THE RELEVANCE OF SPEECH ACTS IN THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will attempt at presenting a characterization of the three clauses (declarative, interrogative and imperative) based on findings in the area of speech acts. That is a characterization of what it means to use a statement, a question and a directive. This will include, in the main, pragmatic account, conditions of occurrence (or appropriacy conditions) and varieties of meaning for each, and the like. Our main goal will be to make explicit such interface between speech acts and grammar to draw upon themes in this pragmatic area for pedagogical purposes. That is how grammatical choices are motivated and accounted for by language learners, relying on the Speech Act Theory.

Keywords: speech act, pragmatic characterization, felicity conditions, grammar, clause

INTRODUCTION

Formal grammar, including semantics, treated statements, questions and directives under the rubrics of declaratives, interrogatives and imperatives, respectively, and sought, thereby, to account for them in formal terms. The scope of this account proved to operate just within the confines of the sentence and to be restricted as to understanding utterances within both context of discourse and context of the world, including speech situation and communicative intention. The issue has been addressed by Speech Acts theorists for whom language users should not puzzle their brains too much over formal properties, or speculate unsparingly upon contextual interpretations. Theyshould, instead, be trainedto assign to a sentence the most plausible interpretation as an utterance in context and be motivated to use one sentence form, say, an interrogative, instead of an imperative or a declarative to perform a particular act.

SPEECH ACTS

Although Speech Act Theory sprang principally from research in the philosophy of language, its realm covers more than philosophical issues.

'Speech act theory has "supplemented the restricted view of language as a succession of uniformly patterned sentences with the conviction that speech is governed by communicative strategies which we pursue as an integral part of our social behaviour".' (Hartmann 1980: 16)

This goes some way to explain why pragmatic meaning requires an equal amount of social background; a fact which is pertinently related to language functional aspects, to the ways things are done by means of words.

'The central insight of speech act […] is that we use language to do things, not only to say that some statement is true or false; language is not only used for description but for action'. (Kempson 1977: 50)

The new trend subsumes a consideration of facts beyond the confines of the sentence-analysis preached so often by formalists. Yet, for an effective performance of acts, Austin (1962) insists that the way these acts are encoded is of necessity. The role of grammar seems, therefore, significant.

It was in the perspective of seeking within the grammar of the language the conventions that determine the force of an utterance and of investigating the conditions that determine the success of an illocutionary act that Austin (1962) set his theory of Speech Acts. He rejected the idea according to which linguistic items are only descriptive, as was preached by formal *truth vs. falsehood* philosophy. He holds that there is more than description in using those items. He also sought to

'…emphasize the importance of relating the functions of language to the social contexts in which languages operate and insist that, not only descriptive, but also non-descriptive utterances should be of concern to the philosopher.' (Lyons 1977: 728)

The notion of Speech Act rests, then, upon a distinction between what is said and what is done with what is said. The latter seems to have been granted much more importance and, besides, unrestricted by formal aspects.

The highly widespread account of Speech Act is that in virtue of which utterances are considered as acts for communicating by means of words (Austin 1962, Sbisà in Verschueren 1995: 495). These acts are so called because they materialize linguistic items in the performance of actions (ordering, warning, apologizing, etc.) in particular contexts.

'… to provide for the felicity conditions for some illocutionary act is to specify exactly how the context has to be in order for a particular utterance of a sentence that is conventionally used to perform that type of act to actualize it on an occasion of utterance…' (Levinson 1983: 245)

SPEECH ACTS:Acharacterization

In what follows, we shall attempt at presenting a rather pragmatic characterization of the three clauses under study, i.e. a characterization of what it means to use a statement, a question and a directive. This will include, in the main, pragmatic account, conditions of occurrence(or *appropriacy* conditions Kempson 1977) and varieties of meaning for each, and the like. Our main goal will be to make explicit such interface between Speech Act and grammar Speech Act ie. how grammatical choices are motivated and interpreted by language users drawing upon Speech Act theory.

(1)STATEMENTS

The term 'statement' is held, here, to mean an utterance with the structure of a grammatical declarative (Subject + Verb + object), but one which does not necessarily mean an assertion. This stands in contrast with the concept of 'statement' in logic which refers to the content of the sentence, used to assert some fact (Kempson 1977). On these very grounds, statements belong, according to Austin (1962), to the category of *constatives*, whose

'…function is to describe some event, process or state of affairs, and they have the property of being either true or false…' (Lyons 1977: 728)

A clear line of demarcation between the foregoing syntactico-semantic analysis and the present Speech Act-based one is that 'statements' of every kind (assertions included) are regarded as acts, be they declaratives or non-declaratives. The following utterance (typical of letter writing), for example, is considered as a 'statement' in form but does not assert any fact. Its meaning is, in fact, far richer than that. Rather, it has the force of a request, with specific conditions being satisfied.

