

COMMANDING IS CREATING: A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF SELECTED AI PROMPTS

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of Speech Act Theory and artificial intelligence (AI) prompt generation, focusing on how user commands facilitate creative outputs in image production. As AI systems increasingly participate in content creation, understanding the dynamics of human-AI interaction becomes crucial. Through qualitative analysis of five AI prompts, the study investigates various speech acts, emphasizing directives as the primary form of user input. Each prompt is examined to identify its locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary aspects, highlighting how effectively the AI responds to user requests. Findings reveal that while many prompts achieve successful outcomes, discrepancies arise when the AI fails to adhere to specific user intentions, affecting the sincerity conditions of the speech acts. The study elucidates the importance of precise prompt formulation, with the direction of fit being a key determinant of success in generating desired outputs. By employing Speech Act Theory, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the communicative processes underlying AI interactions, offering valuable insights for creators and enhancing the effectiveness of AI-assisted content generation.

Keywords: commanding, creating, speech act theory, artificial intelligence (AI), prompt

Introduction

It is intriguing how a command given to a computer, or even a question posed to it, can yield astonishing results, outputs that resemble what only humans could create, yet are generated by machines. In recent times, the concepts of dexterity and creativity have become closely associated with electronic devices that accept, process, and output data as information. Consequently, the function of computer systems has evolved beyond mere data processing to include the generation of high-quality digital creations, such as images and videos. AI prompts serve as commands directed at computer systems with the expectation of receiving creative outputs. These prompts can take various forms such as questions, imperatives, or declarative statements and through them, the visuals, videos, and multimedia representations of the creator's imagination come to life. The evolution of artificial intelligence has significantly simplified graphic creation, allowing individuals to produce compelling designs without needing extensive training in graphic design. One can effortlessly create stunning graphics from the comfort of their home, using just a smartphone, although more sophisticated designs may still require specialized training.

This study aims to explore the mechanisms employed in creating images and videos using AI prompts through the lens of Speech Act Theory. The findings will be valuable for graphic design enthusiasts, professionals, and academics alike, as they will enhance understanding of the compelling forces behind the creations they produce and the interactions that occur in the background while they give commands and receive impressive results. Speech act theory posits that uttering a statement is akin to performing an action. For instance, when a pastor declares a couple as husband and wife, they become so through this pronouncement. However, this declaration holds true only if certain conditions are met: the pastor must have the authority to officiate the marriage, and both parties must meet the necessary requirements to be recognized as married.

Surenjav (2004), building on Austin's (1962) foundational work, explains that speech act theory focuses on acts such as making statements, requesting, apologizing, and thanking rather than merely on sentences or linguistic expressions. J.L. Austin introduced this concept in his posthumously published work, "How to Do Things with Words", which challenged the traditional view that sentences are strictly "true" or "false." He introduced performative utterances, words that effect change. Austin proposed three levels of speech acts: the locutionary act (the literal act of saying something), the illocutionary act (the real action performed in saying the words), and the perlocutionary act (the effect the utterance has on the listener).

John Searle, a student of Austin, further developed this framework in his seminal 1969 work on speech acts, categorizing illocutionary acts into five distinct types based on their intent: assertives (committing the speaker to the truth of a proposition), directives (attempting to get the listener to do something), commissives (committing the speaker to a future action), expressives (reflecting the speaker's psychological state), and declaratives (creating new states of affairs through the utterance).

In the realm of artificial intelligence, AI prompts serve as textual inputs that guide the generation of responses in natural language processing tasks. They function as instructions, questions, or topics influencing the model's output (Brown et al., 2020). Wu et al. (2019) note that AI prompts help shape the context and specificity of generated content, enabling users to achieve more relevant and targeted outputs. Furthermore, Amodei et al. (2018) emphasize that the interaction between AI prompts and systems is crucial for effective human-AI collaboration, enhancing both the efficiency and creativity of outputs.

AI prompts play significant roles in content creation. They assist creators in actualizing their visions by using targeted commands when interacting with AI tools. For example, a content creator wishing to generate a Christmas image of a family of four, a mother, a father, and two daughters, might send a neutral image of these individuals to the AI tool, specifying the desired setting. With these strategic prompts, the AI can create a Christmas image that aligns with the creator's vision. Thus, the effective use of prompts is essential for achieving desired outcomes in AI interactions.

