

Applying Speech Act Theory to Regional Integration

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Introduction

In this paper we will provide a conceptual framework for applying Speech Act Theory analysis of political speech in the context of regional political and economic integration. First we will provide a brief theoretical outline of Speech Act Theory, elucidating its main terminology (Section I). Then we argue why understanding and applying Speech Act Theory is crucial for the process of regional integration (Section II). Lastly, we will turn to analyzing some pertinent case studies to demonstrate the dynamics at play in regional integration (Section III) and end with conclusions and thoughts on further research (Section IV).

I. What is Speech Act Theory?

It will be beneficial to outline a basic understanding of speech act theory. Of course we cannot give an adequate analysis of all of its deliverances, but a basic summary will be enough for our purposes. Perhaps the central claim of this philosophical theory of language, which was pioneered by J.L. Austin's work, *How to Do Things with Words*, is that language does more than simply *say* things; rather, we *do* things with words, hence the term "speech acts."¹ Austin called such actions "performative utterances," including actions such as promising, warning, thanking, inviting, or commanding. This is to go far beyond the prior models of language such as the sender-receiver model, which viewed language primarily as the sending and decoding of messages. Kevin J. Vanhoozer has shown how the old "code model" does not adequately grasp several primary elements of language, including the facts that, "(1) some of the information conveyed is not actually encoded, (2) understanding involves more than decoding linguistic signals, and (3) words do more than convey information."² To be sure, it is true that language is used to convey propositional truths or assertions, but this is only one of the many ways language works in the real world. John Searle has classified at least five different types of utterances, each of which is the accomplishing of some action:³

| Name | Definition | Example(s) |
|------|------------|------------|
|------|------------|------------|

¹ J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2nd Edition, ed. J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisá (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2002), 166.

³ John R. Searle, "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," in: Günderson, K. (ed.), *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, (Minneapolis Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 7, University of Minneapolis Press, 1975) 344-69.

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|-----------------|---|--|
| 1. Assertives | The speaker proposes the truth of an expressed proposition. | Asserting, affirming. (e.g., "It is now 2:30pm"). |
| 2. Directives | The speaker causes the hearer to adopt a course of action. | Requesting, commanding, advising. (e.g., "Would you pass the salt, please"). |
| 3. Commissives | The speaker commits him or herself to future action. | Promising. (e.g., "I'll meet you at the station at noon"). |
| 4. Expressives | The speaker displays an emotional stance towards the proposition. | Thanking, praising, hating. (e.g., "I love this movie!") |
| 5. Declarations | The speaker creates a new reality by means of expressing a proposition. | Firing, hiring, pronouncing as husband and wife. (e.g., when a judge pronounces "guilty" verdict in a court of law). |

David Clark has summed up these five different types of speech acts simply as, *statements, commands, promises, exclamations, and performatives*.⁴ The point here is that each of these utterances are actions performed by the speaker when he or she speaks; she doesn't just say "I'll be there tomorrow," she enacts a *promise* to be there tomorrow.

Also central to speech act theory is the distinctions between locutionary acts, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary force—that is, locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions.⁵ A *locution* is simply the token use of an utterance in its given medium (whether, text, speech, body language, etc.) and with its particular rules of syntax, grammar, and so on. For instance, a particular sentence printed on a page is a locution. But each locution also comes with an *illocutionary* force(s), which is the action the speaker hopes to do with this piece of language. And the actual result of this illocutionary force, that is what the speech results in, is its *perlocutionary* force. A perlocution can either be "felicitous" meaning it accomplished its illocutionary intent, or "infelicitous," meaning it failed to accomplish its illocutionary intent. So if Marty McFly's boss faxes over a sentence that says, "YOU'RE FIRED!," the illocution would be the performative act of firing Mr. McFly, and the perlocutionary effect would be that Mr. McFly actually is fired. In summary, then, the basic insight of speech act theory is the notion that language accomplishes various actions in the world by means of locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions.

⁴ David Clark, "Beyond Inerrancy: Speech Acts and an Evangelical View of Scripture," in *Faith and Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Christian Theology* (ed. James K. Beilby; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 119.

⁵ See: Clark, *Beyond Inerrancy*, 121; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 172–73; Green, Mitchell, "Speech Acts", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/speech-acts/>, §3.

