In Search of Speech Acts

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Abstract

This study investigates critical notions on the linguistic phenomenon known as "speech act". The literature reveals diverse perspectives on speech act. See Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Grice (1975), Saddok (1974), Bach and Harnish (1979), Mey (2001) and Acheoah (2015) for instructive submissions on pragmatics and speech acts. The study of speech acts is essentially a study of the functional perspective of language use. Scholars align with the idea that language use is not arbitrary as it serves the fundamental purpose of achieving speakers' communicative intentions. Early speech act theorists note that the minimal unit of communication transcends the sentence; it is the performance of discrete acts: ordering, informing, requesting, persuading, asking, ascribing, praising, acknowledging, etc. Hinging on the Modular Speech Act Theory, this study concludes that the features of speech acts include the facts that: they are loosely categorized; they can be directly or indirectly performed; they can be performed figuratively; they are performed contextually; they are performed with preparatory conditions; and they can be performed with non-performative formula; and felicity conditions are involved in their performance.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech act, language, Modular Speech Act Theory.

1. Introduction

In any linguistic research, the analysis of language use in various kinds of texts is facilitated by theoretical insights in the literature. Speech act, being the core of pragmatics, reveals language as actions. The perspective that language use counts as the performance of action was evolved and popularized by Austin (ibid.) in his pioneer work, *How to do Things with Words*. In this study, vital postulations and critical perspectives concerning speech act, are brought to the fore, thus revealing the features of speech act. Although views about speech act are not exhaustive, the features of speech act examined in this study, are crucial and worthy of scholarly attention. Language use succeeds in being actions when directed by contextual underrinnings. According to Ayodabo (2013, p. 124), "all pragmaticians appear to agree that pragmatic approaches to language study are concerned about language in use in social context, particularly with reference to the functionality of utterances performed in different context …" In the investigation of the characteristics of speech acts, this study is integrative and discursive. It is a springboard in the study of speech act.

2. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a field of language study. In written or spoken communication, a pragmatic use of language is context-driven. Thus, pragmatics is the study of how context explains the use and interpretation of language. 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 Mey (ibid.), pragmatics is "the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of the society."

The literature reveals common notions in the pragmatic analysis of language use: (a) participants (users of language in context); (b) 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); (c) context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse); (d) non-verbal communication (non-linguistic communication); (e) inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means); (f) presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and (g) shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse). With these theoretical notions, factors that inform choices-making in language use are analyzed as they impinge on on-going communication.

3. Speech Act

Speech act is popularly viewed as action performed with words. Austin (ibid.) classifies speech act into three broad categories: locutionary act (performing an act OF saying something); illocutionary act (performing an act IN saying something); and perlocutionary act (performing an act BY saying something). There are other speech act classifications in the literature, as evolved by classical speech act theorists: Searle (ibid.) as well as Bach and Harnish (ibid.). In the speech act taxonomy of classical speech act theorists, certain verbs are believed to occur within certain speech act categories in communicative situations. Speaker-hearer shared knowledge is usually the basis for successful performance of speech acts. To understand speech act extensively, it is necessary to study classical and contemporary speech act theories. Pratt 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."

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is the Modular Speech Act Theory.

4.1 Modular Speech Act Theory

Graham H. Bird (2004 pp. 317-319) gives extensive submission on the Modular Speech Act Theory:

Modular Speech Act Theory is that part of modular pragmatics that focuses on speech acts. Accordingly, modular speech act theory is a research programme. Its theoretical objectives are delineation and explanation of some system or systems of knowledge of speech act use, in both production and understanding. Within the conceptual framework of modular cognitive pragmatics, modular speech act theory tries to depict human knowledge of using speech acts in appropriate contexts in terms of modular systems and central ones …

Within the framework of cognitive pragmatics, the theoretical objective of the research programme is not to specify a family of verbs present in a dictionary that reflects, says, the current usage of certain words in expressions by members of the group of speakers of the cultural entity called, say, Modern British English. Cognitive studies o language does not address cultural entities of the nature of Modern British English, but rather cognitive entities, idiolects that persons have in their minds and brains. Accordingly, cognitive pragmatics does not aim at any enumeration or classification of verbs and correlative speech act types of languages such as Old English or Modern Hebrew, which are cultural entities, but rather at an adequate delineation and explanation of the class of cognitively possible speech act types, that is, types of speech acts whose existence is compatible with the cognitive constraints that are imposed on human linguistic activity by the human cognitive systems of pragmatic knowledge.

