Speech Acts and Events

Speech Acts Theory

Many linguists examined and analysed meaning in terms of the relationship between the linguistic rules, the context in which an interaction takes place, and the speaker's intention. The philosopher of language Austin made the most concrete step towards the explanation of the relationship between saying and doing by introducing the concept of speech acts which was developed later by his student Searle. Thus, speech act theory was first initiated by Austin and developed by Searle. Austin's lecture series in 1955 later published in the book How to Do Things with Words, proposes that people do things with words. According to him, actions such as apologizing, complaining, promising, complimenting, requesting … etc. can be performed via utterances. Austin sees that a speech act is an act performed by a speaker when producing an utterance in order to communicate with hearers. Communication is a series of communicative acts or speech acts. Speech acts are considered the minimum functional unit in communication such as giving commands, asking questions, and making statements (Austin, 1962).

Austin (1962), claims that utterances are equivalent to actions. Uttering a sentence is performing an action. "Actions performed via utterances are generally called speech acts and, in English, are commonly given more specific labels, such as apology, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise or request" (Yule, 1996: 47). Crystal (1993) proposes that speech acts are actions performed by means of language and defined with reference to the intention of a speaker at the moment of speaking and the effects it has on a listener. That is, a speech act represents an act that the speaker performs when uttering an utterance which serves a function in

communication. Since speech acts allow people to interact in real life situations, uttering a speech act requires not only the knowledge of a language but also the appropriate use of that language within a given culture.

Speech Acts Dimensions

Austin (1962) identifies three distinct levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself. When someone says something, s/he performs three acts simultaneously: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. According to Austin, (1962), the locutionary act is the act of saying something. Following the same line of thought, Yule, (1996) argues that the locutionary act is the first and the basic act of an utterance; it is the production of meaningful linguistic expressions. Yet, Yule (1996) sees that people generally do not just produce well-formed sentences that are grammatically correct with no purpose. People utter sentences with a function and intention; this is the second level of speech acts called the illocutionary act. The illocutionary act is what one does in saying something. At this level, the speaker expresses his/her intentions according to a number of conventions shared in his speech community (Chapman and Routledge, 1999). To know what is meant by the illocutionary act a distinction should be made between two aspects, what is said and what is meant.

It's getting late. (A husband says to his wife at a night party).

In the case of uttering or producing the utterance itself, the speaker performs a locutionary act. It is the simple reference or statement at the lateness of hour. The intention of the husband is a suggestion of a proposal of it's late so let's go home, which is here the illocutionary act. When the wife understands her husband's intention and his intended meaning from saying it's late, and accepts to leave, in this case the perlocutionary act is performed. Interestingly, a perlocutionary

act refers to the effects a speaker's utterance has on hearers or readers. After performing the locutionary and illocutionary acts, the utterance has a third dimension (the perloctionary act) which includes the results of the speaker's utterance on the hearer/reader.

Practice:

Identify the speech act dimensions performed in each utterance

1. Why don't you spend less time watching TV?

----

2. My sister is getting married in August

----

3. This bus won't move until you boys move in out of the doorway.

N.B. utterances are not related, each utterance is taken from a different conversation

Direct and Indirect Illocutionary Acts

The relationship between the surface form of an utterance and its intended meaning is not always straightforward. Put differently, utterances are used to affect the reader in a way or another; some convey the information directly, others convey the message in an indirect way. Searle (1979) claims that a speaker can communicate to the hearer more than he actually says. On the basis of shared background knowledge, the hearer can infer what the speaker means. Moreover, Searle (1979) names the indirect illocutionary act as a primary illocutionary act and the direct one as a secondary illocutionary act. "Whenever there is a direct relationship between a structure and a function we have a direct speech act. Whenever there is an indirect relation

between the structure and a function, we have an indirect speech act" (Yule, 1996: 54-55). To illustrate this, Yule (1996) adds that when a declarative utterance is used to make a statement, it means there is a direct speech act since there is a direct relationship between the structure and function of this utterance, (the structure is declarative; its function is to make a statement). However, when the same declarative utterance is used to make a request, the relationship between the function and the structure of the utterance becomes indirect, which means it is an indirect speech act. Take the following example:

It's cold outside.

