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## A Speech Act and Gricean Analysis of a Natural Conversation

**Abstract:** Pragmatic analyses have predominantly been restricted to constructed dialogues or single utterances due to the complexities of regular conversation. In this paper, we consider a natural dialogue in terms of the classical pragmatic frameworks of Searlean speech act theory and Gricean implicature, in order to verify the descriptive power of these theories and find areas in need of further research in order to be able to truly give a complete account of conversational speech.

*A: Hello*

*B: Hi*

A shows the role exclamation can have in the opening and functioning of a dialogue. Without conveying any information (and therefore being meaningless in a purely Gricean sense) A expresses that they would like to begin a conversation with B, and B recognizes this intention and expresses that they would be willing to participate, using an analogous exclamation.

*A: Would you tell me your name?*

*B: I wouldn't*

A's utterance continues the conversation with a classically Searlean indirect speech act - in form an interrogative but in illocutionary force intended as an imperative, particularly a request from A for B to tell them their name. Considered as a question, B's response could be cooperative in that it directly and truthfully responds to the Question Under Discussion, particularly B's willingness to tell A their name. However, as an imperative, B's response is non-cooperative, in their refusal to provide the relevant information. This non-cooperativity allows for A by a process of Gricean reasoning to conclude that B must have some reason for their non-cooperativity, as we can see in the next exchange. We see that the Searlean idea of the indirect speech act is necessary for, or at least a productive complement to, an implicature based account of natural discourse.

*A: Is there any reason you wouldn't?*

*B: I'm scared of it*

Here in the conversation we find a cooperative exchange amenable to implicature based interpretation. B is able to reason by the Maxim of Quantity that A would not simply like to know whether they have some reason for not saying their name, as they presumably do, but what

particularly that reason is, and they give this reason without providing notably more or less information than is required in the discourse.

*B: Like, if you've read a lot of fantasy books, like Eragon for example, that one written by a 16 year old with a green dragon on its cover, well if a wizard knows your name they have power over you. Maybe you're a wizard*

B's next utterance presents a potential challenge for a speech act based consideration of the conversation. While relevant to the QUD of B's willingness to tell their name, B presumably does not believe that A could actually be a wizard, as they would be required to in the felicity conditions for an assertion – however their making this untrue statement is not perceived as non-cooperative by A, or taken up seriously. In Gricean terms, the utterance violates the maxim of quality, without apparently communicating any additional content through this violation. However, a more nuanced speech-act based approach could appreciate the somewhat whimsical intentions of the utterance – A is clearly able to distinguish these illocutionary features of the statement and appreciate its playfulness. Speech-act theory can provide a framework capable of understanding even apparent counter-examples like this.

*A: I loved those books! Huh, maybe this is working.*

*B: What's working?*

The second half of A's utterance does not provide the context necessary for B's comprehension, and B responds to this non-cooperativity.

*A: Did I say that? Yes I said that.*

*B: Yes, you said that. I mean, if I got the right that.*

A offers another kind of indirect speech act – a rhetorical question. Clearly, for B to answer the question they would have to know what “that” referred to, meaning A would have necessarily said it. In function then, A offers something like an exclamative expressing some feeling about what they previously said – doubt or regret. B responds to the question, demonstrating an interesting kind of anaphoric deixis, with their “the right that” referring both to the “that” they previously spoke and the referent of A's “that.”

*A: I mean, well, do you ever just want to talk to a stranger about everything, to turn to them and really talk to them about whatever you could want to?*

*B: I think lots of people do.*

*A: Yeah.*

Reasoning by Gricean relevance, B can conclude that A's question is also indirectly asserting that this desire to talk to a stranger is their own intention. Interestingly, B also responds

to A's statement as a question – it's necessary to slightly adapt Searlean speech act theory to account for this way that a single utterance can function as more than one kind of speech act at the same time.

*B: So what did you want to talk about?*

*A: I'm not sure*

Here, A and B have a cooperative, relevant, and efficient exchange. It is interesting that exchanges like this without more complex and subtle pragmatic phenomena are apparently the exception rather than the rule.