AI prompts also play significant roles in customer support for the understanding of customer queries and appropriate responses; in education, for interactive tutoring; in data analysis, for analyzing datasets and generation of insights, summaries and visualisation; in marketing, for creating personalized marketing messages or advertising based on user data and preferences and in gaming, for non-player prompts which provide character behaviour and generate dialogues.

In summary, building the foundation on which this study stands, it highlights the effectiveness of strategic prompting in helping creators achieve the desired content through inputting texts into the computer system. It is pertinent also to mention that one's input determines the outcome produced by the AI, which in other words is termed "garbage in, garbage out". Again, the speech act theory is quite relevant for the analysis of AI prompts, as it explains the command system required in AI content creation, which exists between the user and the AI, with the prompts serving as a bridge (in between) the user and AI.

The research questions guiding the present study include: What are the various types of speech acts used in AI prompts; what perlocutionary effects do the prompts have on the AI; what are the direction of fits identifiable in AI prompts; what are the effectiveness of prompts formulations in achieving desired user responses; and what factors affect the AI's meeting of the sincerity conditions?

2. Literature Review

According to Fu et al., (2022), Artificial intelligence (AI) is a technology that enables computers and machines to stimulate human intelligence and problem-solving capabilities. The interaction between AI and language has been seen in AI technologies such as automated speech recognition, machine translation, and natural language processing, which have long been employed in various aspects of language learning and teaching (Fu et al., 2022). In language learning, AI is commonly utilized for automated feedback and assessment (Fu et al., 2022), supporting immediate responses to learner input while alleviating the workload of language teachers (Zhu & Wang, 2025). In addition, AI is also used for providing individualized learning contents and tutoring (Pokrivcakova, 2019) to address the needs and pace of individual students; this personalization extends to various language skills, such as speaking, reading, writing and listening (Huang et al., 2023).

Zhu and Wang (2025) highlight that scholars have explored the multifaceted benefits of AI in personalising language learning experiences, which include: offering real-time and rich feedback (Chen et al., 2021), reducing anxiety among second language (L2) learners (Wang et al., 2024), generating writing ideas (Woo et al., 2023), thus, indicating that AI can enhance language learning experiences both cognitively and affectively (Zhu and Wang, 2025). On the other hand, Zhu and Wang (2025) also reveal that users encounter challenges while adopting AI technologies in language learning and teaching, such as: reliability and accuracy issues (Grimes & Warschauer, 2010; Wang et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023); varied technology acceptance among teachers and students (An et al., 2023); Pokrivcakova, 2019) as well as social and ethical concerns (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Hockly, 2023).

Empirical Review

Language and Speech Acts

Widya (2017) did a pragmatic analysis of speech acts used by English lecturers in language teaching at YDB College of Teacher Training and Educational Sciences, Lubuk Alung, Indonesia, where the English utterances performed by the English lecturers were recorded and classified according to Searles classification of speech acts. The research findings showed that there were four types of speech acts performed by the English lecturers,

namely, the representative, directive, expressive, and the commissive, whereas the declaratives were not utilized by the English lecturers. The finishings also revealed that the most frequently used illocutionary acts were directives, while the least were the commissives.

Kwasau & Abdulrasheed (2025) also carried out a study on the pragmatic analysis of speech acts in 2023 Nigerian presidential campaign speeches of Tinubu and Obi. The study investigated how the two presidential opponents have used language as a tool to canvass for support. The data for the analysis were sourced from the recorded videos and documented campaign speeches by Television Continental (TVC), Channels Television and African Independent Television) AIT) on YouTube, where four speeches were randomly selected. The findings revealed that the dominant speech acts deployed in the campaign speeches of Tinubu and Obi were the commissive with 30.7% consisting of promising, pledging, committing, guaranteeing and assuring. The second dominant act was the representative, covering 30% of the total speech acts, mostly asserting, reporting, informing, accusing, blaming, and criticising. The rest of the distribution included expressive (20.7%), including thanking, condoling, blessing, well-wishing and apologizing, and the directive (16%) comprising of directing, pleading, requesting, advising and questioning. Also, the least employed speech acts were the declaratives, consisting of only 2.5% of the entire speech acts. The study concluded that political campaign speeches are rich in speech acts, serving as strategic tools for candidates to garner public support.