But we must make one further note of Searle's distinction between *primary* and *secondary* illocutionary acts. Primary speech acts are taken to be indirect; they lie beneath direct, secondary speech acts: "In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer."⁶ An example of this distinction can be seen in the following exchange:

Wife: "Are you ready to eat dinner?"

Husband: "I'm almost finished with my work."

The husband's secondary, indirect speech act is about the status of his work completion, which is, strictly speaking, unrelated to his wife's question. But she knows precisely what he means, because she can perceive what he is really communicating: the indirect illocutionary act of asserting, "No, I'm not ready to eat dinner." So there are direct (secondary) and there are indirect (primary) illocutionary speech acts.

We all know of daily examples of this sort of indirect speech. But why do humans talk in this way? To ease tensions and make *relationships* smoother, in part because we don't want to sound harsh or demanding so we "soften" our language. Instead of commanding a coworker to "pour me some coffee," we ask, "is there any coffee left?"⁷

II. Why is Understanding Speech Act Theory Important?

What is important about this theory of language, firstly, is that it applies beyond interpersonal communication, to political and economic speech. Using a speech act theory framework we are able to analyze and understand political speech with a more precise set of tools. On This view, when a politician makes promises on the campaign trail, their speech is more than mere words—they are literally enacting a promise. Ambassadors and diplomats employ deputized speech on behalf of their countrymen to issue commands, express emotions, enact performatives, and assert truths. Thus we are able to apply Searle's classification of speech acts towards the following kind of examples:

⁶ John Searle, "Indirect speech acts," in *Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts*, ed. P. Cole & J. L. Morgan, pp. 59–82 (New York: Academic Press, 1975). Reprinted in *Pragmatics: A Reader*, ed. S. Davis, pp. 265–277 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 178.

⁷ We can analyze this particular speech act in this way: the locution is the English sentence "Is there any coffee left?" The primary illocutionary intent is the directive-request of asking a co-worker to pour a cup of coffee. This primary meaning is lying beneath the surface of a secondary illocution of a "softer" directive-question, which seeks information about how much coffee is left. The perlocutionary effect is felicitous (i.e. it works) if the coworker pours you a cup, but it is infelicitous if he or she merely tells you that, yes there's some left—implying you can pour your own cup!

| Name | Political Example |
|-----------------|--|
| 1. Assertives | "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" (Bill Clinton). |
| 2. Directives | "Mr. Gorbachov, tear down this wall!" (Ronald Regan). |
| 3. Commissive | Korean War Armistice Agreement, July 27, 1953. |
| 4. Expressives | "December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy" (Franklin D. Roosevelt). |
| 5. Declarations | Declaration of War. |

Secondly, if we understand that political language works in this way, we will see that *relationship* is intrinsic to all communication because speech acts constitute actions between persons (or nations supervening upon a network of persons). This means that in order to better political relations we must better political speech. To move towards regional economic and political integration, there must be focus upon how speech affects relationships.

Crucial to this process is to see how the act of "interpretation" fits into this scheme. The "meaning" of an utterance lies in its illocutionary intent. To "interpret" meaning therefore is simply to ascribe illocutionary intent to a speaker. The act of *successful interpretation* occurs when we accurately ascertain the speaker's intent; *misinterpretation* occurs when we wrongly ascribe intent to the speaker, in the form of misunderstanding his or her illocutions. Speakers therefore need to ensure their speech acts are delivered clearly, otherwise communication is not occurring.

III. Application for Regional Integration: Case Studies

We turn now to some examples of misunderstanding affecting relationship and regional integration. In each case the framework provided by speech act theory analysis provides added insight into the dynamics at play.

Case Study 1: "Little Rocket Man."

A recent interaction between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will serve as an extreme illustration of the dynamics between interpretation and relationship. On 24th of September, 2017 President Trump mocked Kim Jong Un as "Little Rocket Man" and threaten his regime "Won't be around much longer" if they continue their current missile program.⁸ North Korea's senior diplomat interpreted this speech act to be a declaration of war.⁹ In reality, Trump's words are best understood as mere emotional expressives—he is emoting, literally calling names—or perhaps he is issuing a real threat, although this is not clear. In any case, North Korea ascribed to him the illocutionary intent of a performative declaration.

