An Overview of Speech Acts in English

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Abstract: Last century philosophers made a great step forward in understanding the way in which we use words in order to achieve something in the real world. They pointed to the fact that we perform speech acts when we speak. The production of speech acts is governed by some rules which help us understand the utterance meaning and decode the speaker meaning. Moreover, in a discourse, the speech acts are organized linearly in sequences of micro-speech acts, and hierarchically in macro-speech acts, which are associated with an entire piece of discourse. As the right choice of speech acts in advertisements contribute to the achievement of the advertiser's goals, the present article selects its examples from various advertisements placed in some English magazines.

Keywords: discourse, illocutionary act, illocutionary force indicating device, speech acts.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, philosophers started wondering on the nature of our utterances. In that period a philosophical doctrine called *logical positivism* appeared. This doctrine states that a sentence has to be either true or false to the reality for which it stands, otherwise it is meaningless (Levinson 1994: 227). It follows then that most literary, aesthetic, ethical discourses and everyday utterances are meaningless. One of the most fervent proponents of this doctrine is Wittgenstein (1961), who later on however underlines that "meaning is use" (Wittgenstein 1958: paragraph 43) and that utterances may be explained in relation to their role in different activities or *language-games* (Șimon 2014).

A similar stand to that of the later Wittgenstein is also adopted by Austin who emphasises that "the total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (Austin

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1962: 147). He distinguishes between those speech acts that express some psychological states and those that mirror the type of social interaction they are involved in. Austin also classifies speech acts into constative and performative ones, the former being evaluated according to truth conditions and the latter according to felicity conditions (Șimon & Dejica 2015a). Furthermore, he emphasises that when uttering a sentence, we simultaneously perform a locutionary, an illocutionary and a perlocutionary act. Taking all this into consideration, Austin's theory of speech acts is perceived as being more comprehensive than the one proposed by logical positivism which it soon replaced.

Searle (1994) further develops Austin's speech acts theory. He emphasises that we use speech acts in order to communicate and therefore speech acts are the smallest units of linguistic communication. The production of speech acts is determined by *regulative* and *constitutive rules*, which influence the illocutionary force of an utterance. The illocutionary force is also the one on which Searle bases his taxonomy of speech acts (Șimon & Dejica 2015b). His classification is thus very helpful for the identification and description of speech acts.

Van Dijk's (1992) approaches speech acts from the perspective of the theory of actions as using speech acts in speaking implies doing actions in real life. He thus differentiates among single speech acts, composite speech acts and sequences of speech acts. Furthermore, he considers that each speech act should contribute to the realisation of other speech acts, so that there might be preparatory, component, auxiliary and consequent speech acts (Șimon 2008). Van Dijk contributes greatly to the understanding of the speech acts by highlighting that they are organised linearly in micro-speech acts, and hierarchically in global / macro-speech acts.

Taking these theories into account, the present article outlines their most important contributions to the description of the speech acts, used independently, or in larger pieces of discourse. The examples used to illustrate some key-concepts are taken from advertisements that appeared in some English magazines listed at the end of the article. The choice of speech acts in advertisements is highly important as they contribute greatly to the success or failure of the advertisement in question.

2. Austin's speech acts theory

In his lectures on speech acts, Austin (1962) clarifies that speech acts are expressions of psychological states (e.g. embarrassment, gratitude, irritation, regrets, etc.) or of involvement in social interaction (e.g. ordering, requesting, promising, warning, etc.). Furthermore, he distinguishes between constative and performative utterances. The former ones describe a state-of-affairs and have the property of being either true or false: *We put a lot in our lasagna.* (*Parents*, September 2006). The latter

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ones, though rarely encountered in written advertisements, perform an act, do something actively (marrying, christening, apologizing, naming a ship, etc.), they do not just say things and they "are not 'true or false'" (Austin 1962: 5): *We call it the dream team* (*Cosmopolitan*, June 2002). In order to evaluate a performative utterance, Austin (1962: 18) proposes a set of felicity conditions, which determine whether the utterance is 'felicitous', i.e. successful, or 'infelicitous', i.e. unsuccessful.

