Speech act theory:

A theory of language based on J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (second edition, 1975), the major premise of which is that language is as much, if not more, a mode of action as it is a means of conveying information. As John Searle puts it, "All linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word, or sentence, or even the token of the symbol, word, or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of a speech act." Meaning, then, should be regarded as a species within the genus intending-to-communicate, since language itself is highly complex, rule-governed intentional behavior. A theory of language is part of a theory of action. The basic emphasis of speech act theory is on what an utterer (U) means by his utterance (x) rather than what x means in a language (L). As H.P. Grice notes, "meaning is a kind of intending," and the hearer's or reader's recognition that the speaker or writer means something by x is part of the meaning of x. In contrast to the assumptions of structuralism (a theory that privileges langue, the system, over parole, the speech act), speech act theory holds that the investigation of structure always presupposes something about meanings, language use, and extralinguistic functions.

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin commences by enunciating a reasonably clear-cut distinction between constative and performative utterances. According to him, an utterance is constative if it describes or reports some state of affairs such that one could say its correspondence with the facts is either true or false. Performatives, on the other hand, "do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true' or 'false.' . . . The uttering of the sentence is, or is part of the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something." Marrying, betting, bequeathing, umpiring, passing sentence, christening, knightng, blessing, firing, baptizing, bidding, and so forth involve performatives. The attitude of the person performing the linguistic act -- his thoughts, feelings, or intentions -- is of paramount importance. Whereas the constative utterance is true or false, the performative utterance is felicitous or infelicitous, sincere or insincere, authentic or inauthentic, well invoked or misinvoked. An "I do" at a marriage ceremony is insincere and misinvoked if the utterer is already married and has no intention of abiding by the conditions of the contract.

Austin divides the linguistic act into three components. First, there is the locutionary act, "the act of 'saying' something." Second, there is the illocutionary act, "the performance of an act in saying something as opposed to the performance of an act of saying something." Third, there is the perlocutionary act, for "saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, of the speaker, or of other persons." In other words, a locutionary act has meaning; it produces an understandable utterance. An illocutionary act has force; it is informed with a certain tone, attitude, feeling, motive, or intention. A perlocutionary act has consequence; it has an effect upon the addressee. By describing an imminently dangerous situation (locutionary component) in a tone that is designed to have the force of a warning (illocutionary component), the addressee may actually frighten the addressee into moving (perlocutionary component). These three components, then,
are not altogether separable, for as Austin points out, "we must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued -- the total speech act -- if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances, and how each can go wrong. Perhaps indeed there is no great distinction between statements and performative utterances." In contradistinction to structuralism, then, speech act theory privileges parole over langue, arguing that external context -- the context of situation -- is more important in the order of explanation than internal context -- the interrelationships among terms within the system of signs. (See also Linguistics and literary theory.)