

Influence of speech acts on interpersonal relationships

PAMPHILE BIGIRINDAVYI

Pan-African University Institute of Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences (PAUGHSS)

Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI)

pamphilebigirindavyi@gmail.com

Buea/Cameroon

Abstract: *This study explores the role of speech acts in influencing interpersonal relationships. In other words, it explores how speech acts shape and influence interpersonal relationships. Speech acts, an ocean of speech that we produce every day in our communication, include various forms such as requests, promises, apologies, and compliments. By examining the ways in which these acts affect the dynamics of personal and professional relationships, this research highlights the power of language in fostering trust, managing and resolve conflicts, empathizing and enhancing social bonds. Either it demonstrates how effective use of speech acts can lead to stronger and more positive connections, while inappropriate use of speech acts can cause frustration and weaken relationships. This study is theoretically guided by the speech act theory developed by Searle in 1969 which focuses on the ways in which words can be used not only to present information but also to carry out actions. Methodologically, this study used a documentary research method based on secondary sources, and the findings underscore the importance of communication skills in personal development and social harmony, offering practical insights for improving interpersonal communication in various contexts.*

Keywords: Speech act, interpersonal relationship, communication, interpersonal communication

Influence des actes de langage sur les relations interpersonnelles

Résumé

Cette étude explore le rôle des actes de langage dans l'influence des relations interpersonnelles. En d'autres termes, il explore comment les actes de langage façonnent et influencent les relations interpersonnelles. Les actes de langage, un océan de discours que nous produisons chaque jour dans notre communication, comprennent diverses formes telles que des demandes, des promesses, des excuses et des compliments. En examinant la façon dont ces actes affectent la dynamique des relations personnelles et professionnelles, cette recherche met en évidence le pouvoir du langage dans la promotion de la confiance, la gestion et la résolution des conflits, l'empathie et le renforcement des liens sociaux. Soit il démontre comment l'utilisation efficace des actes de langage peut conduire à des liens plus forts et plus positifs, tandis que l'utilisation inappropriée des actes de langage peut causer de la frustration et affaiblir les relations.

Sur le plan théorique, cette étude est guidée par la théorie des actes de langage développée par Searle en 1969 qui se concentre sur la manière dont les mots peuvent être utilisés non seulement pour présenter des informations, mais aussi pour effectuer des actions.

Sur le plan méthodologique, cette étude a utilisé une méthode de recherche documentaire basée sur les sources secondaires, et les résultats soulignent l'importance des compétences de communication dans le développement personnel et l'harmonie sociale, offrant des perspectives pratiques pour améliorer la communication interpersonnelle dans divers contextes.

Mots clés : Acte de parole, relation interpersonnelle, communication, communication interpersonnelle

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

Language is a powerful tool that shapes our social interactions and influences our relationships. The way we use our language describes who we are, where we are coming from and even what we think about a given topic. Either, when we open our mouth and produce a word, sentence or deliver a speech can be the source of bonding or destroying our relationship with others. Therefore, one of the most significant aspects of language is the use of speech acts communicative actions that convey intentions, emotions, and social cues. Speech acts encompass a wide range of expressions, including requests, promises, apologies, and compliments, each playing a crucial role in how we connect with others. This paper delves into the impact of speech acts on interpersonal relationships, examining how different forms of communication contribute to building trust, managing conflicts, and strengthening social bonds.

By understanding the nuances of speech acts, we can enhance our communication skills and foster positive relationships both personally and professionally.

1.2. Research question

How do speech acts influence interpersonal relationships?

1.3. Research objective

This study aims to explore the impact of speech acts on the quality of interpersonal relationships, examining how various types of speech acts influence communication, trust, and social bonds between individuals.

2. Literature Review

In this section that will be divide into two major parts namely conceptual review where we are going to define the key words of this work (Speech act, interpersonal relationship, communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication) and the theoretical review where we are going to detail some theories that guide our work.

2.1. Conceptual review

Under this section we are going to define the key words of this work and those are Speech act, interpersonal relationship, communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication.

a. Speech act

According to J.L. Austin, (1962) a speech act is simply defined as an utterance that performs an action. A speech act can also be defined as an utterance that serves a function in communication. It is an action that is performed in saying something. Examples include offering an apology, making a request, giving a compliment, or issuing a warning.

b. Interpersonal relationship

T. D., & Eby, L. T. d. T. (2012) define interpersonal relationship as a social connection between individuals that is characterized by a pattern of interactions and effective communications.

c. Communication

De Vito, (2020) defines communication as the process by which individuals exchange information, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and meanings through verbal and non-verbal methods. Communication requires a sender, a message, a medium, and a receiver, with the goal of achieving shared understanding.

d. Interpersonal communication

Trenholm, & Jensen, (2021) defined interpersonal communication as the process by which individuals exchange information, feelings, and meaning through verbal and non-verbal messages. It involves direct, face-to-face interactions between two or more people and encompasses a range of communication behaviors including speaking, listening, and non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and gestures.

2.2. Theoretical review

Under this section we are going to detail the theory that guided this work.

1) Speech act theory

The concept of speech act theory was introduced by J.L. Austin, an Oxford philosopher, in his 1962 work, "How to Do Things with Words." It was later expanded upon by the American philosopher John Searle in 1969.

Speech act theory, a subfield within pragmatics, explores how language is not only a means of conveying information but also a tool for performing actions. This theory has applications in various fields, including linguistics, philosophy, psychology, legal and literary studies, and artificial intelligence.

Speech act theory identifies three components of utterances:

- **Locutionary Acts:** These involve the production of meaningful statements that are understood by the listener.

- **Illocutionary Acts:** These are actions performed through speech, such as informing, promising, ordering, apologizing, thanking, or answering a question. They express a specific attitude and have an illocutionary force.
- **Perlocutionary Acts:** These produce an effect on the listener's feelings, thoughts, or actions, such as persuading or frightening them.

To determine the nature of a speech act, it is important to first identify the type of act being performed. Locutionary acts are simply the production of linguistic sounds or marks with meaning and reference, as described by Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay in "Philosophy of Language: The Central Topics." Illocutionary and Perlocutionary acts can occur simultaneously during the locution of a statement.

Illocutionary acts direct the audience to perform a specific action or to respond in a certain way. For example, they can convey a promise, an order, an apology, or an expression of thanks. These acts carry a certain illocutionary force and can be grouped into different families based on their intent.

Perlocutionary acts, on the other hand, result in a consequence for the listener. They affect the listener's feelings, thoughts, or actions, such as changing their mind or instilling fear. Unlike illocutionary acts, Perlocutionary acts can evoke emotional responses from the audience.

For instance, consider the statement, "I will not be your friend." The impending loss of friendship is an illocutionary act, while the effect of instilling fear in the friend to comply is a Perlocutionary act.

a. Principles of the speech act theory

Austin, (1962) agreed that speech act theory is set on the following main principles that help to understand how language is used to perform actions

1. Speech Acts Classification: Speech acts are classified into three main types:

- a) **Locutionary Acts:** The actual utterance and its literal meaning (e.g., saying "The cat is on the mat").
- b) **Illocutionary Acts:** The intended function of the utterance (e.g., asserting, questioning, commanding, promising).
- c) **Perlocutionary Acts:** The effect of the utterance on the listener (e.g., persuading, frightening, inspiring).

2. Contextual Relevance

The meaning and function of a speech act depend on the context in which it is uttered. This includes the social, cultural, and situational context that influences how the speech act is interpreted.

3. Intentionality:

The speaker's intention plays a crucial role in determining the illocutionary force of an utterance. The same Locutionary act can have different illocutionary forces depending on the speaker's intent (e.g., "Can you pass the salt?" could be a request or a question about ability).

4. Constitutive Rules:

Speech acts are governed by constitutive rules that define what counts as performing a particular speech act in a given context. For example, saying "I apologize" in the appropriate context counts as making an apology.

5. Felicity Conditions:

For a speech act to be successful (or "felicitous"), certain conditions must be met. These include:

6. Preparatory Conditions:

The context and speaker's authority to perform the act (e.g., a judge has the authority to sentence a defendant).

7. Sincerity Conditions:

The speaker genuinely means what they are saying (e.g., for an apology to be sincere, the speaker must feel remorse).

8. Essential Conditions:

The act must be performed according to the conventions that define it (e.g., saying "I promise" creates an obligation for future action).

9. Performatives vs. Constatives:

J.L. Austin (1962) distinguished between performative utterances (which perform an action, e.g., "I name this ship") and constative utterances (which describe a state of affairs, e.g., "The ship is named").

These principles provide a framework for analyzing how language functions in communication and how speech acts can perform various actions in interpersonal interactions.

b. Families of Speech Act

According to J.L. Austin in his work "How to Do Things with Words," illocutionary acts can be categorized into common families based on the speaker's intended purpose. Austin identifies five primary classes:

- **Verdictives:** These involve delivering a finding or judgement.
- **Exercitives:** These showcase power or influence, such as making decisions or commands.
- **Commissives:** These are commitments to a future action, like promising or undertaking an obligation.
- **Behabitives:** These pertain to social behaviors and attitudes, such as apologizing, congratulating, or condoling.
- **Expositives:** These illustrate how our language functions, including clarifying or explaining.

Additionally, David Crystal, in his "Dictionary of Linguistics" (2008), supports these categories and provides additional examples, such as:

- **Directives:** Attempts by the speaker to get the listener to do something (e.g., begging, commanding, requesting).
- **Expressives:** Expressions of the speaker's psychological state (e.g., apologizing, welcoming, sympathizing).
- **Declarations:** Utterances that bring about a new external reality (e.g., christening, marrying, resigning).

It's important to understand that these categories are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Malmkjaer (2010) notes in "Speech-Act Theory" that there are many borderline cases and overlaps, leading to extensive research aimed at refining these classifications.

Despite the complexities and overlaps, these five widely accepted categories effectively capture a broad spectrum of human expression, especially in the context of illocutionary acts within speech theory.

Briefly Austin, (1962), and Searle (1969) has classified 3 main actions related to speech acts namely: Locutionary, illocutionary and Perlocutionary acts.

- 1) **Locutionary act:** Yule, (1996) defined it as an utterance in the form of statement. Ex: This box is heavy.
- 2) **Illocutionary act:** It is related to something someone said that has the effect on the action. For example, giving an order, or making a promise.

Ex: Is there any salt? (the illocutionary act is a request: Please give me some salt.)

- 3) **Perlocutionary act:** It refers to the effects the utterance has on the thoughts or actions of the other person.

c. Categories of speech acts

Austin, (1962) and Searle, (1969) has classified speech acts into 5 categories namely Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declarations.

1) Representatives/Assertives

Representatives are speech acts that the utterance commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. Utterances are produced based on the speaker's observations and then expressed as facts or opinions derived from those observations. Representative speech acts are indicated by various verbs, including remind, tell, assert, deny, correct, state, guess, predict, report, describe, inform, insist, assure, agree, claim, believe, and conclude.

Directives

Directive speech acts are utilized by the speaker to encourage or command someone to take a specific action. These speech acts include **requesting, questioning, command, order, and suggesting.**

Ex: Could you lend me a pencil, please?

The utterance represents the speaker's request the hearer to do something which is to lend him a pencil.

2) Commissives

Commissives are speech acts that the utterances commit the speaker to some future cause of action, these include promising, threatening, offering, refusal, pledges.

Ex: I will be back.

3) Expressive

These speech acts express the speaker's psychological state. Examples include acts like thanking, apologizing, welcoming, and congratulating.

Ex: Don't be shy, my home is your home.

The utterance represents the speaker's expression that he/she welcomes someone.

4) Declaration

Declarations are speech acts that the utterance effect immediate changes in institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions.

They include excommunicating, declaring war, christening, firing from employment.

Ex: You are dead to me.

This theory is related to this work first in the sense that it helps in analyzing how different types of speech acts (e.g., assertives, directives, Commissives, Expressives, declarations) influence interpersonal relationships. By categorizing and examining these acts, you can explore how they shape interactions and affect relationship dynamics.

Second, this theory emphasizes the importance of illocutionary acts (the intended meaning) and Perlocutionary acts (the effect on the listener). This can help you understand how the intentions behind words and their impact on others play a crucial role in building, maintaining, or deteriorating relationships.

Third, by applying Speech Act Theory, you can provide practical examples of how specific speech acts (e.g., apologies, promises, requests) can either strengthen or weaken interpersonal relationships. This can offer valuable insights into effective communication strategies.

Characteristics of interpersonal relationship

Interpersonal relationships are characterized by various attributes that define the nature and quality of the connections between individuals.

DeVito, (2020), has made a range of characteristics of interpersonal relationship:

1. **Communication:** Effective communication is fundamental in interpersonal relationships. It involves both verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, including speaking, listening, body language, and facial expressions.
2. **Trust:** Trust is an important component that enables individuals to rely on each other, share personal information, and feel secure in the relationship.
3. **Empathy:** This is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person enhances the emotional connection and fosters compassion and support.
4. **Mutual Respect:** This may include respecting each other's points of view, values, culture, and boundaries for a healthy relationship. It plays an important role in maintaining harmony and avoiding unnecessary conflicts.
5. **Emotional Support:** Providing emotional support during times of need strengthens the bond and demonstrates care and concern for each other's well-being.

6. **Reciprocity:** Interpersonal relationships are based on mutual exchange, where both parties contribute and benefit from the relationship.
7. **Conflict Resolution:** The ability to effectively manage and resolve conflicts is important for sustaining long-term relationships. It involves negotiation, compromise, and finding a common ground that work for both parties.
8. **Intimacy:** Intimacy refers to the closeness and connectedness between individuals. It can be emotional, intellectual, or physical and contributes to the depth of the relationship.
9. **Commitment:** Commitment involves a willingness to invest time and effort into the relationship and a dedication to maintaining and nurturing the bond over time.
10. **Shared Goals and Values:** Having common goals and values can strengthen the relationship by providing a sense of purpose and direction.

3. Methodology

In this study, we explore how speech acts influence interpersonal relationships by analyzing existing literature and data. We gathered information from various sources, including academic articles, books, and reliable online databases that cover our topic comprehensively. Each source was carefully selected to ensure it met our standards for credibility, relevance, and up-to-date information. We then synthesized the data to uncover common themes and insights into how different speech acts impact human interactions. By comparing and contrasting findings from different studies, we aimed to build a well-rounded understanding of the subject. While we recognize that secondary research has its limitations such as potential biases and the lack of experimental data we have addressed these issues to strengthen the reliability of our conclusions.

4. Results

The results have showed that speech acts can influence our relationships in numerous ways and some of them are the following:

1. **Expressing Emotions:** Speech acts like apologies, congratulations, and condolences allow us to convey our personal feelings and emotions. They help build empathy and understanding between people. For example, a heartfelt apology can mend a broken relationship by acknowledging mistakes and expressing genuine regret. A significant instance of this is when former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe formally apologized to South Korean “comfort women” for their suffering during World War II in 2018. This apology was a crucial step towards reconciliation between the two nations, as it aimed to acknowledge past wrongs and foster healing. (The diplomat, Nov.21,2021)
2. **Formalizing Relationships:** Certain speech acts, like declarations (e.g., “I declare you husband and wife”), can formalize or change the nature of a relationship, marking significant life events and transitions. This act takes a relationship to a new level, where behaviors and interactions evolve accordingly.
3. **Requests and Commands:** The way we make requests or give commands can shape our relationships. Consider the difference between “Please close the door” and “Close the door,” or “Could you help me with that salt?” and “Give me that salt.” Using polite and respectful phrases can positively influence relationships, making interactions smoother and more pleasant. On the other hand, direct commands can come across as rude and potentially damage relationships.
4. **Promises and Commitments:** Speech acts involving promises (e.g., “I will marry you”) can strengthen relationships by building trust and reliability.
5. **Keeping or Breaking Promises:** Fulfilling promises can strengthen relationships, while breaking them can lead to conflict and mistrust.

Example 1: John: “As promised, here is the proposal ring. Thank you for being so patient.”

Jane: “Wow! I will love you forever, my king.”

Example 2: Richard: “I’m sorry, I cannot marry you as promised; I have another girlfriend.”

Jacky: “Go to hell, Richard. Never talk to me again.”

6. **Resolving Conflicts:** Acknowledging hurt feelings and expressing regret can be crucial in resolving conflicts and fostering reconciliation. For instance, in Rwanda, those who committed genocide often kneel before their victims to acknowledge and regret their actions, helping to restore harmony in their communities.
7. **Positive Speech Acts:** Compliments and expressions of gratitude can enhance relationships by creating a positive atmosphere. They reinforce mutual respect and appreciation.

Example: "I express my gratitude to the President of Rwanda for reappointing me as Prime Minister of the Republic of Rwanda" (Edouard Ngirente, Prime Minister of Rwanda, on X, August 13, 2024).

8. **Encouragement and Support:** Speech acts like "You did a great job!" or "I'm here for you" foster a supportive environment and deepen connections. Encouragement from teachers, for example, can make students feel valued and confident to participate.
9. **Following Social Norms:** Adhering to social norms (e.g., greetings, formal addresses) helps maintain harmony and respect in interactions. In societies where greetings are common, relationships with community members are smoother, and people with good manners can easily receive services.

5. Conclusion

This study provides deep insights into the dynamics of human communication. Speech acts, as defined by the Speech Act Theory, go beyond the exchange of words; they embrace in large the intentions, functions, and effects of our utterances. The effective use of speech acts can positively impact the quality of interpersonal relationships by fostering understanding, trust, and cooperation among individuals, while their ineffective use may harm and destroy interpersonal relationship and therefore lead to frustration and conflict.

Through the analysis of various types of speech acts such as assertives, directives, Commissive, Expressives, and declarations, it becomes evident that the way we communicate plays a critical role in shaping our interactions. For instance, assertives help in sharing information and building a common knowledge, while directives guide behavior and actions. Commissive, which involve promises and commitments, are essential in establishing reliability and trust. Expressives convey emotions and attitudes, enhancing empathy and emotional connections. Declarations, by changing the external situation, often mark significant moments in relationships, such as making commitments or resolving conflicts.

The principles of Speech Act Theory, including the importance of context, intentionality, and felicity conditions, highlight the complexities of communication. Recognizing and understanding these principles enable individuals to navigate conversations more effectively, thereby enhancing interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, speech acts are instrumental in conflict resolution. By identifying the underlying needs and concerns of each party through illocutionary acts, and considering the Perlocutionary effects, communicators can address issues more constructively, leading to mutually satisfactory solutions. This not only resolves conflict but also strengthens the bonds between individuals.

Briefly, the influence of speech acts on interpersonal relationships is profound. Effective communication, guided by the principles of Speech Act Theory, can create a supportive and empathetic environment, fostering deeper connections and enhancing the overall quality of relationships. By mastering the use of speech acts, individuals can improve their interpersonal skills, leading to more meaningful and fulfilling interactions.

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