



Perspectives on Speech Acts

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Abstract

Language is a tool for communication among humans. A study of speech act is essentially immersed in language use and interpretation. Participants of discourse convey their feelings, ideas and messages by skillfully using language according to contexts and situations. In this regard, speech acts are used to inform, persuade, describe and perform other intentional acts. This paper examines speech acts in terms of critical perspectives in the literature. After the pioneering work of Austin (cf. 1962), the study of “speech acts as actions” became popularized. This development informed classical and contemporary insights in the literature, resulting in speech act theories and taxonomies such as those of Searle (1969), Grice (1975), Bach and Harnish (1979), Adgbija (1982), Mey (2001), among others. This study concludes that speech acts are rule-governed, context-driven, universal and establish the link between pragmatics and semantics.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech acts, language, communication, illocutionary act, perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is a field of language study, with “speech act” as its core theoretical concept. Pragmatics is concerned with the analysis of the use and interpretation of verbal and nonverbal communication. In this study, we present and examine critical perspectives on speech act. In the literature, perspectives on speech act are not exhaustive. Interestingly, such perspectives do not have equal significance for contemporary research. This study examines very significant perspectives on speech. The perspectives are listed, and they revolve around the intrinsic properties of speech acts, their categorization and functions.

2. Literature Review

This section of the paper briefly examines basic concepts: language, pragmatics and speech act.

2.1 Language

The Latin expression “lingua” (which means “tongue”) is linked to the origin of language. The languages of the world have language-specific words, sounds and syntax. Language is a conventional tool for communication through the use of speech sounds. Bloomfield (1933) conceptualizes language in relation to sounds and their meanings. The features of language are discrete: it is a system; it involves the use of symbols; it is arbitrary; it is a vocal phenomenon; it is dynamic; it is a vehicle of culture; it is a social phenomenon; it is living; and it is a symbol of individual and collective identity. Via language, ideas, feelings and emotions are communicated using the human organs of speech. Language is often viewed as a social phenomenon because of its interpersonal and integrative function. The universal properties of language spur research on different levels of language: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, etc. Each of these fields has its research focus:

- i. Phonetics: It is the study of speech sounds in language;
- ii. Phonology: It studies sounds as a system in language (i.e. rule-governed structural patterns of sounds);
- iii. Morphology: It studies word structure;

- iv. Syntax: This is the study of sentence structure;
 - v. Semantics: It is the study of meaning in language; and
 - vi. Pragmatics: This is the study of language-use according to contexts.
- See Dada (2010) for additional tips on language as a sociolinguistic concept.

2.2 Pragmatics

The *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994) defines pragmatics as “the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes.” According to Crystal and Varley (1993), “pragmatics is the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involves using language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes.” Austin (ibid.) submits that crucial concepts in pragmatics include:

- participants (users of language in context);
- speech acts (**locutionary act** which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; **illocutionary act** which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and **perlocutionary act** which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);
- context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);
- non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic communication);
- inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);
- presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication);
- and
- shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

For more insights on pragmatics, see Levinson (1983), Adegbija (1982), Adegbija (1999), Mey (2001), Grice (1975) and Searle (1969).

Pragmatics is traceable to the Greek word “pragma” (deed/action). Charles Morris (1938) is famous as far as contemporary use of the term “pragmatics” is concerned. Pragmatics emerged as a reaction against formalist approach to language study. Formalism ignores man’s creative potentials in the use of language; emphasis was on “linguistic competence” rather than “communicative competence”.

2.3. Speech Acts

Speech act evolves from the discovery of early scholars of pragmatics. They note that the minimal unit of human communication is not the sentence, but the acts performed in using the sentence: asserting, informing, describing, persuading, acknowledging, etc. During that era, classical pragmatic theories flourished.

3. Perspectives on Speech Acts

In this section of the paper, we present perspectives which ascribe discrete features to speech act.