A theory of speech act force, within the conceptual framework of cognitive pragmatics, is descriptively adequate and explanatorily powerful, if it shows how the class of the cognitively possible speech act types is delineated in terms of:

(SAT 1) a general conception of speech act type as a rule-governed practice whose system of rules satisfies a restricted class of conditions;

(SAT 2) a restricted class of cognitively possible basic speech act types; and

(SAT 3) a restricted class of basic amplifications of speech act types, that is to say, operations on speech act types (functions) that generate cognitively possible speech act types (systems of rules).

Searle's theory of speech acts (Searle 1969) made several steps towards a general conception of speech act, as required by (SAT 1). The most important contribution of that theory was the deep insight into the nature of the systems of rules that govern speech acts …

> Thus far speech act force theory has been stretched within the conceptual framework of cognitive pragmatics. Within the more specific conceptual framework of modular pragmatics, a theory of speech act force will address issues of P-modularity and centrality of related system of knowledge …

Within the Modular theoretical framework, the features of speech acts examined in this study are products of linguistic and extralinguistic communication constraints (norms, message, competence types, role-relations, cognition, shared knowledge and social structures).

5. Front-burner Notions on Speech Acts
5.1 Loose Classification
The literature acknowledges that the classification of speech acts is intractable, due to the versatility of verb categories. Consider 5.1a:

5.1a. *Take the drugs before attending the meeting.*
In the above sentence (or utterance), the speaker (s) informs, directs, advises and requests the hearer (h) to take the drugs before attending the meeting; the illocutionary acts depend on pragmatic variables. In Bach and Harnish's (ibid.) speech act taxonomy, speech act categories include: ascriptive, informative, assertive, assentive, dissentive, responsive, descriptive, suggestive, etc. Studies show that these categories overlap in communication. Consider 5.1b:

5.1b. *The bitterness of this herbal mixture is its efficacy.*
In 5.1b, the quality of bitterness is being ascribed (ascriptive) to "the herbal mixture", yet the utterance serves the purpose of describing (descriptive speech act) and persuading (persuasive speech act). In describing the herbal mixture, s essentially gives clarification (clarifying/illocutionary act). Broad classification of speech acts as in early theories of pragmatics, are bedeviled by contemporary studies in which the classification of speech acts is fascinatingly within the perspective of indirect illocutionary strategies, sentence patterning and lexical choices. In this regard, Acheoah (2015) is instructive; it is a study that presents novel typologies of illocutionary strategies that operate in communicative events. To elucidate the meaning-laden potentials of sentence patterning, Acheoah (2015) evolves the Illocutionary Frames Principle (IFP). The notion was developed in a subsequent study (Acheoah 2014). Considering the intractable attributes of speech acts, their broad categorization in classical speech act theories (e.g. verdictives, commissives, acknowledgements, declarations, etc.) possibly share verbs in the English lexicon, given the fact that words have synonyms. For example, if verbs grouped under "verdictives" are used to convey "declarations", it can result in distortion and complexity in meaning-determinism. There is also the claim that a broad speech act category in one theory, corresponds approximately to another broad speech act category in a different theory. In performing a commissive (promise), different expressions other than the word "promise (verb) can be used. Constraints which emerge from the linguistic conventions of the language being used in an on-going communication (referred to as Operative Language in Acheoah (2015)), make speech act studies even more intriguing. Indeed, broad categorization of speeh acts cannot account for the dynamics of human communication. See Savas (1994) for the claim that there should be more investigation of speech act. Lorena Pérez Hernández (2011, p. 118) reports that, "the nature of the relationship between speech act verbs and speech act categories has fuelled a wealth of debate from the 1970s to our days. Searle (1979: ix) has traditionally voiced the line of thought that takes this relationship to be rather loose: illocutionary acts are, so to speak, natural conceptual kinds, and we should no more suppose that our ordinary language verbs carve the conceptual field of illocutions at its semantic joints than we would suppose that our ordinary language expressions for naming and describing plants and animals correspond exactly to the natural biological kinds[1]."

