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# The Pragmatic Aspects Of Speech Acts

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## 1. Introduction

Pragmatics and sociolinguistics view the speech acts as the smallest unit of analysis in any speech event. The latter is defined as a “socially accepted” and “patterned sequence” in which the participants of specific speech community are involved. Speech community is used to refer to a group of participants who intuitively know how to behave in a specific speech event. Examples of the speech events are conversations, jokes, sermons, interview, prayers or political speeches (peñalosa,1981:71).

In general, communication is pragmatic. One strives to achieve goals. Speech Act Theory (henceforth, SAT) explains how one uses language to accomplish these goals (Oort,1997: 2, and Doyle, 2002:1)

Bowen (2001:1) states that pragmatics is the area of language functions that embraces the use of language in social contexts. This involves knowing what, how, and when to say it, in order to be with other people.

Speech acts (henceforth, SAs) have been studied by different philosophers and linguists and the pragmaticians’ views seem to be the most important one (Bach and Harnish, 1979:62). What follows, then, is the different approaches towards the study of SAs.

## 2. Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory

Austin (1962:1) differentiates between statements constatives which describe some state of affairs (i.e., report some information about facts) and the performatives in which the saying of the words constitutes the performing of an action. In other words, one can do things with speech.

Fromkin and Rodman (1993:159) state that using SAs in an utterance does something over and above the statement. For example, by saying “I warn you that there is a sheepdog in the closet”, you not only say something, you warn someone.

## 3. The Conventional Nature of Speech Acts

Austin (Ibid, 26-36) stresses the conventional nature of the performance of SAs; the following agreed upon procedures must be followed to the point:

1. There must exist an accepted conventional procedure for the utterance of certain words for certain persons in certain circumstances. Coulthard (1985:14) gives an

example that in English there is an agreed upon procedure for naming a ship but not a house.

2. The words must be uttered by the appropriate persons in appropriate circumstances.
3. The procedure must be “executed” by all participants both correctly and completely. For example, in the marriage ceremony, which includes “yes”/no questions, yes is not an acceptable answer. Besides, the ceremony has a fixed point for the ring to be placed on the finger.

Austin (Ibid 14-15) adds that performative utterance will be “unhappy” (insincere) if these procedures are not followed.

#### 4. Some Arguments in Austin’s (1962) Theory

Austin (Ibid.54) first states that the explicit performatives have the formula of “the first person singular present indicative active”. Then, he finds that this might be suspicious because of the following arguments:

1. person and voice are not essential because there are performatives that have verbs in the second and third persons, e.g., “**You are hereby authorized to pay...**”.
2. Mood and tense break down as an absolute criteria for explicit performative actions. For example, mood will not do if one says “**Turn right**” instead of “**I order you to turn right**”. Tense, moreover, will not do either because one can say “you did it” instead of “**I find you guilty**” (Ibid.58).
3. It is doubtful whether there is a grammatical criterion because the first person singular present indicative active may be used to describe how somebody habitually behave, e.g. “I bet him (every morning) six pence that it will rain.” (Ibid, 64-65).
4. It is not always the case that one has a performative verb for making something explicit. For example, one may insult somebody by saying something though one does not have the formula “**I insult you**” (Ibid.64-65).
5. Austin (Ibid) blurs the distinction between the constatives and performatives because he finds the expositive utterance also satisfies the criteria or tests of the performatives. The main body of the expositives has the form of a statement and its head is a performative verb that shows how the sentence is to be fitted into the context of a conversation, e.g., I argue, conclude, testify, etc. (Ibid.85)
6. Thus, Levinson (1983:229) adds that Austin concludes that any performative utterance, even the constatives, should be reducible or expandable into a form with a verb in the first person singular present indicative active, e.g., “out” is equivalent to “**I declare you out**”.
7. The test of the performatives includes satisfying the following “felicity conditions” (Ibid.79)
  - I. Does the saying of words constitute the performance of an act? If not, then, the utterance is not a performative.
  - II. Could one really be doing the action without uttering the words? For example, one cannot apologize by keeping silent.
  - III. Is the action done deliberately and voluntarily? For example, one can say “**I am willing to apologize**” but one cannot say “**I am willing to be sorry**”.

IV. Can the utterance be literally false? (So it is a constative,) or can it be unhappy? (So it is a performative).

### 5. The Decomposition of a Speech Act

Trosborg (1995:16) reports the Austin (1962:98) says that when uttering a sentence, a speaker is performing several acts which go beyond the act of the utterance itself:

1. Locutionary Act: this is the act of saying something, e.g., he said to me **“shoot her”** meaning **“shoot”** and referring by **“her”** to her.
2. Illocutionary Act: this is the act performed in saying something which determines in what way, function and sense one is using the locution. For example, **“he urged (advised, ordered) me to shoot her.”**
3. perlocutionary Act: this is the act performed as a result of saying something, the sequential effects of saying something upon the thoughts, or the actions of the audience. For example, **“he persuaded me to shoot her.”**

Using a slightly different classification of that proposed by Austin,

1. An utterance act (the bringing forth of certain speech sounds, words and sentences), as when one utters the sentence **“She is a beautiful girl”**.
2. A propositional act (referring to something or someone and predicating some properties of that thing or person). As in the example mentioned above in point three.
3. An illocutionary act (investing the utterance with a communicative force of promise, statement of fact and so on. For example, the speaker's illocutionary force of uttering **‘it is cold in here’** may make the hearer close the window.