3.1 The performance of speech acts is rule-governed.

The normative properties of language, illocutionary goals of participants of discourse and pragmatic constraints, are some of the basic reasons why speech acts are performed as a rule-governed communicative behaviour. According to David A. Brenders (1987, p. 331) “speech act theory, as a part of the philosophy of language, has been concerned with analyzing the performance of linguistic acts (asserting, promising, questioning) as a rule-governed form of behavior ...”

3.2 Speech acts can be performed with non-verbal communication.

The term “speech” implies language use. However, speech acts can be performed through the use of non-performative formula; that is, without using words. Austin (ibid.) notes this point. Corroborating Austin (ibid.), Leech (1983, p. 226) asks a crucial question: “Must the verb ‘persuade’ denote a linguistic act or non-verbal act such as ‘brandishing a hatchet’?” When a non-performative formula is used in performing an illocutionary act, there can be effects on the receiver (perlocutionary act) as noted by Searle (cited in Jozsef Andor 2011, p. 124) who states that “illocutionary acts are always, in my sense, speech acts, even if they are not performed in language but are performed by raising your arm or by winking, or by making some other gestures. But perlocutionary acts cannot be performed as speech acts. They are not essentially speech acts at all. A perlocutionary act has to do with the effect on the hearer.” Such perlocutionary acts (sequels) are not incidental; they are products of intentionally deployed non-verbal communication. Austin (ibid., p. 119) is also instructive in this regard:

Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons; and it may be done with the design, intention or purpose of producing them ... we shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of perlocutionary act or perlocution ... It is characteristic of perlocutionary acts that the response achieved or the sequel can be achieved by additional or entirely by non-locutionary means: thus, intimidation may be achieved by waving a stick or pointing a gun.

3.3 Speech acts can convey extra-sentential meanings.

Meaning transcends the physical properties of expressions. Through the use of speech acts, the meanings conveyed in expressions used in communicative events are not exhaustive. Besides, such meanings can be extra-textual as a result of speaker-meaning. Commenting on the divergence between speaker-meaning and sentence meaning, Savas L. Tsohatzidis (1994, p. 2) posits:

Knowing what illocutionary act a speaker has performed in uttering a sentence of his language is essential for knowing what he meant in uttering that sentence; it is well known, however, that what speakers of a natural language mean by uttering sentences of that language is not always the same as what those sentences themselves mean; given, then, that speaker meanings and sentence meanings can diverge, why should the study of illocutionary acts, essential though they may be in understanding speaker meaning, be deemed a necessary component of the study of linguistic meaning?"

3.4 Speech acts establish the link between semantics and pragmatics.

In communication across genres, both standard meanings and speaker-meanings are used by participants of discourse, to convey messages. While standard meaning is semantic meaning, speaker-meaning is pragmatic meaning (occasional meaning). This perspective accentuates the link between semantics and pragmatics. Knowledge of semantic meaning enables speakers to deviate from linguistic conventions unto pragmatic meaning. Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ibid., p. 4) contends that "it is a logical possibility, of course, that, among the various components that presumably conspire in determining what speakers of natural languages mean, the illocutionary component should turn out to be relevant in specifying only what those speakers occasionally mean rather than what they standardly mean ... if therefore, illocutionary acts are equally necessary in characterizing standard speaker meanings and occasional speaker meanings, the issues arising when one considers their role in these would be most profitably regarded as issues of semantic and of pragmatic theory respectively." Speech act theorists attempt classification of speech act verbs and their conventional illocutionary acts, considering the links between semantics and pragmatics. Indeed, pragmatic use of language does not ignore their findings. Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ibid., p. 4) asserts that "it is a logical possibility, of course, that, among the various components that presumably conspire in determining what speakers of natural languages mean, the illocutionary component should turn out to be relevant in specifying only what those speakers occasionally mean rather than what they standardly mean ... if therefore, illocutionary acts are equally necessary in characterizing standard speaker meanings and occasional speaker meanings, the issues arising when one considers their role in these would be most profitably regarded as issues of semantic and of pragmatic theory respectively."