-'I wonder if I could remind you gently that I would like to receive a copy of your Bern paper as soon as possible…' (From Holec in Riley 1985: 32)

To think of a simple assertion is to accommodate its main properties, which may include the following (Searle 1969):

1- *the speaker has proof of the truth of the proposition*

2- *it is not obvious that his interlocutor knows this proposition*

3- *the speaker believes the proposition*

4- *the proposition represents an existing state of affairs.*

On Speech Act Theory, a 'statement' is considered as an act like other acts. What distinguishes it from a 'question' and a 'directive' is a set of specific conditions of act occurrence and not its form. These conditions would include, in addition to those that should obtain for an assertion to count, as mentioned above, the following:

1- Addresser intends to influence in some way his addressee (e.g. *to* convince him of a fact expressed by means of the propositional content) and expects his addressee to accept what he states to him.

2- Addressee can accept addresser's statement of fact or can refute it altogether.

In case all conditions are met, a 'statement' is taken as an *assertion*. Consider the following example (Bachman 1990).

'Smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and may complicate pregnancy.' (Bachman 1990: 110)

All the facts in the utterance point at assigning the act the force of asserting on account of what the addresser intends to do with his statement.

Yet, this form of statement has not always the illocutionary force of *asserting*. In fact, instances abound where other illocutionary forces are acted *via* a statement-structure clause. Let us consider the following examples.

'Passengers are requested to cross the railway line by the footbridge.' (Lyons 1977: 729)

The utterance,found at a railway footbridge and whichfunctions as a directive, has the force of a request issued by the authority concerned with the safety of passengers at this place.

According to Speech Act theory, the concern is, then, supra-syntactico-semantic, in that it looks for what is being donewith a statement-like clause. It transcends the propositional content, yet shapes it in accordance with the illocution.

(2)QUESTIONS

Questions are typically used for *information-seeking*, or *eliciting*. Their pragmatic interpretation does not preclude them from doing what is typical of them. Yet, their use in different contexts makes them obey certain conditions for their interpretation. Let us state first that the two main questions (Yes-no questions and wh-questions) are used primarily in case an addresser requires his addressee to say whether the propositional content is true (Fraser in Richards and Schmidth 1983). This is the case with Yes-no question type 'Is it cold?'. As to the other type, i.e. wh-type of question, the addresser requires his addressee to fill in some information gap referred to by the wh-element.

'What is his name?, said Mr Bennet to his wife, inquiring about the new neighbour. (Jane Austin: *Pride and Prejudice*)

In fact, a question differs from a statement in that it relies on what the addressee will contribute to the interaction. Whereas in the case of a statement the addresser possesses the information and either challenges his addressee or expects a confirmation from him.

One non-illocutionary condition pertaining to questions, excluding rhetorical questions, is that any utterance functioning as a question requires conventionally an answer. Assigning information-seeking illocutionary force to an utterance builds upon some conditions. This requires in some cases a confirmation of the propositional content or its rejection by the addressee in some other cases. Another condition attendant upon a question is that when an addresser intends his utterance to be a question (to be precise, an information-seeking question), he should commit himself to a fact, *viz* he should not know the answer. The utterance

'Is the door open?' (Lyons 1977: 755)

Expresses doubt as to the truth of the propositional content (the state of the door to be open or not). As to the illocutionary act being intended by the producer of the segment, it depends on his intention behind his asking such a question. Having the addressee to 'close the door', on account of addresser's desire to do this, stands as the best candidate for assigning a force of (an indirect) *directive* to the utterance. The addressee may provide an answer such as 'Yes, it is', 'I don't know', yet the illocution remains present until there is compliance by the addressee. Non-compliance with the act may happen if the addressee does not desire, or in case some other condition is not satisfied.

(3)DIRECTIVES

Directives represent a class of Searle's categories of acts (mentioned earlier). Unlike grammar-defined ones (commands, orders and the like), directives, here, constitute a rather general class. They extend from pure *commands* to *requests*, *directions*, *instructions*, *prohibitions*, *recommendations*, *warnings*, *advice* and the like. Within this class, language is used to get things done. And there is a pragmatic fact that

'…any appropriately uttered imperative sentence is directed at the addressee, who is thereby asked to perform some action (of which he or she is the intended agent and hence the active subject).' (Horn 1988: 136)

To distinguish a grammatical consideration of 'imperatives' from a pragmatic account of 'directives', Leech (1983) posits that the latter has to cover such utterances as:

1- *Have a good time (wish)*

2- *Help yourself (offer)*

3- *Make yourself at home (invitation)*

4- *Be whole (faith healing)*

5- *Go to hell (curse)*

6- *Say that again, and I'll hit you (threat)*

Etc.

