less realistic in different linguacultures and the available space provided for the written response may influence the length of the response. In general, written responses appear to be shorter than spoken responses and the design of the task allows for only one utterance. The follow-up by the original speaker indicates that no negotiations appear to be necessary. Whatever the response, the original speaker will accept it while in a real situation the original speaker may not be satisfied with the first response and ask for a 'real' apology (see