3.5 Speech acts are context-driven.

Pratt (1977) rightly notes that "speech act theory provides a way of talking about utterances not only in terms of their surface grammatical properties but also in terms of the context in which they are made, the intentions, attitudes, and expectations of the participants, the relationships existing between participants ... rules and conventions that are understood to be in play when an utterance is made and received." The literature of pragmatics evolves different kinds of contexts. For example, Adegbija (ibid.) mentions pragmatic, social, linguistic and psychological contexts that impinge on the use and interpretation of language. When language is used according to context, speaker-meaning can be conveyed and understood by the addressee. Language choice is made according to contexts and situations. Fowler (1981) posits that "linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs." In a similar vein, Adegbija (ibid.) submits that "language use is not incidental. It is of credit."

3.6 Speech acts are intentional acts.

The performer of a speech act targets the addressee in terms of the message to be conveyed and the perlocutionary act to be achieved. According to John T. Kearns, cited in Savas (ibid., p. 51), "the words used to perform linguistic acts are not meaningful. But words are conventionally associated with certain types of acts and will normally be used to perform these kinds of acts. The meaning of someone's linguistic act is her intention for the act. Most words are conventionally associated with more than one type of act. The language user's intention determines which particular type of act she performs. And it is common, by a slip of the tongue or carelessness, for a speaker to use the wrong word in performing a linguistic act. She still performs the kind of act she intends, but the expression she uses will probably mislead her audience." John T. Kearns, cited in Savas L. T. (ibid., p. 50) also states that "a linguistic act, or speech act, is an intentional, meaningful act performed with an expression or expressions. Even though the word 'speech' suggests saying something out loud, I use the two expressions 'speech act' and 'linguistic act' interchangeably for acts performed

with expressions, whether they are out loud, in writing, or ‘in one’s head’. Both speakers/writers and their audiences (when they understand the speakers/writers) perform linguistic acts.” The intentional nature of the performance of speech act is the reason why scholars hold the view that they are focused acts, message-laden and audience-specific.

3.7 Speech acts are classifiable.

The literature presents the efforts of classical pragmatic theorists and the speech act taxonomies they evolved. Consider Austin (ibid.) cited in Levinson (1983):

- Locutionary act: The utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference;
- Illocutionary act: The making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence, by virtue of the conventional “force” associated with it (or with its explicit performative paraphrase);
- Perlocutionary act: The bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterance ... Illocutionary act is what is directly achieved by the conventional force associated with the issuance of a certain kind of utterance in accordance with a conventional procedure, and is consequently determinate (in principle at least). In contrast, a perlocutionary act is therefore not conventionally achieved just by uttering that particular utterance, and includes all those effects intended or unintended often indeterminate, that some particular utterance in a particular situation may cause. While one would like to be able to identify the perlocutionary effects with the consequences of what has been said, illocutionary acts too have direct and in-built consequences – there is the issue of “uptake” (including the understanding of both the force and the content of the utterance by its addressee(s)).

Austin (ibid.) also mentions performatives and constatives as broad categorizations of speech act. Speech act taxonomies are part of classificatory efforts in the literature. In Bach and Harnish’s (ibid.) speech act taxonomy, different speech act categories are presented: ascriptive, assentive dissentive, responsive, question, answer, behabitive, offer, reject, etc. Sperber and Wilson (1986, p. 244) submit that “a speech act classification may be ‘invented’ to theorize about utterances, or developed on the basis of native speakers’ own classification of such utterances; but in neither case does such a classification play a necessary role in communication.”

3.8 The interpretation of speech acts is inference-based.

The use of indirect speech acts and non-literal language presupposes the interpretation of speech acts via different inference strategies. See Bach and Harish’s (ibid.) “speech act schemata” for insights on literal and non-literal illocutionary strategies. Lorena Pérez Hernández (2011, p. 100) reports that “speech acts were initially seen as highly dependent on inferential processes for their interpretation and in fact the few attempts that were made to account for their conversational nature were largely unconvincing¹...”

