

# *Analysis on the Application of Austin's Speech Act Theory in the Fort-da Game*

**Zhaoying Chu**

*School of Philosophy and Religious, Minzu University of China, Beijing, China, 100081*  
*Annie.chu20182018@outlook.com*

**Abstract:** Fort-da game is a classic case of psychoanalytic doctrine, and its model has provided great inspiration for the study of psychiatric disorders such as masochism and hysteria. In this paper, whether the motive of the young boy's behavior is hidden behind the fort-da game would be analyzed by applying Austin's speech act theory from the perspective of linguistics and exploring the operation mode of other language games. In conclusion, fort-da could be a kind of speech act that reflects the little boy's intention.

**Keywords:** fort-da, speech act, Austin, Tirrell.

## **1. Introduction**

Austin's speech act theory is an important theory in the field of linguistics and has strong application and guidance. Most scholars have explored the intention behind language and the importance of Austin's speech act theory in dialogue by combining it with multiple disciplinary fields through the study of multiple language scenarios (e.g., line dialogue in television drama scenarios, political speeches, dialogue scenes in literature, etc.) [1]. However, few scholars have linked this theory to the discipline of psychoanalysis and explored the application of Austin's speech act theory to psychoanalytic cases. Based on that, this thesis is curious about the applicability of the famous fort-da game in psychoanalytic cases to speech act theory. Therefore, combined with the knowledge in the field of psychoanalysis, it tries to explore the value of speech act theory in cases in the field of psychoanalysis by starting from the analysis of three kinds of speech acts in fort-da. There may be implications for future research in the field of psychoanalysis or in the field of linguistics.

## **2. The Introduction of Fort-da Game**

The game of fort-da was first proposed by Freud to describe a pattern of behavior in children that deserves deeper investigation. At the same time, it is a well-known pattern in the field of psychoanalysis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes it in detail.

Freud described the self-invented language game of a one-and-a-half year old boy. First of all, the boy was a good boy -- he never cried even when his extremely attached mother left him for several hours. But he invented a slightly strange game in which he often threw his toys while screaming "o-o-o-o-o", which means "gone", and then he would go and find his toy again and excitedly scream "da" after he found it, which means "there". "This, then, was the complete game--disappearance and return." [2]

Here, Freud notes that the one-and-a-half-year-old boy was so well-behaved that he did not cry when his mother left, even though he loves her very much. The only strange thing is the fort-da game. Besides, both Freud and the boy's mother believed that the boy's "o-o-o-o-o" was not a meaningless shout, but represented the German word "fort" ["gone"]. He repeated the game of "fort" over and over again, and then ended with "da". Freud tried to find the cause of this behavior pattern, or the motivation for the boy to act in this way.

Interpretations of this behavioral pattern are diverse because of the complex psychological knowledge involved behind this behavioral pattern. For example, Lacan argues that the fort-da game is a dichotomy between presence and absence[3]. When children are confronted with their mother's absence, they need to replace her with a coil. In this alternative fort-da game, it is the alternation between mother's presence and absence that allows children to symbolize or signify her according to this alternation, thus developing a space for meaning interpretation.

### 3. Austin's Speech Act Theory

Austin's theory of speech acts relates language to human behavior and critiques the previous view that all language is purely descriptive[4]. The most famous of these is his trichotomy of speech acts: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act.

The locutionary act is the act of saying something with a certain sense and reference. It can be understood like a physical manifestation of an utterance. The illocutionary act is the act performed in saying something and it is often named and identified by the explicit performative verbs. To be brief, it can be understood as the speaker's intention. The perlocutionary act is the act performed by, or as a consequence of saying something, so we can regard it as the actual effect of speech act. For example, I say "The room is so dark!" when I enter a room with my friend. The locutionary act is to state the room's status which is dark. The illocutionary act is the intention to ask the friend to turn on the light. The perlocutionary act may be to let the friend to turn on the light successfully. The locutionary act is an act of saying something or saying something to accomplish something by the power of discourse, which is similar to the speaker's "what is intended", a question of what the speaker wants to say to be accepted by others. The perlocutionary act, on the other hand, is the result of the speech, the question of "what is intended" and then "what happens"[5].

### 4. Linguistic Analysis of Fort-da

One thing which needs to be clear is that in Freud's account, the little boy who likes to play fort-da knows the meaning of his words and the words are not unconsciously shouting. And given that he loves his mother, yet he could play the game without crying when she left, we have reasons to believe that there is some connection between the intentions or desires behind the fort-da and the little boy himself. So, it is hard to deny that Austin's speech act theory could be applied to the forte-da game.

#### 4.1. Three Kinds of Speech Acts and the Fort-da

##### 4.1.1. Locutionary Act

First of all, we know that fort-da has its own meaning. That is to say, the locutionary act of fort means gone, and da is found.

##### 4.1.2. Illocutionary Act

Second, in the fort-da game, the boy himself has a desire to be present with his mother. This desire is alienated through language into a demand, a demand for the mother's presence. The boy passively suffers from his mother's absence, but through the language game of fort-da, he acquires a kind of

autonomy (he is in charge of the process of disappearing and finding) and gets pleasure and satisfaction because of da. We can understand that the illocutionary act of fort is to cause the mother's departure; that of da is to find the mother.

#### 4.1.3. Perlocutionary Act

Finally, since the little boy is the only one in the whole process, his words have more of an effect on himself. The perlocutionary act of fort repeated several times may be to make the little boy drop his toy (representing the mother); the final da makes the little boy go and find his doll. And the whole process (fort-da) makes the little boy feel satisfied due to the acquisition of a kind of autonomy.