Austin (1962: 57) also points to the fact that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between constative and performative utterances as they both display the same linguistic characteristics: declarative sentence, first person subject, verb used in the present tense simple of the indicative mood and in the active voice. He proposes the insertion of the adverb *hereby* between subject and predicate in order to check whether the utterance is performative or not: *We hereby call it the dream team.*

Moreover, Austin (1962: 69) also classifies performatives into:

a. *implicit* or *primary performatives*, which are less specific and explicit: *A Sharps bedroom will help you to create a quiet place to relax.* (*Good Housekeeping*, May 2003) (It counts as an elliptical promise)

b. *explicit performatives*, which make explicit the act being performed by the utterance: *We promise that a Sharps bedroom will help you to create a quiet place to relax.*

Austin (1962: 108) also emphasises that in uttering a sentence, three kinds of acts are simultaneously performed: a locutionary, an illocutionary and a perlocutionary act. The *locutionary act* presupposes the utterance of a sentence with a determinate sense and reference. The *illocutionary act* describes the direct achievements of an utterance (the making of a request, statement, promise, offer, asking a question, issuing an order, etc.) on account of the conventional force / intention associated with it or with its explicit paraphrase. Finally, the *perlocutionary act* presupposes the bringing about of intended and unintended effects on the addressee(s) by uttering the sentence. These effects obviously depend on the circumstances of the utterance (Șimon 2014: 139-140).

For example, in an advertisement the following line can be read: *Call for a brochure 0845 270 0355* (*Good Housekeeping*, September 2006). The locutionary act consists of a sentence with the meaning 'pick up the phone, dial 0845 270 0355, order a brochure'. The illocutionary act performed may be a direction or an urge. The perlocutionary act may be either persuasion or annoyance. The advertiser may persuade the possible customer to call and order the brochure, particularly if s/he has previously had positive experiences when ordering. However if the possible customer has wanted to order a brochure in the past and has been harassed with plenty other offers when s/he only wanted a brochure, s/he may feel annoyed by the line mentioned above.

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3. Searle's speech acts theory

Searle (1994) defines the speech acts as "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (1994:16) as "speaking a language is performing speech acts" (1994: 16). He considers that the production of speech acts is governed by *regulative* and *constitutive rules*. The regulative rules, such as the rules of etiquette, regulate the pre-existing forms of behaviour or activities, which are independent of these rules. The constitutive rules constitute and regulate activities, such as playing football or chess, which depend on these rules (Searle 1994: 33-34). From the perspective of the communication process, the constitutive rules describe the *sentence / utterance meaning*, determine the *illocutionary force of the utterance*, and thus help the hearer decode the *speaker meaning*. The illocutionary force of an utterance is accomplished through linguistic means, such as word order, stress, intonation contour, punctuation, verbs, especially performative verbs, adverbs, etc., which are called Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID) (Searle 1994: 42-50; 62-71).

Taking into account the illocutionary force, Searle (1976: 1-24) also establishes a five-class taxonomy of illocutionary acts:

a. *Assertives/ Representatives* commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, e.g. stating, claiming, reporting, concluding, confessing, confirming, etc.: *There is no finer Vodka.* (*Cosmopolitan*, June 2002)

b. *Directives* are attempts made by the speaker to get the hearer to do a volitional act, e.g. ordering, commanding, begging, challenging, requesting, questioning, advising, recommending, etc.: *Serve neat at 32 ºF.* (*Cosmopolitan*, June 2002)

c. *Commissives* commit the speaker to some action, e.g. promising, offering, swearing, vowing, threatening, etc.: *Consolidated Credit Counselling Services, Inc. can reduce or eliminate interest charges.* (*Cosmopolitan*, June 2002)

d. *Expressives* express the speaker's psychological state with respect to the state-of-affairs expressed by the propositional content, e.g. thanking, apologizing, blaming, pardoning, congratulating, condoling, welcoming, etc.: *It couldn't be easier!* (*Good Housekeeping*, September 2006)

e. *Declaratives* bring about changes in the reality expressed by the propositional content, e.g. christening, resigning, dismissing, naming, appointing, sentencing, etc.: *We call it the dream team.* (*Cosmopolitan*, June 2002)

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4. Van Dijk's speech acts theory

While Austin and Searle study speech acts in isolated sentences issued in a given context, van Dijk (1992) analyses them in sequences that occur in natural discourses. Van Dijk (1992: 167-183) considers that speech acts should be approached from the viewpoint of the theory of actions, which distinguishes between acts and actions. The *acts* are intention-successful doings and the acts which require further consequences in order to be purpose-successful are called *actions* (van Dijk 1992: 176-177). Moreover, the theory of actions establishes a taxonomy of acts: *single acts, composite acts* (*compound acts* and *complex acts*) and *sequences of acts*. Taking this classification into account, van Dijk (1992: 172-178; 213-218) distinguishes among single speech acts, composite speech acts and sequences of speech acts:

a. *a single (speech) act* is an act / a speech act with one intended result: *In just ten minutes roots are gone!* (*In Style*, September 2007)

b. *composite (speech) acts* have no given purpose, and may be compound or complex:

b1. *a compound (speech) act* consists of equally important (speech) acts, the result of each (speech) act being a condition for the success of the next (speech) act:

All in One looks like white bread // but has the wheatgerm and fibre goodness of wholemeal (compound speech acts) – *it's the easy way to healthier eating.* (major speech act) (*Psychologies*, September 2006)

b2. *a complex (speech) act* is made up of minor and major (speech) acts; at least one (speech) act is embedded in one of the component major (speech) acts:

As far as I'm concerned (embedded speech act) // *my war against roots is over* (major speech act). (*In Style*, September 2007)

c. *sequences of (speech) acts* have a given purpose, the same agent and the acts need not be part of a definite plan; they may be interpreted as:

c1. *one action* if one global intention / plan can be assigned to them, or if this action can be a condition for / consequence of other actions:

Does the idea of no preservatives in your lasagna sound good? It sounds good to us, too. (*Parents*, September 2006) (the global intention is drawing the recipients' attention on the qualities of the new product)

c2. *sequences of actions* in all the other cases:

STRENGTHENS GUMS by up to 73%* //

CONTAINS VITAMIN E (the first sequence of speech acts)

(...)

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Its formula:
- *Contains anti oxidant Vitamin E //*
- *Protects teeth against cavities //*
- *Strengthens gums by up to 73%* //*
- *Helps fight gum recession* (the second sequence of speech acts) (*Psychologies***,** September 2006)

Taking into account the fact that the theory of action emphasises that acts contribute to the realisation of other acts, speech acts are classified from the perspective of their contribution to the realization of another speech act into preparatory, component, auxiliary and consequent speech acts (van Dijk 1992: 172-178; 213-218; Superceanu 2000: 77):

a. *preparatory (speech) act*: when its result is a necessary or probable condition for another (speech) act:

> *When your baby's ready to start feeding herself,* (preparatory act) *// try Fruit Puffs & Veggie Puffs* (major act)*.* (*Parents*, September 2006)

b. *component (speech) act*: which counts as a necessary (speech) act represented in the global intention of the major (speech) act:

> (…) *you won't believe* (major act) // *it lasts for hours and hours* (component act) **(***Psychologies***,** September 2006**)**

c. *auxiliary (speech) act*: when the success of its result is a sufficient condition for the success of the major (speech) act:

> *For fitness and lifestyle tips visit* [*www.lorealparis.co.uk*](www.lorealparis.co.uk) (major act) *// BECAUSE YOU'RE WORTH IT* (auxiliary act)*.* (*Psychologies*, September 2006)

d. *consequent (speech) act*: which is derived from the performance of the major (speech) act:

> *New Comfort concentrates have less packaging* (major act) // *so you can do your bit for the environment* (consequent act)*.* (*In Style*, September 2007)

Van Dijk's (1992: 232) major contribution to the study of speech acts in discourse is that he differentiates between *micro-speech acts*, i.e. the individual speech acts, and *macro-speech acts / global speech acts*, i.e. the global, overall speech act of a piece of discourse. More exactly, van Dijk defines a macro-speech act as "the global speech act performed by the utterance of a whole discourse, and executed by a sequence of possibly different speech acts" (1992: 215). To put it differently, a discourse is coherent if all the micro-speech acts of a discourse are organized linearly in sequences and hierarchically in global speech acts. This is particularly relevant for conventional types of discourse, such as advertisements or

narratives, which are rather associated with global speech acts than with component speech acts (van Dijk 1992: 233).

5. Conclusion

The present article gave an account of the most important speech acts theories developed by Austin, Searle, and van Dijk, who consider that speaking a language is performing acts. Their speech acts theories complement each other so that in the end an entire linguistic phenomenon is covered. Speech acts, the minimal units of linguistic communication, were thus defined as expressions of psychological states or involvement in social interaction. They have been classified into constative and performative; locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary; assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. These speech acts may be evaluated according to truth conditions or to felicity conditions, and may be described in terms of constitutive or regulative rules. The illocutionary force of an utterance is established by the illocutionary force indicating devices, which are linguistic means such as verbs, intonation contour, stress, word order, etc. In a discourse, speech acts are organised linearly in micro-speech act sequences and hierarchically in macro-speech acts, which are the global speech acts performed by entire discourses. All the topics approached in the present article have been exemplified with speech acts selected from English magazine advertisements in order to emphasise their important role in achieving the advertiser's goals.

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