3.9 Speech acts are actions.

Austin’s (ibid.) pioneering work titled *How to Do Things with Words* presents speech act as actions. Corroborating Austin’s claim, Searle (1976) itemizes actions performable via sentences deployed in discourse:

- i. **Representative**, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (paradigm cases: asserting, concluding, etc.);
- ii. **Directives**, which are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (paradigm cases: requesting, questioning);
- iii. **Commissives**, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (paradigm cases: promising, threatening, offering);
- iv. **Expressives**, which express a psychological state (paradigm cases: thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating);
- v. **Declarations**, which effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions (paradigm cases: excommunicating, declaring war, christening, firing from employment).”

3.10 Speech acts are state-of-affairs.

Speech acts are viewed as having social relevance because they address state-of-affairs in society. Their referents are essentially the shared knowledge of discourse participants in various domains of society: religion, politics, culture, trade, etc. Acheoah (2018) analyzes mobile phone text messages with the caption: “Best-selling Books in Town”. The writer attempts to amuse the readers by using contradiction as an illocutionary strategy. For example, the writer presents the title of one of the best-selling books as: “How to Make Your Marriage Work”, and claims that Nigeria’s popular musician, 2 Face Idibia, is the author; this comic element succeeds because the audience (Nigerians) do not expect 2 Face Idibia who is widely believed to be the father of children of different mothers (outside marriage), to be the author of the best-selling book. Speech acts do not exist in a vacuum as they are products of writer-reader (encoder-decoder) shared knowledge. For the topic relevance of speech acts to be processed by decoders, the referents that the speech acts pick from the real world should be societal phenomena².

3.11 Speech acts are performed with felicity conditions.

Felicity conditions are the underpinnings for acceptable performance of speech acts (cf. Austin *ibid.*). For example, to perform a felicitous directive (speech act), the participants, the circumstance and the language must be appropriate. Cook, cited in Adeyemi (2000) gives a list of felicity conditions for different directive acts thus:

1. The sender believes the action should be done;
2. The receiver has the ability to do the action;
3. The receiver has the obligation to do the action;
4. The sender has the right to tell the receiver to do the action;
5. The sender refers to an action necessary for a particular goal;
6. The sender refers to an action necessary if the receiver is to avoid unpleasant consequences;
7. The sender refers to an action which will benefit the receiver;
8. The sender refers to an action which will benefit the sender;
9. The sender possesses knowledge which the receiver lacks;
10. The sender cannot carry out the action referred to.”

4. CONCLUSION

In the literature of pragmatics, different perspectives abound on the use and interpretation of speech acts, and such perspectives count as the features of speech acts. This study establishes that speech acts are:

- performed with appropriate felicity conditions;
- context-based;
- states-of-affairs; and
- focused acts.

Speech acts show the functional attributes of language in communicative events. Levinson (*ibid.*) posits that “one of the motivations of research in pragmatics might then be to establish the effects of the uses of language on language structure. We need to turn to the functions of speech to be able to think of the uses of language in ways that could provide functional accounts of linguistic structure.” Indeed, research on the communicative potentials and properties of speech acts remains on the front-burner in the literature of pragmatics. This study is a springboard in that direction.

Notes

¹ Adding to the submission, Lorena Pérez Hernández (*ibid.*, p. 101) asserts that “in the 80’s the inferential accounts of speech acts were taken to a more radical position by scholars such as Leech (1983) and Sperber and Wilson (1995). It was claimed that the understanding of all speech acts (both direct and indirect) was a matter of sheer inferential activity. Discussion on the conventionalization, much less the full grammatical codification, of illocutionary was either banned from accounts on illocution or restricted to very generic categories such as Sperber and Wilson’s so-called high-level explicatures which are associated with the three main sentence types (i.e. declarative, imperative, interrogative), or, in relevance-theoretic terms, saying, telling, and asking)”

² A speaker is expected to make his/her utterance “easy to mean”. The decoder should be able to work out the topic relevance of a sentence or utterance. See Sperber and Wilson (1986) for the meaning of the term “topic relevance”. In a similar vein, Allan Keith (1986) opines that when an utterance is uttered in discourse, the decoder attempts to locate the “world-spoken-of”.

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