Conditions attendant upon each of the above acts will allow for its distinction from the others, though some overlap is not excluded. Generally speaking, one would talk of a command, a subclass of directives if the following conditions are held true (Peccei 1999).

1- The speaker must be in a position to direct the hearer to perform the act.

2- The directed act must not be something which has already happened or would happen anyway.

3- The directed act must be something the hearer is willing or obligated to carry out if asked.

4- The directed act must be something which the hearer is capable of carrying out.

5- The directed act must be something which is needed by or desirable to the speaker. (Peccei 1999: 55)

Investing an utterance with the force of 'directing' should obey the above set of felicity conditions.

In accordance with such conditions, an addressee is left with no option of refusing, as is the case with a request, for example.

On the face of it, the following 'statements' appear to assert something. Their satisfaction of the 'directive' conditions, however, belies this and puts them within the 'camp' of the directive sub-class of a command. This is very important, since a great number of directives come in a form which does not correspond at all with their illocution.

The door is open(with the meaning of: 'shut the door')

'Thank you for not smoking.'(sign posted in a public place) (Fraser in Richards and Schmidth 1983) (with the meaning of: 'do not smoke')

They may also include such tactful utterances as

- It might be better if you close the door(close the door)

- I want you to close the door(close the door)

-People at the back are you listening? (Directing someone to listen).

-What are you meant to be doing? (Stop what you are doing and do what you should do).

  (Leech 1983)

But directives have not always the force of commanding. They may also function as requests or as some other act. In the language of advertising, for instance, a directive has no intention of commanding or even requesting. The illocutionary force in such a case is to urge (urging) the target audience, say, to buy something. If it happens that the audience does not comply with the act, no sanction will follow up, as it often happens with a command or an order. Also with advising, what the addresser is doing is just to 'tell people what is right for them to do without there being any kind of imposition'.

On the other hand, not all felicity conditions of a command hold for other acts because in those other acts the addressee has more option not to comply with the 'mand' (Lyons 1977). For instance, for an act of 'requesting' to obtain, the following conditions have to be met:

-The *requestor* must be in a position (he possesses the right) to   make the request.

 -The *requestee* must be able to accomplish the request.

 -The request must be desired by the requestor.

Further, requests are considered in the benefit of addresser, in the sense that what a request or usually asks for (requests) will be beneficial to him or her.

The two acts of *instructing* and *directing* fall, also, within the class of directives as defined above. They differ from a command in that they usually leave more option to the addressee not to comply; yet unlike a request, they are considered to be in the benefit of addressee. Two cases in point are the following utterances. The first is an *instruction* given in case of a scald.

'First, place the burnt area in cool water for at least ten minutes.'   (Stephens 1986: 36) and the second is a *direction* as to finding a place 'Take the number 15 bus from the station and get off at the Star Hotel. Walk down Cromwell Road, past the Odeon Cinema, and then take the first turning…' (Ibid: 39)

In the case of an act of *warning* achieved by the following utterance Beware of pickpockets one would add to the three conditions above the following two conditions (Widdowson 1979).

-The addresser refers to an action which need be done by the addressee to avoid being hurt.

- The addresser knows something that the addressee does not know.

A point is worth being noted. Although there exist conditions defining each act, one cannot think of some algorithmic defining rules that set acts apart. Speech Acts are sometimes meant to be ambivalent. To quote Leech (1977)

'The rhetoric of speech acts often encourages ambivalence: "Would you like to come and sit down?"…depending on the situation could be an invitation, a request or a directive. Or, more important, it could be deliberately poised on the uncertain boundary between all three. It is often in the speaker's interest, and in the interest of politeness, to allow the precise force of a speech act to remain unclear.' (Leech 1977: 99)

COCLUSION
The foregoing insights into Speech Act, if applied in the classroom, seem to be rewarding. Once introduced into the non-correspondence between sentences and utterances, between utterances and acts they actualize within the constraints of some communicative conditions, learners will be enabled to identify what is meant *via* what is said. Moreover, Speech Act, as a pragmatic branch, will require of learners to be sensitive to aspects of the speech situation, so crucial for both act defining and appropriate use of language. To this may be added yet another equally important merit of Speech Act; it gets students indulged in sociocultural embeddings in terms of which a great deal of the verbal behaviour is accounted for. Grammar as a formal system will see its role highly rewarding if it cooperates with Speech Act-based analysis in the realization of meaning. A grammar of the sort can legitimately claim to be communicative.

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