Trosborg (Ibid. 17-18) and Strawson (1964:442) draw a comparison between Austin and Searle's classification. Searle (1969) argues that in performing an illocutionary act, one characteristically performs propositional cat and utterance acts, e.g. making an “x” on a ballot paper stands for voting. By comparison, Austin (1962) includes understanding in the “happiness conditions” of illocutionary acts: i.e. unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act is not happily successfully performed. This effect is called the “perlocutionary effect” (henceforth, PE) which includes alarming persuading, convincing, etc. In other words, Bach (1994:160) argues that Austin has supposed that the successful performance of an illocutionary force (henceforth, IF) is a matter of convention, not intention. Austin (1962) has not taken into consideration the central role of speakers' intentions and hearers' inferences as Searle (1969) has done.

### 6. A Systematic Classification of Illocutionary Acts

Austin (1962:148-49) classifies the SAs into:

1. Verdictives which are typified by the giving of a verdict, e.g., estimating reckoning or appraisal.
2. Exercitives which are exercising of powers, rights upon others, e.g. voting, ordering, warning, etc.
3. Commissives which commit somebody to.
4. Behavitives which have to do with social behaviour, e.g., apologizing, cursing, etc, for example **“I'm sorry that I could not phone you”**.

5. Expositives which make plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument, e.g., “I apologize, assume, etc”.

Leech (1983:176) criticizes Austin for supposing that there is a one-to-one relationship between verbs in the English language and categories of speech acts.

Mey (1993:162) says that Searle (1977) criticizes Austin's (1962) classification since:

- I. The categories Austin establishes are not exclusive, their criteria often overlap, and for having incompatible elements within his categories. For example, the speech act (henceforth, SA) of describing belongs sometimes to the category of “verdictives” and “expositives”.

- II. There is no clear principle on the basis of which the taxonomy is constructed.

Mey (Ibid) maintains that Searle (1977) uses four dimensions in classifying SAs and differentiating between them. These dimensions include:

- A. Illocutionary point: this is concerned with the intended IF.
- B. Direction of fit: this conceptualizes a relation between language and reality.
- C. Expressed psychological state: this views different SAs under the same angle. For example, a state of mind of belief may collect not only statements but also claims and deductions.
- D. Content: this allows one to separate out SAs in accordance with what they are about.

Yule (1997:53-54) maintains that Searle (1977) ends up in establishing five categories of SAs as follows:

- A. Representatives (assertives): these state what the speaker believes to be the case or not. The speaker here makes words fit the world, for example assert, assure, etc.
- B. Declaratives: these bring about some alternation in the status or condition of the referred to object or objects by virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed, as in nominating, declaring, confirming, etc.
- C. Directives: these SAs are used by the speakers to get someone else to do something. An instance of this is order, question, etc.
- D. Commissives: these are kinds of SAs that speakers use to commit themselves to some future action, as in promising, threatening, committing, etc.
- E. Expressives: these state what the speaker feels, for example, “greeting, apologizing, etc.”

To conclude, one may say that Searle's (1977) classification of SAs is superior to Austin's since:

- A. Searle is mainly concerned with what people perform whenever they use language; and
- B. Austin is merely concerned with the distinction between IF and PE.

## **7. Searle's (1975) Indirect Speech Acts**

Searle (1975: 62) and Hurford and Heasley (1983: 269) view the phenomenon of SAs as a combination of two acts: primary illocutionary act (indirect speech act), and a secondary one (direct speech act, henceforth, DSA). The primary act operates through and in force of the secondary one.

Searle (1975: 62) adds that the secondary illocutionary act is literal, whereas the primary illocutionary act is not.

Coulthard (1985: 26) maintains that the problem of indirect speech act (henceforth, ISA<sub>(s)</sub>) goes to the idea that sometimes the grammatical moods declarative, interrogative and imperative, do not realize statement, question and directive respectively. For example, the following utterances belong to the category of directive (request) SA:

1. Can you pass the salt?
2. Would you pass the salt?
3. I'd like to have the salt.
4. You ought to pass the salt.

### **8. The Pragmatics of Illocutionary Performatives**

Mey (1993: 147-148) states that the classical SAT has put the cart before the horse. He (Ibid) argues that Pragmaticians must ask what effects speech acting has in performing an act; the successful performance is not due to the power of one's words.

Leech (1983: 189) and Abdulla (1989: 6) share the same view. They state that a performative utterance derives its property as a performative from pragmatics as well as semantics. Semantically, it is a proposition with a present tense verb. Pragmatically, it is a 'self-naming' utterance which has the force indicated by its main verb. The IF of the performative is indicated by the verb itself; the IF of the non-performative has to be inferred pragmatically (i.e. implicit rather than explicit).

Verschueren (1998: 30) has the same view that pragmatically the IF of the non-performative has to be interpreted depending on its context of situation.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, one may say that Searle's (1969) distinction between the intended meaning and its intended effect reflects Austin's (1962) distinction between IF and PE. One may also contend, here, that the IF of a non-performative utterance has to be inferred pragmatically. Thus, "**Sit down**" could be an offer, threat, or an order depending on its context.

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