#### 4.2. The Intention Behind Fort-da

To analyze in more depth the illocutionary act and the intention of the little boy behind it, where we need to introduce some Lacanian theories. Lacan distinguishes between the concepts of "need", "demand", and "desire", where the need is for the object that provides satisfaction, and the demand is for the object of desire that the child is given from the mother in the alienation of language so that the object demanded is no longer the object that provides satisfaction. The object of desire is no longer the object of satisfaction, but the object of desire that has been lost. It is the intervention of the other in the linguistic process that gives the need the meaning of demand, and desire is born from the gap between need and demand. This is why the baby cries even after it has been fed because it demands that its mother is with it forever[6,7].

It can be said that the boy has a need for his mother's presence because he loves her, and when he speaks fort-da, language intervenes to transform the need into demand. This unfulfilled demand exceeds the need, and the gap between this demand and the need generates desire (for the mother's presence). This desire is absent due to the absence of the mother, and this absence is passive. The language fort in this sense is the illocutionary act, representing the absence of the boy's desire for his mother's presence, and his intention to change from passive to active, thus having the perlocutionary act -- the active throwing of the toy (the mother's departure). Da's illocutionary act, on the other hand, represents the boy's intention for the return of his mother, and the pleasure of getting a desired satisfaction by actively finding the toy.

### 5. Discussion: Other Language Game'S Application for Speech Act Theory

In the fort-da language game, the young boy as the speaker does not have an explicit listener; his fort-da has more effects on himself. He produces a series of actions through language that also affects his own mental state.

Lynne Tirrell has said in *Genocidal Language Games* that "Language games include speech acts of many kinds, and utterances that might look syntactically like the same bit of speech might constitute quite different speech acts depending on the games in which it occurs." In the book, he argues that language has a certain power, a power that can produce action. In the Rwandan genocide, derogatory terms and coded euphemisms were used to direct killers to their victims. This derogatory term has some power to influence the Hutus and indirectly contribute to the massacre. One of the key features of deeply derogatory term is action-engendering function[8].

For example, when a Hutu says to a Tutsi, "You're an inyenzi." First, the locutionary act is what inyenzi means, a cockroach. Second, the illocutionary act is that he will think that the Tutsi is not a person, but a cockroach. and pa, will have an effect on both the speaker and the listener. To the speaker, he will determine that Tutsis are not human beings and therefore lack respect and equality. To the listener, he will feel insulted and angry. The use of the word Inyenzi, acting together on both the speaker and the listener, and because it represents the speaker's intention to treat the listener with

contempt, may lead to conflict when the listener recognizes the speaker's intention. This is the case with pejorative words.

Besides, sometimes this language game can help solve common problems. An example of this is if a guy A likes girl B, but is afraid to confess his feelings because he is not sure about B. A can ask B, "Would you like to go out to dinner with me?" The locutionary act of this sentence is its own meaning, the boy asks the girl if she wants to go out to dinner with A. For the illocutionary act, the girl is asking the boy if she wants to go out to dinner with A. And for the perlocutionary act, it represents A's INTENTION - he wants to go out with B. In the sense of perlocutionary act, for the girl - that is, the listener, she may choose to say yes or no after understanding A's intention; perhaps she does not understand and leads to another situation. For the boy - the speaker - he will be nervous about whether the girl will respond or not because he has said the words. But with "Would you like to go out to dinner with me?" this language game, he can avoid an awkward situation where the girl does not like him and will alienate him later, whether she agrees or not. That is, if the girl will ask him if he wants to go out with her and make it clear that she doesn't like him, then he can say that he just wants to go out to dinner and can deny that he means to go out. Through this clever language game, the boy is likely to achieve his purpose, but also may not reach but does not put himself in an awkward situation.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis focuses on the application of Austin's speech act theory to the famous case of the fort-da game in psychoanalysis, and by extension, to the application of speech act theory in other language games. In summary, the speech act theory can be applied not only to one-person language games but also to explain two-person conversational situations and more language games. In both cases of fort-da and inyenzi, the important role of language is demonstrated. The intervention of language not only reflects the speaker's intention but also has an action-engaging function, which results in a certain action outcome. This paper only provides a superficial analysis of psychoanalytic cases from the perspective of linguistics, which is still insufficient for research in the field of psychoanalysis, and in the future will explore the behavioral mechanisms behind language after a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of psychiatric research.

## References

- [1] Zhao Dongmei, *Exploration of Austin's speech act*, Heilongjiang University, 2012.5.5
- [2] Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, Gregory Zilboorg, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, new york.london, W.W.NORTON & COMPANY 1961.
- [3] Jacques•Lacan, translated from Chu Xiaoquan, *Selected Works of Lacan*, East China Normal University Press, 2019.10
- [4] Austin, John L., *How to Do Things with Words*, Clarendon, Oxford 1962.
- [5] Doerge, Friedrich Christoph. *Illocutionary Acts - Austin's Account and What Searle Made Out of It*. . Tuebingen 2006.
- [6] Wu Qiong, *JACOUES LACAN Read Your Symptoms*, People's University of China Press (Beijing), 2010
- [7] Taihei Fukuhara translated from Wang Xiaofeng, Li Zhuofan, *Lacan Mirror Phase*, Hebei Education Publishing House, 2001.8.
- [8] Lynne Tirrell, *Genocidal Language Games*, In Ishani Maitra & Mary Kate McGowan (eds.), *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*. Oxford University Press. pp. 174--221 (2012)