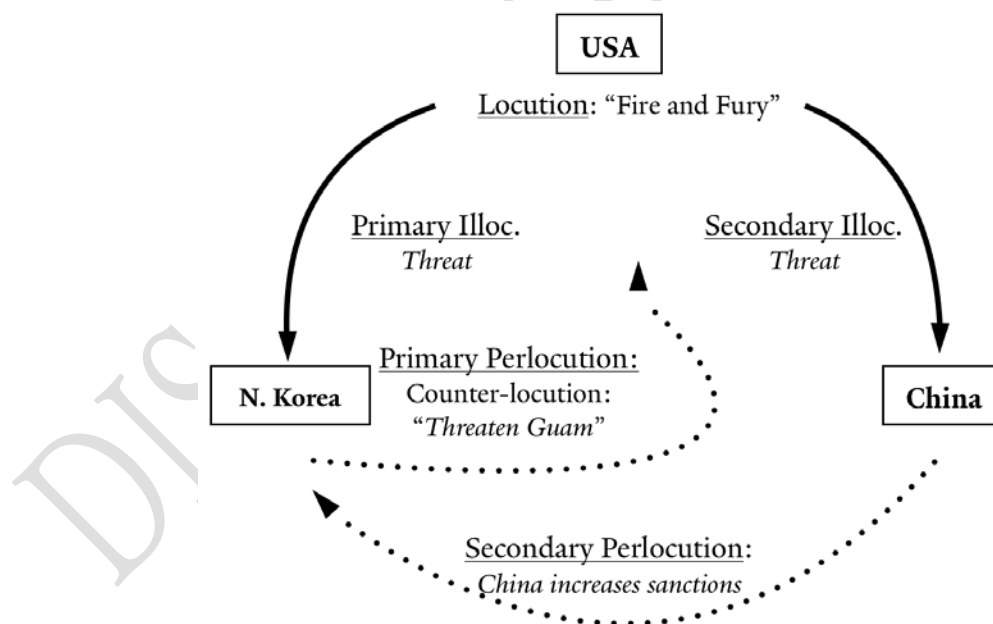
⁸ Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump). "Just heard Foreign Minister of North Korea speak at U.N. If he echoes thoughts of Little Rocket Man, they won't be around much longer!" September 24th, 2017, 12:08PM. Tweet.

⁹ Barbara Demick, "North Korea Says Trump Declared War via Tweet. The White House Says It Didn't." [latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-north-korea-war-threat-20170925-story.html). <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-north-korea-war-threat-20170925-story.html>.

Writing as an American, in our current political climate, unfortunately, much of president Trump's apparently assertive/indicative speech can be more accurately analyzed as "expressives" (i.e. mere emotional expressions). His utterances have the perlocutionary intent of riling up a populist base to give him more political power, rather than plainly assert truths and enact promises. This pattern of speech creates a disconnection for anyone reading Trump on a more "surface-level" illocutionary meaning. Inevitably negative consequence arise from this, which damage relations between speakers.

Case Study 2: "Fire and Fury."

We now turn to a clear case of "threat" or "warning," which is the illocutionary act of a "commissive"; in other words, a sort of unwelcome promise of future negative action. On August 9th, 2017 Mr. Trump said that further North Korean nuclear threats "will be met with fire and fury and frankly power the likes of which the world has never seen before."¹⁰ Here he is committing himself to future retaliation. On the surface, the Trump administration hopes this threat will have the perlocutionary effect of stopping further missile programs in the North. (In fact, the actual result in the relationship was that threats begot counter-threats, with the North claiming it would plan a strike on U.S. military bases in Guam). However, within this locution many see an additional secondary illocutionary intent directed towards China. Some believe this utterance was meant to display a spirit of brinkmanship, to force China's hand to get involved and help the U.S. restrain North Korea's nuclear program, since China does not want a failed state south of its border in the event of a war. Therefore, we can analyze the relationship between these three countries in this way.



¹⁰ Emily Shugerman, "Donald Trump Warns North Korea 'Will Be Met with Fire and Fury like the World Has Never Seen.'" The Independent, August 8, 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-north-korea-fire-and-fury-like-the-world-has-never-seen-nuclear-threat-a7883386.html>.