*A: Meaning, love, and suicidal ideation, and stuff. But now that I can say it there's nothing to say.*

*B: Right. Now that you can say it there's nothing to say.*

A clarifies their previous utterance. B's use of repetition is intriguing, in that semantically they say nothing new. However, by cooperativity, we can see that B is reinforcing or generalizing A's assertion.

*A: Say, do you ever get the feeling that your life is actually the product of an introductory creative writing workshop?*

*B: You know .. that could explain a lot of things. Like, just the other day I .. well someone I know had just split up with someone and the sunny weather had suddenly turned into rain, and we were walking and talking, and we looked up and noticed we were on Hope street. I mean it was so heavy handed.*

The speakers again work with the complexities of whimsicality. The specific nature, communicative role, and function of these kinds of statements is a subject in need of more precise research and formalization.

*A: Yeah. Say, I really like your tote bag, the pattern's so intricate*

*B: Oh, thanks*

In fact, this is essentially a textbook example of reasoning from Grice's relevance maxim. In A's making a comment obviously unrelated to the past comment, B can recognize this shift and reason that A is deliberately avoiding addressing the Question Under Discussion. The subject of split-ups could be undesirable or difficult for A to discuss, leading them to offer a new subject for conversation.

*A: So, what is your name?*

*B: You know, you really don't actually want to talk with me.*

B utters here a statement that is, remarkably, untrue on two levels of interpretation, and which can only be parsed with an extra degree of Gricean implicature. Clearly, given that A is currently talking with B, that A initiated the conversation, and that A stated that they desired to start the conversation, A "wants" to talk with B, and also A knows that A "wants" to talk with B. Thus, both the literal and the non-literal reading of "you know" in the sentence are false. However, with a further layer of indirectness, it's possible to correctly parse the statement as one of psychological observation, whereby B makes a distinction between A's conscious and subconscious desires. Recursive implication and indirectness is a pragmatic phenomenon in need of much more work by linguists - it seems possible to the author that recursivity could model implication in pragmatics as effectively and as precisely as Chomsky's recursive grammars model formal syntax! In any case, recursive construction is clearly a fundamental an underrecognized element of pragmatic reasoning.

*A: That's ... just not true. Why would ... you say that?*

*B: No, it is, you want to tell yourself you talked to me, that we shared a moment about wizards and thereafter understood each other completely, that you could look at the shapes and colors on my totebag and see into my soul, or something like that. But I'm not Vladimir Putin, and you're not George Herbert Walker Bush, and no souls were recently observed.*

A offers some Searlean indirectness, a rhetorical question, and other interesting pragmatic phenomena but nothing strictly new to this analysis. B's statement, on the other hand, marvelously illustrates the subtleties and difficulties of cultural reference. Neither speech act theory nor Gricean reasoning can explain the allusion here. Could the statement about George H.W. Bush be parsed by the average English speaker living in Australia? Or would it be at all meaningful to someone in the United States 10 years from now, or 20 years ago, or even in a community where most people don't regularly read newspapers or watch or listen to the news? Accounting for cultural background is one of the greatest challenges to any formal pragmatic model, as it forces the model to recognize some systems of knowledge fundamentally outside its predictive and interpretive domain. The meaning of a cultural reference is so localized and temporalized as to make an analytical model of pragmatic interpretation, even for a single language, quite challenging to formulate and not perfectly predictive. That said, there are grounds for belief that cultural reference is a marginal phenomenon in ordinary discourse.

*A: \*Enigmatically profound, intense, aphoristic, and hilarious dialog\**

*B: \*Enigmatically profound, intense, aphoristic, and hilarious dialog\**

*\*Convincing imitation of an academic voice that misses the point in endearing ways\**

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*B: Well, I think I'm going now, goodbye!*

*A: Bye! You really were the right stranger to talk to ...*

*B: Yeah well, maybe we'll get the chance to try it again sometime? Though no, I guess we wouldn't be strangers then, and then it wouldn't be a very interesting conversation at all.*

Exclamatives mark the end of the conversation, like its beginning. The first “goodbye” partially seems to fail, or have been insincere, in that the conversation continues, but it still indirectly signals certain features of B’s intentions, i.e. to end the conversation. This intention is recognized, and A does not respond to B’s final statement.