



This work is licensed
under a Creative
Commons Attribution
4.0 International
License.

What AI does: A pragmatic analysis of a writing assignment

Tosh Tachino

Aoyama Gakuin University

toshtachino@gmail.com

This article examines the impact of AI on the speech act of a writing assignment. The pragmatic analysis reveals that AI does not have to affect the speech act, but it exacerbates the inherent tension that always existed within the genre of a writing assignment. This analysis suggests that we need to discuss the role of AI not in isolation but in context.

Keywords: speech act, AI, writing assignment, pragmatics

Introduction

The current AI revolution has spawned a heated public debate over the impact of AI in many areas (e.g., Rudolph, et al. 2023), and for language teachers, one of the most immediate concerns is its impact on writing assignments. The empirical data on the state of this disruption are still emerging, and it is not clear whether student behaviors on writing assignments actually changed significantly (Lee et al., 2024; Prothero, 2024). Nevertheless, language teachers are deeply concerned that AI tools are increasingly making it easier for students to feign performance and more difficult for teachers to detect it (Steponenaite & Barakat, 2023), and there is a range of opinions on what should be done (e.g., Marzuki et al., 2023). While we need a continued discussion on how to approach AI tools in language teaching, tools need to be understood in context. This article seeks to contribute to this ongoing conversation by offering some insights from a pragmatic perspective through Austin's speech act theory (Austin, 1975).

Speech act theory

The central tenet of Austin's (1975) speech act theory is that speech is not about making a truth claim with its propositional content but about performing a pragmatic action through the act of speaking. To say "It's hot in here" in a particular situation is not so much about describing the temperature of a particular location than about asking the listener to open the window. To explain how this speech act is performed, Austin proposes the following three terms:

- ▶ Locutionary act: The physical utterance of a speech
- ▶ Illocutionary act: The act performed by the locutionary act
- ▶ Perlocutionary act: The effect of the illocutionary act

The speaker, feeling uncomfortable with the temperature in the room, utters the words, “It’s hot in here.” These words constitute a locutionary act. There are many possible reasons for uttering these words, but in this particular example, the speaker intends the locutionary act to be taken as a request to relieve the situation. This is the speaker’s illocutionary intent; therefore, a request is the illocutionary act. The listener now needs to infer the speaker’s illocutionary intent from the locutionary act, and the listener’s interpretation becomes illocutionary uptake. If all goes well, the illocutionary intent and uptake match, and the listener takes up the speaker’s illocutionary act to open the window, the desired perlocutionary act in this case.

There are conditions in order for a speech act to succeed, known as “felicity conditions,” and these circumstances must be in place for a locutionary act to perform an illocutionary act. In our example, there must be a listener who is physically capable of opening the window, the window must not be barred from outside, and so on.

It is also important to recognize that the outcome of a speech act is a perlocutionary act, so the locutionary act is essentially a tool for obtaining that outcome. The tool can be highly artistic and ornate (“If I profane with my unworthiest hand/This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:/My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand/To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.”) or simple and crude (“Me Tarzan, you Jane.”) It does not even need to be linguistic (♡), even though not all tools are locutionary acts. In our example with a stifling room, the speaker could use a remote control to open the window instead of saying “It’s hot in here” to achieve the same end.

Locutionary act by AI

Since the locutionary act is a tool, the use of AI to generate it is not inherently a problem, and it does not need to affect the other elements of the speech act. The same illocutionary intent may still belong to the speaker to be accurately taken up by the listener, who goes on to perform the same desired perlocutionary act. This delegation of locutionary act is not a new phenomenon as we always had interpreters, lawyers, ambassadors, and other agents to articulate our illocutionary intents. These agents can often perform better speech acts than we can, and AI could also do the same in certain circumstances, such as the one described in the following prompt given to ChatGPT 4o.

I am in a meeting with my boss at work. The room is hot, and the window is closed. I wish the boss, who is sitting by the window, would open the window. Ordinarily, I would say, “It’s hot in here.” But my boss is an older Japanese man from the Showa period with very traditional values, and I don’t know what the most tactful way to say it.

ChatGPT’s output came as follows:

In this situation, where you want to be tactful and respectful given your boss’s



JALTCALL

Trends

Vol. 1
2024 JALTCALL
Conference Papers
Special Issue

background, you might consider a more indirect approach. You could say something like:

「すみません、少し暑く感じるのですが、窓を少し開けてもよろしいでしょうか？」

This translates to, “Excuse me, I feel a bit warm; would it be alright if we opened the window a little?”

This phrasing is polite, acknowledges your discomfort indirectly, and places the decision in your boss’s hands, showing respect for his position and preferences.

Although ChatGPT’s locutionary act does not faithfully follow the original illocutionary intent, its Japanese sentence is linguistically, culturally, and pragmatically competent. It may well be better than anything that the speaker could articulate without knowing Japanese, as long as s/he is willing to open the window himself/herself.

Speech act of a writing assignment

If delegating a locutionary act to AI is not a problem per se, then, why is it a problem when students delegate their “My Summer Vacation” essays to AI? After all, English is not their first language, and they may not have the ability to describe the sublime beauty of the disappearing fireworks in the night sky.

In fact, using AI to help them articulate the same experience may not be a problem under a different context. If the illocutionary act in question were to build personal relationships, then, delegating the locutionary act to AI might not be problematic. If understood this way (illocutionary uptake), then readers might respond by reciprocating their stories of their summer vacations (perlocutionary acts), with or without the help of AI.