Case Study 3: China's "New Era" Speech

On October 18th, 2017 the 19th party congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) occurred in which Chinese leader Xi Jinping gave a now-famous speech outlining China's "New Era." This event was met with much critical review in East Asia. Specifically, there was concern over promises to continue "construction on islands and reefs in the South China Sea" and "that by the mid-21st century our people's armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces."¹¹ Statements such as these raised concerns over Chinese hegemony. As though to preemptively assuage such concerns, Xi Jinping assured that "China's development does not pose a threat to any other country. No matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion."¹²

The difficulty here lies in how to interpret the promise to never engage in "expansion" in light of the promise to continue to expand, militarily into the South China Sea.¹³ This latter promise creates concern in the region and leads to the perlocutionary affect that relations are further damaged between China and its neighbors. This is because, from the point of view of China's neighbors, Xi Jinping cannot keep both promises. He has thus committed himself to contradictory actions, which creates a level of distrust—which pollutes relationships. Therefore we can see the interplay between speech-action-relationship.

Case Study 4: Visits to Yasukuni Shrine

It is important to recognize that Speech Act Theory includes non-verbal communication.¹⁴ Thus it can be used to analyze the controversy surrounding visits by Japanese Prime Ministers, and other heads of state, to the Yasukuni Shrine honoring those who died in war—including 1068 convicted as war criminals by international war crimes tribunals in post WWII. When a Prime Minister pays respects at Yasukuni Shrine, how are we to interpret this locutionary act? What is his illocutionary intent? The primary illocutionary intent is often reported as simply paying respect to the dead, but other nations such as China and Korea insist that such visits also express "an effort to glorify the Japanese militaristic history of external invasion and colonial rule."¹⁵ I believe this shows that these nations are ascribing a secondary illocutionary intent to these actions, beyond the surface-level meaning. This is why, for instance, Shinzo Abe has responded by explicitly denying any deeper meaning, indicating he has "no intention to neglect the feelings of the people in China and South Korea."¹⁶ What is interesting for our purposes, is that this political interaction revolves

¹¹ Zheping Huang, "What China's 'New Era' Looks like, in Xi Jinping's Own Words." *Quartz*. Accessed February 5, 2018. <https://qz.com/1106365/chinas-19th-party-congress-speech-text-what-xi-jinping-said-on-climate-south-china-sea-taiwan-technology/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The two statements can only make sense together in light of the belief that these islands and reefs already belong to China, so they do not "count" as hegemony.

¹⁴ For instance, in response to the question "where's the bathroom," pointing ("that way") constitutes an assertative regarding its location. Of course different cultures have various impolite gestures to communicate expressives as well.

¹⁵ "Japanese Prime Minister Visits Yasukuni War Shrine - 毎日新聞," December 27, 2013. Accessed February 19th, 2018.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131227012900/http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20131226p2g00m0dm032000c.html>.

¹⁶ "Statement by Prime Minister Abe - Pledge for Everlasting Peace," Thursday, December 26, 2013. Accessed February 19, 2018. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201312/1202986_7801.html.

around the ascribing of intention and meaning to locutionary speech acts. Regardless of actual intent(s), the perlocutionary affect of these visits has often resulted in strained relations within the region. The path forward to resolution, from the Japanese point of view, might include more aggressive strategies to successfully communicate the supposedly limited intent of these visits, as well as to avoid communicating unintended secondary intent with its resultant undesired negative perlocutionary affects.

IV. Conclusion

Speech acts that occur between nations, understood as *actions*, have tangible effects upon the relationship network between those nations. Political actors, therefore, are encouraged to reflect upon the fact that their communication is much more than “just words” but also sends out powerful actions into the world that affect relationships with other countries, for better or worse. From the preceding case studies we can see an emerging theme that has application for relation-building between nations and thus result in positive regional integration. Namely, that clarity and precision on the illocutionary level of intention is absolutely crucial and that breakdown can easily occur on this level. Policymakers and politicians therefore must carefully employ their own speech acts as well as properly interpret others’ speech acts (i.e. ascribe the correct illocutionary intent to others). The more consciously we employ our own speech acts, more likely we are to achieve our desired results by making our illocutionary intents transfer into felicitous perlocutions.

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