5.2 Direct or Indirect Propositions
In using speech acts, participants of discourse can either be direct or indirect (as in using literal or non-literal propositions). For effective communication, Bach and Harnish (ibid.) propose that if s uses a non-literal language, h should be made to understand what is meant; this view aligns with the idea of speaker-hearer cooperative behaviour in conversation. Bach and Harnish's (ibid.) Speech Act Schemata (SAS) capture literal, non-literal, direct and indirect propositions. In being direct or indirect, s is influenced by contextual underpinnings and illocutionry goals. Indirect speech acts, as the literature notes, are suitable in conveying politeness whereas direct speech acts are suitable for performing face threatening acts in discourse. Whereas a direct speech act is a covert proposition, an indirect speech act is when there is an additional (non-literal) meaning to an utterance. Pragmatic presupposition and other inference strategies are used to work out the meaning of an indirect speech act. In 4.2a below, s condemns h for not reading hard in preparation for the said examination:

5.2a. *I can see that too much reading made you fail the examination. Continue watching television. The movies are always shown.*
To deduce the meaning of an indirect speech act, as in 4.2a, the words and stretches that convey sentences are considered. In 5.2a, the sentence before the last and the last sentence convey the meaning of the utterance; s does not

believe that *h* read hard for the examination. Indeed, *s* is not praising *h*, but condemning *h* for allowing the watching of movies to prevent him from reading hard in preparation for the examination. The message is understood by the addressee (*h*). In human communication, utterances have "force". When the force of an utterance diverges from the covert associative force in speaker-hearer knowledge of the Operative Language, an indirect speech act is performed. Yule (ibid.) submits that indirect speech act is "indirect relationship between structure and function of an utterance[2]." Although the concept of indirect speech act is contentious in the literature, it is operational in human communication.

5.3 Contextual Performance

The use and interpretation of speech acts are context-driven. Thus, by promising, *s* may simply be persuading *h* as in 5.3a

5.3a. *I promise you a new car if you make the team win the match.*

Context shows the pragmatic link between language and communication variables: participants, setting, topic of discourse, time, etc. Given the functions of context in communication, scholars evolve different types of contexts: pragmatic, social, linguistic and psychological contexts. Context is the whole essence for the emergence of pragmatics and speech act theorizing. In pragmatics, the hitherto formalist approach to language study was replaced with the functional approach which gives language users supremacy over linguistic conventions. The argument that speech acts should be performed with felicity conditions is a way of understanding how context affects language use. Performing speech acts with felicity condition presupposes abiding by contextual expectations. For example, a directive uttered with certain linguistic expressions is appropriate (felicitous) in certain contexts whereas in other contexts, it could be inappropriate (infelicitous). Social structures and value systems (shared knowledge of participants of discourse) are invoked by the participants themselves when they interpret verbal and non-verbal elements of communication. As a reaction to the shortcomings of predating pragmatic theories, particularly Mey (ibid.), Acheoah (2015) presents novel notions with context-driven functionality in speaker-hearer transaction of meaning. Exploring context in communication is in tandem with demonstrating coherence, and this is expected of a proficient speaker. When participants of discourse skillfully explore context in communication, it is partly because it takes coherent use of language resources to achieve intended perlocutionary effects. Language users do not take the effects (perlocutionary acts/perlocutionary sequels) of their utterances for granted, given the fact that in being unpredictable, perlocutionary effects are problematic. This view corroborates Brenders (p. 1987, p. 344) who notes that "coherent conversation involves both the coordinated production of illocutionary acts and the management of the potential perlocutionary effects of utterances[3]."