In a study titled "Digital Performativity: Speech Acts in AI-Human Interaction and the Problem of Felicity Conditions ", Roshna et al., (2025), examined how traditional speech acts theory applies to interactions between humans and artificial intelligence systems, using Austin's concept of felicity conditions and John Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts by analyzing whether AI systems can genuinely perform speech acts or merely stimulate them. They posed the following questions: "Can AI carry out speech acts?" "How do users interpret AI-generated utterances?" "What are the ethical implications of AI communication that lack traditional felicity conditions?" The findings of this study, however, took a middle position in response to whether AI can carry out speech acts as it found that AI can satisfy many useful components of speech act-it may observe traditional procedures, produce effects, and create institutional facts, but, however, cannot fulfill the sincerity and intentionality situations that Austin and Searle took into consideration as crucial for true speech acts.

In Holtel (2026), prompt engineering is positioned within the broader context of Discourse Analysis (DA) and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), highlighting the transformation of potential Speech Act Theory in the age of AI-driven dialogue systems. In this study, prompt crafting is reconceptualized, from being traditionally treated as a technical exercise involving precise command inputs, to being seen as a dialogical and intentional communicative practice that derives from human language. The study, drawing on the foundational work of Austin et al., argues that interactions with large language models can be framed as speech acts which are expressions shaped by intention, social function, and a turn-taking structure. The study identifies six recurring types of prompting that represent a reflection of natural conversational behaviour, providing a practical framework for designing meaningful and context-aware and goal-oriented exchange between human and machine. By bridging computational logic with human discourse convention. The study advocates for a shift from isolated directive one-shot prompts to a multi-turn purposeful dialogue to enhance interpretability, relevance and user agency in AI-mediated communication.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employs the Speech Act Theory. According to Mabaquiao (2018), the speech act theory is one of the rigorous attempts to systematically explain the workings of language. It is not only widely influential in the areas of language, but in the areas of linguistics and communication as well.

The speech act theory started with Austin's preliminary distinction between two kinds of utterances - Constantine and performative utterances, where Constantine utterances refer to linguistic expressions that are either true or false, often used to describe facts or state if affairs in the world, while performative refer to linguistic expressions that are used to perform certain actions-they are the kind of expressions wherein one performs certain actions while saying them. For instance, in saying "I advise you to seek permission from your parents ", the speaker in effect is performing the act if advising (Mabaquiao, 2018).

Austin identified three conditions under which performative could be said to be successful or unsuccessful. They are; the appropriateness of the persons involved in the performative and the circumstance in which the performative is uttered-if the person or circumstance are inappropriate, the performative is unsuccessful; hence, null and void; the insincerity of the person uttering a performative; and the failure to perform future action entailed by performatives (Mabaquiao, 2018).

Austin's (1989) "How to Do Things with Words", highlights 5 basic types of performative, which are commissives, expositives, exercitives, behavibites, and verdictives, while Searle on the other hand, came up with his own five basic types of speech acts. In the lead article of his book "Expression and Meaning", Searle identified the following basic distinctions of speech acts that constantly account for their differences: Illocutionary point, direction of fit, and sincerity conditions (Mabaquiao, 2018).

The illocutionary point of an illocutionary act or a speech act refers to the basic point or purpose of the speaker in performing an illocutionary act of a certain kind. For instance, in making a promise, a speaker may have many reasons or intentions; but in so far as she is making a promise, and not, say, making an assertion or expressing hope, her basic point or purpose is to commit herself to an obligation to do something for the receiver of her promise. Direction of fit refers to the direction of the match between the word (speech act) and the world (states of affairs) in determining the success of illocutionary acts. It has three varieties- word-to-world direction of fit (where a speech act is being matched with a state of affairs, that is, reflects reality, for example, saying "The sky is blue"); world-to-word direction of fit (where a speech act is made to change a situation, for example, "When a priest pronounces a man and a woman husband and wife); and null direction of fit (where there is no match intended between a speech act and a state of affairs). The condition of sincerity, on the other hand, refers to the appropriate mental state that goes with the performance of an illocutionary act. For instance, in making a statement, say by uttering "Philippine politics is dirty," one should believe in the truth of what the statement asserts or states. Otherwise, the speaker is not really making a statement; perhaps he is just making a joke, simply making an utterance act, or he is telling a lie. In this case, he is not performing the act of making a promise but the act of deceiving someone (Mabaquiao, 2018).

