

AUDIENCE, SPEECH ACT THEORY, AND COMPOSITION TEXTBOOKS
A REVIEW OF THE TREATMENT OF AUDIENCE IN COMPOSITION TEXTS

by

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The notion that the student writer should be able to identify an audience for his writing is a recent addition to some college composition textbooks. Some authors see this identification as an important beginning step in the writing process, and they devote several pages to the idea. Each author offers practical suggestions aimed at helping the student to understand that audience is an important factor in determining the tone, purpose and mode of discourse of a piece of writing. As a philosophy of language, Speech Act Theory includes the audience as a factor the writer must consider when writing a sentence. The premise of this report is that Speech Act Theory does offer a student an additional method of locating and writing to an audience.

To use a language, whether through speech or writing is to engage in a rule-governed form of behavior. This is the hypothesis that John R. Searle tests through his theory that "the production of a sentence token under certain conditions is a speech act, and speech acts are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication."¹ It is the rules or conditions that Searle is interested in identifying in order to explain how a speaker or writer can use language to communicate effectively. In order to do this, Searle identifies the three elements necessary in any communication as the speaker, hearer, and utterance, or for the purposes of this report in written communications as the writer, audience, and artifact. In order to consider the issue of audience as set out in several

current composition textbooks, it is necessary to summarize briefly Searle's establishment of the rules that govern speech acts. The discussion is adapted from Searle's work; the principles are his.

Searle's work is an expansion of philosopher J. L. Austin's ideas that are contained in the work How to do Things With Words. Austin, and Searle's publications opened a new vein of thought in the field of language philosophy. After Searle's Speech Acts was published in 1969, other linguists and philosophers saw the importance of the work and began their own studies expanding on Searle and Austin. Still Speech Act Theory is a relatively new area of inquiry that is being applied in many fields. There is a wealth of newly published material that deals with Speech Act Theory or pragmatics in the fields of philosophy, grammar, literary criticism and, most recently, composition.

The other element of this report, audience, has also been the subject of a great deal of publication, mostly due to the great new interest in the field of composition. But although there are some recent publications that consider Speech Act Theory and composition together, an ERIC search revealed that there is no available study relating this specific part of composition, audience to Speech Act Theory,--a relationship that this report attempts to provide which is what this report is concerned with.

Essential to this study is the understanding that there are rules or conditions necessary to perform speech acts, and a distinction must be made between regulative rules and constitutive rules. As their names suggest, regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, while constitutive rules constitute an activity, but an activity that can be newly created or defined by the con-

stitutive rules. Games offer the best example of constitutive rules, because the rules provide specifications for the game, without which the game would be impossible to play.²

Another distinction between regulative and constitutive rules is the form they usually take. Regulative rules are commonly imperatives: "Do X" or "If Y do X." Constitutive rules are not always imperative and can be expressed as "X counts as Y," or "X counts as Y in context C." For example: "If you shoot for the basket, arch the ball high" is a regulative rule. "If you hit the basket, it counts as a score in basketball." is a constitutive rule. This formula provides for specifications rather than appraisals.³ Language use then "is a matter of performing speech acts according to systems of constitutive rules."⁴ This conclusion can be drawn if one considers language behavior is conventional, and that speech acts are performed in accordance with the rules of language behavior, because the rules define the conventions.

When a speaker makes an utterance, or a writer writes a sentence, three acts can be distinguished. The locutionary act is the utterance. The second act, the illocutionary act is that made in the utterance. The third act is that made by the utterance. Examples here are helpful:

Locutionary act: Saying "I didn't murder my wife."
 Illocutionary act: Informing an audience that "I didn't murder my wife."
 Perlocutionary act: Convincing an audience that "I didn't murder my wife."

Another act is the propositional act or the performance of reference or predication. But propositional acts cannot be performed without the illocutionary act: "one cannot just express a