This declarative statement performs two illocutionary acts, a direct and an indirect one. If the hearer considers the utterance as a statement and understands it as a description of the weather in that place, it means that the hearer understands the direct act or meaning of this utterance. If the hearer considers this utterance as a request to close the door or the window, for example, the hearer infers the indirect meaning of the utterance (Yule, 1996).

Speech Events and Speech Situations

The speaker usually expects that the listener or hearer can easily recognize her/his communicative intention through speech acts. The hearer can do that only with the help of certain circumstances surrounding the utterance, these circumstances, according to Yule (1996), are called speech events. A speech situation is the context of language use such as ceremonies, fights, classrooms, parties, etc. it is associated with speech but it is not governed by rules of speaking; however, a speech event is governed by rules of speaking and it takes place within a speech situation. Thus, speech events may be a conversation that consists of smaller units of speech acts.

"A speech event is an activity in which participants interact via language in some conventional way to arrive at some outcome" (Yule, 1996:57).

A: What time is it, please?

B: It is 1 o'clock

A: Thanks

This conversation contains a speech situation which is the bus station, a speech event which is asking the time, and speech acts which are the acts of requesting, thanking and responding.

The Cooperative Principle

Consider the following example: 'a hamburger is a hamburger' (Yule, 1996:35). This statement is a reply for a woman who asks another woman in the middle of their lunch hour whether she likes the hamburger she was eating. From her reply, it can be said that the answer is not communicative since it expresses something obvious. Another similar example could be the statement 'business is business'. According to Yule (1996), these expressions are called tautologies, and if these expressions are used in a particular conversation, this means that the speaker implies in his utterance another meaning more than what these words say literally.

According to Grice, utterances which are performed in conversations are governed by rules (which he called maxims). These rules together constitute the cooperative principle.

Grice Maxims

Grice (1975) suggests that in order to work out at what other people are getting, one should take it for granted that when s/he talks s/he follows certain rules, or maxims. There are

nine maxims altogether, grouped under four headings. These are the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation, and the maxim of manner.

a.   *The Maxim of Quantity*

The maxim of quantity implies that the information that the utterance carries should be neither too little nor too much. The utterance should only contain the appropriate amount of information which is needed to understand the utterance, as Yule (1996: 37) states "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required". The following example explains the above point of view.

A: I want to drink a cup of tea.

B: Help yourself.

In this example, it can be noticed that unnecessary expressions, such as, I will not make a cup of tea for you so make it by yourself, are not included. Only information which is required is included here, which means that B's answer follows the quantity maxim.

b.   *The Maxim of Quality*

In order to serve the quality maxim one should not tell lies, i.e., the speaker's contribution must be one that is true. "Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence." (Yule, 1996: 37) In other words, speakers should say only something they know is true, or something about which they have evidence. The example used by Yule (1996: 36) clarifies the idea this maxim holds. There is a woman sitting on a park bench. A man comes along and sits down on the bench.

Man: Does your dog bite?

Woman: No.

The man reaches down to bet the dog. The dog bites the man's hand.

Man: Ouch! Hey! You said your dog doesn't bite.

Woman: He doesn't. But that's not my dog.

In this example, the woman is assumed to tell the truth.

c.   The Maxim of Relation

Abiding by this maxim, speakers should not say something that is not relevant to the topic at hand. Speakers' contribution should be related to the purpose of conversation (Yule, 1996). Leech (1983: 99) argues that "an utterance U is relevant to a speech situation to the extent that U can be interpreted as contributing to the conversational goal(s) of s and h". That is to say, in order to preserve the maxim of relation interlocutors should expect answers that are relevant to the previous utterance.

A: Who has taken my dictionary?

B: The children were in your room today.

In the above conversation, the participants are husband and wife. The implied meaning is that the children may have taken the dictionary. Thus, B is cooperative since what she says is relevant to what A utters.

d.   The Maxim of Manner

The main point this maxim refers to, according to Grice (1975), is that speakers should be clear enough when uttering their utterances. "Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity. Be brief. And be orderly." (Yule, 1996:37) Moreover, speakers should be direct and straightforward. An example to better explain this maxim is as follow

A: Let's get the kids something

B: OK. But not I-C-E-C-R-E-A-M

It is clear here that B is going out of his/her way to be a bit obscure, spelling out the words rather than simply saying them. B flouts the maxim of manner so that A can infer that there must be a special reason for B to be uncooperative.