Consequently, based on the principles of illocutionary point, direction of fit, and sincerity condition, Searle identified the following basic types of speech acts. They are assertives, which include statements, descriptions, classifications, and explanations. The illocutionary point of assertives is to commit the hearer to the truth of the proposition, the direction of fit: is word-to-world, the conditions of satisfaction are either true or false, and the sincerity condition is belief ("An assertive is always an expression of a belief") (Searle, 1999); the directives, which include orders, commands, and requests. The illocutionary point is to try to get the hearer to behave in such a way as to make his behaviour match the propositional content of the directive (Searle, 1999). Direction of Fit: world-to-word. Conditions of satisfaction: can be obeyed, disobeyed, complied with, granted, and so on. Sincerity condition: Desire (Every directive is an expression of a desire that the hearer should do the directed act) (Searle, 1999). Commissives; examples: promises, vows, pledges, contracts, and guarantees. The illocutionary point is for the speaker to commit "to undertake the course of action represented in the propositional content" (Searle, 1999). Direction of Fit: world-to-word. Conditions of Satisfaction: can be carried out, kept, or broken. Sincerity Condition: Intention (Every commissive is "an expression of an intention to do something" (Searle, 1999). Expressives: Some examples are: apologies, thanks, congratulations, welcomes, and condolences. Illocutionary point: "To express the sincerity condition of the speech act" (Searle 1999). Direction of Fit: null (for expressives assume the truth of their propositional content). Conditions of Satisfaction: none. Sincerity Condition: varies with the type of expressive (example, in making an apology, the speaker should feel sorry about what he is apologizing for; in congratulating someone, the speaker should feel glad about what he is congratulating the hearer for) (Searle, 1999), and lastly, 5) Declaratives. Examples: "I pronounce you man and wife," "War is hereby declared," "You are fired," and "I resign." Illocutionary Point: To bring about change in the world by representing it as having been changed" (Searle 1999). Direction of Fit: double: word-to-world and world-to-word (By changing the world, the direction of fit is world-to-word; by representing it as having been changed, the direction of fit is word-to-world.) Conditions of Satisfaction: varies (Searle does not specifically discuss the conditions of satisfaction of declaratives; but following Austin, we can say that declaratives are either happy or unhappy.) Sincerity Condition: varies (Some directives have both belief and desire as their sincerity condition (Fotion, 2000).

3. Research Methodology

This study employs the qualitative research method to analyze 5 randomly selected AI prompts from content creators' archives (generated using nano banana 2 AI tool), which aided the content creation of images, using the Speech Act Theory. First, The locutionary, illocutionary and the perlocutionary acts are respectively analyzed, where the locutionary act of each prompt, presents the exact text the user inputs into the computer system; the illocutionary act shows the meaning intended by the user, that is the actual imagery the user aims to achieve with the text input; while the perlocutionary act, on the other hand, reveals the response presented by the AI in reaction to the command received from the user. Next, these illocutionary acts are further analyzed by categorizing them according to Searle's Speech Act classification.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

The following are five randomly selected AI prompts collated from content creator archives within the past six months, together with the descriptions of the obtained results (perlocutionary acts). The prompts are presented with labels "AI Prompts 1 to 5", and analyzed after each presentation. In the analysis, first, the locutionary act which is the prompt is presented, followed by the illocutionary act (which is the picture the creator intends to produce using the prompt, next are the direction of fit and the sincerity conditions.

AI Prompt 1

"Generate a picture of a young mother with a 6-month old baby on her back, tied firmly with a neat and yellow-coloured wrapper. She runs, juggling the poor child up and down, while scrambling difficulty to jump into a slowly moving vehicle, a mini-bus painted yellow. She falls on her knees halfway onto the bus. People come to rescue her and her baby up, helping her clean up the dust, while scrutinizing her baby to be sure she's fine. The mother, her baby and the helpers are African black skinned people."