5.4 Figurative Peformance

In using speech acts figuratively, language is a fusion of word classes. In this sense, verbs are assisted in conveying messages (meaning). Metaphor is common in figurative use of speech acts. Consider 5.4a:

5.4a. *She is the husband of the house.*

In the above utterance, it is clear that language users rely on mastery of linguistic conventions (linguistic competence) to deviate unto pragmatic meaning (communicative competence). In uttering 5.4a, s conveys a clear message that the referent (a house wife) is domineering and tough (s is ascribing quality to the wife and condemning her). The topic relevance of the utterance is processed accordingly by h using speaker-hearer shared knowledge. See Sperber and Wilson (1986) for tips on "topic relevance". In the use of figurative illocutionary acts, speech acts convey message "around the clause" which is often the location of propositions. The figurative potentials of speech acts are immersed in the intrinsic potential of language to make references. Language use is essentially a process of "referring" via speech acts. Acheoah (2018) therefore contends that speech acts are states-of-affairs. Commenting on reference-making, Frege (1997), cited in Sandt (1988, p. 163) opines that "a logically perfect language should satisfy the conditions that every expression grammatically well-constructed as a proper name out of signs already introduced shall in fact designate an object, and that no new sign shall be introduced as a proper name without being secured a reference." In the use of speech acts for reference-making, language serves the purpose of representing the phenomena invoked by language users. This is the case in spoken and written discourses. According to Bennett (1998), "language does serve as a tool for communication, but in addition, it is a 'system of representation' for perception and thinking."

5.5 Performance with Preparatory Conditions

Speech acts are used in accordance with the socio-cultural values of society. Studies in "politeness principles" and "politeness strategies" are in this direction, quite illuminating. A greeting (speech act) is expected to be performed before a requestive (speech act) to achieve a face-saving act, if the speaker is proficient (communicative competence). Across cultures of the world, a person is not expected to hurriedly make a request from his/her interlocutor without first greeting the interlocutor; doing so results in a face-threatening act. As a preparatory condition for requesting, "greeting" precedes "requesting". Similarly, a classroom teacher performs an informative speech act (teaching) before asking students questions on what was taught; in this situation, "informing" precedes "asking". Performing a preparatory speech act is a demonstration of the mental states of participants of discourse. The participants believe that their contributions to a communicative event must align with the world knowledge they share with co-participants. This process is simply

cognition (as in cognitive pragmatics). Chilton (2005a, p. 23) submits that cognitive pragmatics "is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions (cf. Bara 2010: 1) produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another … If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals."

5.6 Felicity Condition

Speech acts are performed with felicity conditions so that they can be acceptable, reasonable and logical. Austin (1962) posits that speech acts can be felicitous (happy) or infelicitous (unhappy). A Felicitous speech act is when a right expression is uttered by the right person to the right participant(s). In addition, the purpose and context (situation) should be appropriate. For example, to perform a verdictive, the participants should be in a court of law, and the utterer should be a Judge. Similarly, to proclaim a man and a woman as husband and wife, it is logical to be in the right place (e.g. a church), and the proclaimer should be in a position to do so (the right person e.g a Pastor). Indeed, as part of the felicity condition, the consent of the man and woman should be considered. Truth-conditionality of expressions is logically linked to the concept of felicity in the study of speech acts[4].

5.7 Non-performative Formula

The literature strongly holds the view that speech acts can be performed with a non-performative formula (without uttering words). In this sense, mere brandishing a hatchet can serve the purpose of persuading someone to grant a request or yield to a demand (cf. Leech 1983). Acheoah (2015) presents extralinguistic components of communication and contends that they are candidates for meaning: semiotic particulars (whether, shapes, body marks, colour); sociolinguistic variables (age, social status, gender); silence, gestures, and contextual objects. Terence Hawkes (1977, p. 125) rightly notes that "every speech act includes the transmission of message through the languages of gesture, posture, clothing, hairstyle, perfume, accent, social context … over and above, under and beneath, even at cross purposes with what words actually say."

