What are speech acts and to what extent do they explain how we do things with words?

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Making statements is the paradigmatic use of a language, but there are many other things that can be done with words. It is through words that we give orders, make requests, ask questions, give thanks, offer apologies, make promises, and so on. To define, a speech act refers to an utterance that serves a purpose in communication. In some instances, a speech act can be comprised by just one word, as in "thanks!" to give thanks, or several sentences or words: "Thank you for giving me a job." In essence, speech acts comprise of real-life interactions and not only requires the understanding of a language but also the correct use of the language within a particular context (De Sousa Melo, 2002). When it comes to second language speakers, speech acts can be challenging to perform because the speaker may not be familiar with the cultural norms or idiomatic expressions in the language.

These L2 learners may end up transferring the rules and conventions of their first language into the second language, under the assumption that these rules are universal. For example, when something that works in Spanish is transferred into a second language, it might not transfer meaning. Moreover, every speech act is basically the performance of more than one act at once, distinguished by the diverse aspects of the speaker's intentions. For instance, the first act can be that of saying something, what the individual actually does in saying it and how the speaker might be trying to affect their audience. This essay attempts to explain what speech acts are and how they can explain how we do things with words.

The theory of speech acts established by John Langshaw "J. L" Austin in his book *how to do things with words* is partly explanatory and partly taxonomic. The theory systematically classifies the types of speech acts and ways in which they can fail or succeed. It suggests that the relationship between words and the force of how they are uttered is often indirect. For instance,

one can say "This is a cow shed" to state non-literary that a room is filthy and messy and, to ask indirectly for it to be cleaned. However, even when this sentence is said directly and literally, say to describe the place where cows stay, it is clear that the content of the speech will not be fully determined by its linguistic meaning. Furthermore, the word "this" on itself does not specify or determine the area by referred to by the speaker. The primary task of the speech acts theory is to deal with how a speaker can succeed in what they say despite the various linguistic meanings present (Bach, 1994).

According to Austin (1962), speech acts are acts of communication. From its definition, communication refers to the action of expressing a particular attitude hence the speech act being employed must correspond to the particular attitude that is being expressed. Indeed, a speech act succeeds only if the attitude identified by the audience is that intended by the speaker. For instance, one can consider whether the utterance by the speaker was a statement made to express a belief, an apology made to show regret, or a request made to express desire towards something. However, it is worth noting that some speech acts are not acts of communication, that is, their purpose is not to communicate but to affect the institutional state of affairs. They achieve this in two distinct ways; making something to be the case and others can actually judge something to be the case. Good examples of the first way include appointing, bequeathing and sentences while those of the second kind may include the appraisal by an examiner, ruling of a judge and a call by the referee. Indeed, both types of acts can only be performed is certain ways under specific circumstances and by speakers of particular social or institutional positions.

In his book called *how to do Things with Words*, Austin describes three levels of acts that go beyond the mere act of utterance: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Here, he differentiates the act of saying something, the action involved in saying it, and what the speaker

does by saying it (Bach, 1994). However, it is worth noting Austin did not mean that locutionary act refers to the actual act of utterance, but the act of saying things that are often reported in a quotation. For example, the prime minister said, "terrorism is not a problem." In this case, the locutionary act is the statement that has been reported in quotes. It is not necessary that the prime minister uses these words, "terrorism is not a problem," to inform the public that terrorism is not a problem. Furthermore, it is not a must that he be speaking in the English language. It does not matter the manner in which he says that terrorism is not a problem because he would be assuring the country that they will be safe from terror threats. The assurance is an illocutionary act (Bach, 1994). Thereby, he would be performing the perlocutionary act of relieving their fears on safety. The prime minister will be performing all the three speech acts by simply uttering a certain phrase.

According to Bach (1969), there is a direct relationship between the words used (terrorism is not a problem), what is said, and the act of assuring the country residents that terrorism is not a problem. However, there is a less straightforward connection between the uttering and the act of informing the people that they should feel safe because there won't be terrorism in the country. It is evident that a linguistic connection does not exist here, for the utterance does not mention safety. The citizens must infer that the prime minister intends to assure them that they are safe from terror attacks. Indeed, these words count as an act of that sort because the speaker is uttering them with this intention. Furthermore, similarly, there is an oblique connection when the following words are said "It's getting late" not merely to make a statement about the time of the day but also to request the hearer to hurry up or as a proposal for them to go to a safer place. Regardless whether it is intended to be a proposal or as a request, depends on the context in which both the speaker and their audience rely on. This still stands

even when there is a more direct connection between the words and the deeds because the nature of the sentence uttered may not appropriately determine the specific illocutionary act to be performed. A good example, by analogy, is that in shaking hands, one can, depending on the circumstances, be doing several things: greeting each other, introducing themselves, bidding farewell or sealing a deal. Similarly, a nature of an act can be determined by the ways in which a sentence has been used. For instance, 'I will tell mother' could be understood as a warning, a promise, or a prediction. Clearly, the intentions of the speaker determines the sort of act in question.