Analysis of AI Prompt 1

The prompt is a directive speech act, issuing a command to the AI to perform the locutionary act of creating an image that depicts a specific scene.

The illocutionary Act: The prompt is intended to create a visual representation that conveys a narrative, involving a young mother, her baby, and bystanders in a dynamic situation.

Perlocutionary Act: The AI successfully produced an image that accurately reflects the scene described. This is shown below:



Direction of Fit: The prompt exhibits a world-to-word direction of fit as the speaker wants the AI to create a visual that matches a specific imagined reality.

Sincerity conditions: The sincerity conditions of the prompt can be understood as follows: The prompt assumes that the AI can understand and generate images based on complex scenarios. It also assumes that the AI can interpret and respond to the emotional and cultural aspects of the scene accurately. On this note, the illocutionary act of the prompt is deemed successful as AI accurately presented all the details embedded in the prompt, ranging from the understanding of the command to its adherence to specifications, accurate representation of the African race, and the emotional and physical realities.

AI Prompt 2

"Make a beautiful video of a woman dancing happily with her new born baby girl on the naming ceremony of her baby, with family and friends watching and clapping happily in joyful thanksgiving. The environment is subtle, blissful and exotic, with the presence of local Igbo Nigerian setting in urban Lagos."

Analysis of Prompt 2

Locutionary Act: The literal meaning of the prompt is a directive to the AI to create a video depicting a specific scene: a woman dancing with her newborn baby girl during a naming ceremony.

Illocutionary Act: The intention is to evoke a joyful, celebratory atmosphere, capturing cultural significance and family bonding that comes with the naming of a new born child.

Perlocutionary Act: The expected effect is for AI to generate to generate a video of a woman dancing with her newborn baby girl with audience cheering her and in a local Igbo setting. Here is the video screenshot:



Direction of Fit: The prompt exhibits a world-to-words direction of fit, where the speaker desires the AI to generate a video that accurately reflects the envisioned scenario, bringing the described world into existence.

Sincerity Conditions: The sincerity conditions of the speech act is successful as the AI understood the request; it recognized that it is being asked to create a video, not just an image or text, it adhered to the scene description, which include a woman dancing happily with her newborn baby girl, with family and friends clapping and engaging joyfully, a subtle and exotic environment reflecting an Igbo Nigerian setting in urban Lagos. The video also successfully conveyed the emotions of happiness and thanksgiving, capturing the cultural significance of the naming ceremony.

Prompt 3

Create an image of a black American grandpa advising his 10 year old grandson. The grandpa draws his left ear, while the grandson listens with serious and weird looks crossing his legs. the grandson is white American.

Analysis of Prompts 3

Locutionary Act: The prompt above is a directive to the AI to generate an image of a grandpa advising his grandson, possibly conveying words of wisdom physically demonstrated by the drawing of his ear.

Illocutionary Act: The user intends to use the prompt to make AI produce an image that depicts two generations - the older and the much younger generation, where the older generation passes words of wisdom to the younger, with the younger generation yielding. The prompt also depicts two races- the white and the black race.

Perlocutionary Act: The AI produces an image close to the user's imagination, although not exact- the prompt mentioned the grandpa's drawing of the left ear, whereas the AI produces an image of his drawing the right ear. This is shown below:



Direction of Fit- There is a failure to achieve the direction of fit as the perlocutionary effect shows the AI generating the grandpa drawing the right ear, instead of the left ear, which is not in alignment with the intended speech act. In other words, the direction of fit is compromised due to the deviation from the specific command.

Sincerity Conditions: The AI fails to meet the user's request accurately as it presents an image of the grandpa drawing one right ear instead of the left ear. Hence, the sincerity condition of the speech act is not met, making the speech act insincere.

Prompt 4

"Make a photo of a young banking professional lady in her early 20's working in a bank. She sits confidently in the chair responding to customers' needs. Let her be seen handing a sum of 100, 000 naira to a customer who first handed her a signed cheque. Other customers queue behind the mid age man. Dress the lady in beautiful indigo coloured pant suit, in a beautiful makeup, red painted lips, bone straight hair digital wrist watch. She is sitting behind the counter. She is light skinned and African race."