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Language use is the functional perspective of speech acts as evident in the discrete acts performed by a speaker in communicative contexts: ordering, asking, informing, asserting, persuading, acknowledging, etc. To explain the characteristics or features of speech acts irrespective of their categories, perspectives in the literature are the basis. Such perspectives abound from the period of early scholars of the discipline (pragmatics) to contemporary times. However, they are not exhaustive; they keep evolving. Speech act remains a very fascinating aspect of language studies. It is therefore not surprising that early speech act theorists are referred to as language philosophers. The study of speech acts remains the basis for establishing language use from speaker-ends. Searle, cited in Brenders (ibid, p. 340) submit that "in the performance of an illocutionary act the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and furthermore, if he is using words literally, he intends this recognition to be achieved …" The transaction of meaning is fundamental to the conceptualization of speech act as a pragmatic concept. Brenders (ibid. p. 329) rightly notes that "one of the central issues involved in any systematic analysis of communication is the role of 'meaning' in conversation. One general trend in such analyses has been to regard meaning as the products of social action. While this approach promotes the sensible idea that communication is the product of social actors in context rather than the mere adherence to language rules, this position has tended to blur the distinction between semantic and pragmatic meaning, and illocutionary versus perlocutionary acts. As a result, slogans such as 'Words don't mean, people mean', are used widely, while research proceeds with little or no discussion of whether this approach yields consistent and sensible analyses of meaning in communication." The features of speech acts examined in this study reveals that communication is indeed, a rule-governed behaviour. In searching for speech acts in terms of their intrinsic attributes, language has to be analyzed not only at the level of words, but also at the level of linguistic stretches. Conclusively, this study reveals discrete attributes of speech acts which include the facts that:

  i)   they are loosely classified;

  ii)   they can be performed figuratively;

  iii)   they are direct or indirect propositions;

  iv)   they are context-driven; and

  v)   they are performed with preparatory conditions;

  vi)   they can be performed with non-performative formula; and

  vii)   their performance involves fulfilling felicity conditions.

Research on speech acts is invariably about the investigation of meaning. Corroborating this view, Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ibid. p. 2) asserts that "the study of illocutionary acts should be acknowledged as an indispensible component of the

study of meaning." The transaction and decoding of meaning in discourse remain fascinatingly intriguing because sentence meaning and speaker-meaning can diverge. The features of speech acts examined in this study show that the performance of speech acts targets people and socially realistic phenomena5. Findings of studies on speech acts are not exhaustive, because of the endless nature of meaning; meaning continues to evolve. See Acheoah and Olalleye (2018) for tips on the nature of meaning.

Notes

1. Lorena Pérez Hernández (2011, p. 118) also posits that "the nature of the relationship between speech act verbs and speech act categories has fuelled a wealth of debate from the 1970s to our days. Searle (1979: ix) has traditionally voiced the line of thought that takes this relationship to be rather loose: illocutionary acts are, so to speak, natural conceptual kinds, and we should no more suppose that our ordinary language verbs carve the conceptual field of illocutions at its semantic joints than we would suppose that our ordinary language expressions for naming and describing plants and animals correspond exactly to the natural biological kinds."

2. Rumide J. O. (2013, p. 137) asserts that "indirect speech act is an important aspect of speech acts which we perform in our daily use of language. It is a veritable tool in the maintenance of social cohesion between the speaker and hearer, because it carries elements of politeness."

3. Labov (1972, p. 297) rightly opines that "no use of language can be divorced from its social context since special meaning is parasitic upon language."

4. Austin, cited in Levinson (1983) contends that:

   performatives are, if one likes, just rather special sorts of ceremony. And unlike constatives, which are assessed in terms of truth and falsity, performatives can only be assessed as felicitous or infelicitous according to whether their felicity conditions are met or not. Austin isolates three basic senses in which in saying something one is doing something, and hence three kinds of acts that are simultaneously performed:

   - 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.

5. According to David Harrah, cited in Savas L. Tsohatzidis (1994, p. 375), "most speech acts seem to be focused and directed. They are intended as coming from the agent and going to the receivers or audience. They are intended to have a certain point, and they are intended to be construed as having a certain point."

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