Table 1. The speech act of building relationships

locutionary act:	“My Summer Vacation”
illocutionary act:	an invitation to build personal relationships
perlocutionary act:	a reciprocating story

However, the illocutionary act of a writing assignment is usually not an invitation to build personal relationships. Both the instructor and students readily recognize its primary function as a practice to improve their language skills. This is why the instructor’s perlocutionary act is seldom a reciprocating story but corrective feedback. This is why delegating the locutionary act to AI is problematic: the whole point of the practice is for students to produce locutionary acts of their own. AI-generated locutionary acts do not meet the felicity condition of this illocutionary act.

Table 2. The speech act of practicing language

locutionary act:	“My Summer Vacation”
illocutionary act:	Practice
perlocutionary act:	corrective feedback (including the grade)

If this description of a writing assignment were obvious, then no student would be delegating their locutionary acts to AI. After all, these opportunities for practice exist for their benefit, and they are the ones who would be losing out by undermining their own illocutionary intents to practice and learn.

But the speech act of a writing assignment is complex. White (2001) traced the origin and evolution of modern writing assessment to a political battle between English teachers and administrators in the California State University system in the 1970s. The result is that the genre of a writing assignment is a site of contention between these two parties, and the illocutionary intent of a writing prompt contains both (1) helping students learn and (2) ranking them (Dias et al., 2013).

Table 3. The speech act of a writing prompt

locutionary act:	“Write a short essay about your summer vacation.”
illocutionary act:	teaching and testing
illocutionary intent:	(1) helping students learn; (2) sorting students by their abilities
perlocutionary act:	“My Summer Vacation”

The question of how the students will write their essays (including whether or not they will use AI) partly depends on how they interpret this ambiguous illocutionary intent. If they perceive it purely as an opportunity to learn or to showcase their abilities, there is a match between the illocutionary intent and uptake of the prompt. The students would then carry over that uptake as their illocutionary intent, and their essays would perform illocutionary acts that are consistent with the intent of the writing prompt. In this case, students are not likely to delegate their locutionary acts to AI since doing so would impede their ability to perform their illocutionary acts.

If, on the other hand, they perceive this assignment as meaningless busywork, then there is a mismatch between the illocutionary intent and uptake. This mismatch will affect the illocutionary intent of “My Summer Vacation” to become something like “to produce a passable work with as little effort as possible.” More hostile students may perceive this assignment as a tool of oppression by the hegemonic forces, and such illocutionary uptake may turn “My Summer Vacation” into an act of resistance. In these and other similar cases, students may still perform their illocutionary acts without using AI, but the use of AI is now compatible with their illocutionary intent, and AI may facilitate their performance in enacting their illocutionary acts, which are now different from the intent of the writing prompt.

Conclusion

The above pragmatic analysis leads to an argument that the problem of an undermined writing assignment is not fundamentally an AI problem. Rather the problem arises from the inherent tension in the social motives of a school writing assignment, as well as a mismatch between the illocutionary intent and the illocutionary uptake. For this reason, focusing solely on controlling AI use is akin to addressing a symptom without confronting the underlying cause. Furthermore, putting a blanket ban on AI tools would foreclose many opportunities for enacting illocutionary acts that serve the interests of all – students, teachers, and perhaps even administrators. A more productive and profitable approach may be to focus on finding common grounds and agreeing on the speech act of a writing assignment and the roles that AI might play. For this to happen, we need to continue open conversations on this issue.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Dias, P., Freedman, A., Medway, P., & Paré, A. (2013). *Worlds apart: Acting and writing in academic and workplace contexts*. Routledge.
- Lee, V. R., Pope, D., Miles, S., & Zárata, R. C. (2024). Cheating in the age of generative AI: A high school survey study of cheating behaviors before and after the release of ChatGPT. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 7, 100253. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666920X24000560>
- Marwala, T. (2024, July 9). How will AI change Africa? [Webinar] JICA Ogata Research Institute/United Nations University Knowledge Forum.
- Marzuki, Widiati, U., Rusdin, D., Darwin, & Indrawati, I. (2023). The impact of AI writing tools on the content and organization of students' writing: EFL teachers' perspective. *Cogent Education*, 10(2), 223646. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2236469>
- Prothero, A. (2024, April 25). New data reveal how many students are using AI to cheat. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/technology/new-data-reveal-how-many-students-are-using-ai-to-cheat/2024/04v>
- Rudolph, J., Tan, S., & Tan, S. (2023). War of the chatbots: Bard, Bing Chat, ChatGPT, Ernie and beyond. The new AI gold rush and its impact on higher education. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, 6(1), 364–389. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.1.23>
- Steponenaite, A., & Barakat, B. (2023). *Plagiarism in AI empowered world*. In *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 434–442). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://kar.kent.ac.uk/101173/1/Conference_paper_template_AI_manuscript_edit2.pdf
- White, E. M. (2001). The opening of the modern era of writing assessment: A narrative. *College English*, 63(3), 306. <https://doi.org/10.2307/378995>

Author biodata

Tosh Tachino is a university lecturer at Aoyama Gakuin University. His previous work appeared in *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, *Text & Talk*, *Written Communication*, and in an anthology *Genre and the performance of publics* (Utah State University Press) among others.



JALTCALL

Trends

Vol. 1

2024 JALTCALL
Conference Papers
Special Issue