Analysis of Prompt 4

Locutionary Act: The prompt depicts a young African banking professional in her early 20's sitting confidently behind the counter. She is dressed in an indigo pant suit; has beautiful makeup, bone-straight and a digital wristwatch. She is handing a sum of 100, 000 naira to a mid-age male customer who has presented a signed cheque. Other customers are queuing behind him.

Illocutionary Act: The illocutionary act reflects the intended meaning behind the prompt:

The description suggests a scenario demonstrating professionalism and customer service within a banking environment. It conveys the idea of empowerment, competence, and the importance of financial transactions in a professional setting. The imagery aims to portray a positive representation of young African women in business.

Perlocutionary Act: The AI accurately produces the image requested by the user. The image is shown below:



Direction of Fit: The prompt shows world-to-word direction of fit, as the generated image fits into the desired word(s) of the user. The image outcome of AI presented the image of a young African banking professional in her early 20's sitting confidently behind the counter, et cetera.

Sincerity Conditions: The AI generated image satisfied the prompt command, hence meeting the conditions for the sincerity of the speech act.

Prompt 5

Generate the image of school children playing football. They are looking exhausted but happy. It is modern urban Nigerian setting.

Analysis of Prompt 5

Locutionary Act: The user requests the generation of an image depicting school children playing football in a modern urban Nigerian setting.

Illocutionary Act: The user intends to achieve an imagery of school children playing football, although exhausted, happy. The user's intended setting is modern urban Nigerian setting.

Perlocutionary Act: When the user requests an image of school children playing football, the AI interprets this as a desire to evoke specific emotions (happiness despite exhaustion) and capture a cultural setting (modern urban Nigeria), and by generating an image that aligns with the user's request, the AI fulfills the user's expectations. The image is shown below:



Direction of Fit: The request to generate an image of school children playing football involves a world-to-words direction of fit. The user desires the AI to create an image that reflects their vision, transforming an abstract idea into a concrete visual representation.

Sincerity Conditions: The AI successfully created an image that captures the essence of the prompt. Therefore, the sincerity conditions of the speech act are met.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of AI prompts through the lens of Speech Act Theory reveals significant insights regarding their effectiveness and the underlying mechanics of human-AI interaction. Each prompt acts as a vehicle for user intent, establishing a framework for AI-generated outputs.

The analysis identified directives as the predominant speech act, wherein users command the AI to generate specific images or videos. The success of these directives hinges on how well the AI interprets and executes the command, aligning with the illocutionary intent of the user.

In addition, the outcomes of the prompts demonstrate a range of effectiveness. Successful examples, such as AI Prompt 1, 2, 4 and Prompt 5, illustrate the AI's ability to generate outputs that resonate with the user's vision, capturing intended emotions and cultural contexts. However, Prompt 3 highlights a failure in meeting the user's specifications, which indicates the critical nature of precision in prompt formulation.

Again, most prompts exhibit a world-to-word direction of fit, where the AI's output successfully matches the user's request. Instances of misalignment, as seen in Prompt 3, underscore the importance of explicit detail in prompts to ensure that the generated content accurately reflects the intended scene.

On the other hand, the analysis reveals that the effectiveness of the prompts largely relies on the AI's ability to meet the sincerity conditions set forth by the user. For instance, in Prompt 1, 2, 4 and Prompt 5, the AI satisfied the conditions, generating content that aligned closely with the user's intent. Conversely, in Prompt 3, the failure to adhere to specific details led to a breakdown in sincerity, impacting the overall effectiveness of the interaction.

Finally, factors such as the complexity of prompts, cultural context, and specificity significantly affect the AI's ability to meet the conditions for successful speech acts. The findings suggest that more nuanced prompts can lead to richer and more contextually appropriate outputs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of AI prompts through Speech Act Theory provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics between user intentions and AI capabilities. It highlights the necessity for careful prompt construction and the implications of effective communication in enhancing human-AI collaboration. By recognizing the interplay of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, users can optimize their interactions with AI systems, fostering better creative outcomes.

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