In a typical speech situation where there is an audience, the speaker and an utterance, the speaker will have performed several acts such as giving orders, warning, greeting, making statements, asking questions, and giving reports. All these kind of acts are what Austin (1962) referred to as illocutionary acts. To define, an illocutionary act can be said to be a complete speech act that consist of a particular illocutionary force (assertion, suggestion, promise, demand, or vow) and the delivery of a propositional content of the speech. Some of the verbs and verb phrases that are associated with illocutionary acts include: censure, criticize, express approval, comment, remark, command, warn, approve, describe, promise, and welcome.

In the performance of an illocutionary act, one engages in a form of behavior that is governed by a set of rules (Searle, 1969). This author proceeds to state that some philosophers believe that to know the meaning of a word is basically to know the rules for its employment or use. Therefore, he classifies these rules into two: those that regulate the existing forms of behavior and those that go beyond regulation of behavior to define and create new forms of behavior (3). With regards to the first kind, which Searle refers to as regulative rules, he gives an example that interpersonal relationships are regulated by rules of etiquette even though these

relationships are not actually dependent on them. On the other hand, for the second kind, the

rules of a game do not merely regulate it but creates the possibility or definition of the activity.

He refers to this kind of rules as constitutive rules (3).

Communicative Illocutionary acts can be classified into four primary categories:

directives, acknowledgments constatives, and *commissives*. Michael Harnish and Kent Bach

(1994) developed a taxonomy in which each category of illocutionary act is analyzed depending

on the type of attitude that it expresses. Harnish and Bach borrow these terms (*commissive* and

constative) from Austin (1962) and *directive* from Searle (1969). However, they adopted the last

kind of illocutionary acts to replace *expressive* by Searle and *behabitive* by Austin. Examples of

directives include: asking, dismissing, admonishing, suggesting, instructing, permitting,

excusing, advising, warning, requiring, and requesting. Examples of *constatives* include: to

affirm, claim, conjecture, classify, identify, insist, inform, concur, attribute, answer, report, state,

deny, disagree, confirm, and announce. Examples of *commissives* include: to offer, agree,

volunteer, promise, invite, guarantee, and swear. Lastly, examples of *acknowledgements* include:

to greet, thank, condole, apologise, and congratulate. These authors spelt out the relationship

between each category of illocutionary act and the attitude being expressed. It is worth noting

that Trognon (2002) states that an action can only be illocutionary if it satisfies two conditions:

the content is proposes must be true, and it is true in accordance with the direction of fit of its

illocutionary force.

A locutionary act, according to Austin (1962), is the act of utterance or creating a

meaningful expression. John Searle, an American philosopher, has revisited the concept which

he now refers to as a propositional act. When the speaker makes an utterance, the utterance

becomes the locutionary act. In simple words, it is the act of saying the literary meaning of the

utterance. It can also be said to be the speaker's words. On a literary perspective, it is what the utterance means from the words that it carries and how they are arranged or structured. Some of the actions involved in performing a locutionary act include: asking and answering questions, announcing an intention, giving a warning or assurance, giving description and pronouncing a sentence (Davis, 2002). Austin explained that this act comprises of three sub-acts: a phonic act, a phatic act and a rhetic act. A phonic act is that which produces an utterance-inscription while a phatic act involves the developing of a certain linguistic expression. On the other hand, a rhetic act involves the contextualization of the utterance-inscription. The first sub-act concerns itself with the production of a particular sequence of vocal sounds (spoken language) or some written symbols (written language). The second sub-act involves the construction of a string of symbols and/or sounds, in form of a word, sentence of phrase, or discourse, in a language. It is worth noting that John Searle grouped these two sub-acts into one known as an *utterance act*.

On the other hand, a perlocutionary act is an action that produces an effect which is achieved in the hearer of the speaker's utterance. Good examples of this act include: persuading, insulting, convincing, manipulating and scaring. Levinson (1983) observes that it is important to distinguish between perlocutionary acts from illocutionary acts. He states that a perlocutionary act is the effect on the hearer that the utterer intends should follow from his utterance. This act can also be said to be the audience's reaction towards what the speaker utters. For instance, the statement "It is cold outside!" the perlocutionary effect will be for the hearer to wear a jacket or stay indoors.

In conclusion, speech acts play a crucial role in determining how we do things with words. Indeed, they can be classified into three major categories namely: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Diverse scholars have followed Austin's work *How to*

Do Things with Words and done more research on speech acts, their classification together with use in the English language. It is also imperative to conclude that in the philosophy of language, the speech acts theory emphasizes the significance of the difference between the use of language and the linguistic meaning. It is this distinction that enhances the formulation of questions concerning the nature of linguistic knowledge. Lastly, it is clear that a parallel distinction between the reference of the speaker and linguistic reference brings up the question of how linguistic expressions independently refer their use by a speaker.

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