

Pragmatics and Speech Acts

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Learning Objectives

At the end of this lecture, students will be able to distinguish semantic meaning from pragmatic meaning. They will also understand the following concepts:

- Pragmatics as language use in context
 - Discourse context
 - Social context
 - Physical context
 - Context in a shared body of knowledge about the world
- Speech acts and speech as action
- The types of speech acts
- Austin's "forces"
 - Locution
 - Illocution
 - Perlocution
- Searle's classes of speech acts
- Grice's Maxims

Outline

1 Speech Act Theory

Speech Acts

When we do things with language, we engage in what are called **SPEECH ACTS**. There are a great many types of speech acts, a few of which are listed here:

- Statement
- Question
- Command
- Promise

There are a variety of different linguistic devices that are used to mark speech acts of this kind. For example, in Hmong (to a lesser extent, Chinese) and many languages of Southeast Asia, speech acts are marked with special particles that occur at the end of sentences. In English, they may be marked by special syntactic devices (wh-movement for wh-questions, for example).

Truth Values

Formal semantics characterizes utterances in terms of their truth values. This does not work for speech acts: how do you say whether a command is true or not?

Felicity Conditions

Pragmatics uses FELICITY CONDITIONS. An utterance is felicitous if it is appropriate to a particular context.

Speech Act Theory

Take the statement:

- (1) I bequeath this watch to my brother.

I cannot really get away with saying this if I am not the owner of the watch. In this case, my speech act would be said to be INFELICITOUS. However, if I say

- (2) I take this man to be my husband.

and I am at a wedding, am to be married to “this man,” and am at the appropriate stage in a wedding ceremony, this utterance may be FELICITOUS. Likewise,

- (3) I declare war on Saudi Arabia!

Is infelicitous if most of us say it, but is felicitous (but perhaps a bit unfortunate) if a head of state says it.

Performatives I

These sentences are of a class that the philosopher of language J. L. Austin called PERFORMATIVES. They are utterances that perform an action. You can often tell if a sentence is a performative by adding *hereby* to it.

Performatives II

- (4) a. I hereby name this ship the Queen Elizabeth.
- b. I hereby take this man to be my husband.
- c. I hereby bequeath this watch to my brother.
- d. I hereby declare war.

However, you cannot say:

- (5) a. Birds hereby sing.
- b. There is hereby fighting in the Ukraine.

That is to say, the sentences in (4) are performatives but the

Austin's Forces

Austin divided the pragmatic force of an utterance into three facets:

- **LOCUTION.** The act of saying words.
- **ILLOCUTION.** The action performed *in* saying those words.
 - Ask
 - Promise
 - Command
 - Etc.
- **PERLOCUTION.** The effects of those words on the listener. The action performed *by* saying those words.
 - Persuade
 - Convince
 - Scare
 - Elicit an answer
 - Etc.

Searle's Illocutionary Speech Acts

The philosopher of language John Searle (1975) set up the following classification of illocutionary speech acts:

- **ASSERTIVES.** speech acts that commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, e.g. reciting a creed
- **DIRECTIVES.** speech acts that are to cause the hearer to take a particular action, e.g. requests, commands and advice
- **COMMISSIVES.** speech acts that commit a speaker to some future action, e.g. promises and oaths
- **EXPRESSIVES.** speech acts that express the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition, e.g. congratulations, excuses and thanks
- **DECLARATIONS.** speech acts that change the reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration, e.g. baptisms, pronouncing someone guilty or pronouncing someone husband and wife"

Grices Maxims: The Cooperative Principle

■ Maxim of Quality

1. Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 - Do not say what you believe is false.
 - Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

■ Maxim of Quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

■ Maxim of Relation

- Be relevant.

■ Maxim of Manner

- Be perspicuous.
 - Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - Avoid ambiguity.
 - Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - Be orderly.

If You've Got It, Flout It

How do we know that Grice's maxims point to something real?
Because we're surprised or annoyed when someone violates them.

Grice's Maxims—Summary

- The maxim of quantity, where one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more.
- The maxim of quality, where one tries to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.
- The maxim of relation, where one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.
- The maxim of manner, when one tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as one can in what one says, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity.