

College of Education for Humanities
Department of English

Lecture Three (Chapter 10)

Pragmatics - Speech Acts

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Speech Acts

Definition

-A speech act is an action that is performed by a speaker with an utterance.

-Speech acts can be used to make requests, give commands, ask questions, or provide information.

- So, a speech act is not just about uttering a sentence; it's about performing an action with that utterance.

For example, if you say, "I'll be there at six," you are not just uttering a sentence but also making a promise.

How speech acts work

In order to understand how speech acts work, we need to consider the relationship between the structure of an utterance and its function.

Function	Structure	Utterance
Question	Interrogative	Did you eat the pizza?
Command (or request)	Imperative	Eat the pizza (please)!
Statement	Declarative	You ate the pizza.

Scholars established some grouping of Speech acts that share some conditions.

1. **Assertives:** utterances that describe some state of affairs. Examples of this type involve statements, giving information, notifications, assertions, conclusions and descriptions.
e.g., *'Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius'*
2. **Directives:** utterances used to get the listener to do (or not do) something.
Examples involve: Requesting, ordering, forbidding, advising, suggesting, insisting, recommending.
e.g., Give me a cup of coffee. Make it black.
3. **Commissives:** utterances in which the speaker commits himself/herself to do something. Examples of this type involve Promising, threatening
e.g., I'll be back. (Promises)
4. **Expressives:** utterances that state what the speaker feels. Examples of expressives include Apologising, thanking, congratulating, condoling, and welcoming.
e.g., I'm really sorry.
5. **Declarations:** speech acts that change the status of an entity via an utterance. Examples involve: Naming, appointing, resigning, firing, and divorcing.
e.g., Priest: I now pronounce you a husband and a wife.

Direct & indirect speech acts

-Whenever there is a direct relationship between a structure and a function, we have a direct speech act.

For example: When you seriously want to know the answer to
Is she wearing a wig? That utterance is a direct speech act.

-Whenever there is an indirect relationship between a structure and a function, we have an indirect speech act.

For example, you can use an **interrogative structure** to make a request.

Can you pass the salt?

Also, you can use a **declarative structure** to make a request to the person who just came in from the chilly outside to close it.
You left the door open.

Other examples of indirect speech acts:

-The declarative form *'The baby is sick'* has the illocutionary force of informing, and thus, it functions as a direct speech act. However, it can also be considered a request to take the baby to the doctor and, thus, functions as an indirect speech act. As a result, the directive speech act of requesting is carried out indirectly by performing the assertive speech act of informing.

-Another example explains how interrogation is used to make a request. *'Can you turn on the fan?'* Requesting the hearer to turn on the fan is performed indirectly by performing the speech act of asking.

Note: context always shapes how we interpret speech. Direct/Indirect