

Speech Act Theory and Its Application to EFL Teaching in China

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Abstract

In recent years, with the unremitting development of Speech Act Theory, it has gradually emerged as an important topic and has been considered as a basic theory in pragmatics. A speech act as an action performed by means of language is an important element of communicative competence and the Speech Act Theory not only conveys the linguistic rules people share to create the acts, but also leads language learners to use this language tactfully or appropriately. It is believed that to learn a language is indeed to learn how to communicate in that language. However, evidence shows that many Chinese learners of English fail to achieve the tactful or appropriate use of English in their daily communication with native speakers. Thereby, researchers suggest that applying Speech Act Theory in language teaching has become increasingly imperative (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980; Flor & Juan, 2010; Yalden, 1987). This paper briefly views the Speech Act Theory involving Austin's concept of Speech Act and Searle's concept of Speech Act and analyzes other important theories based on Speech Act Theory. It is suggested applying Speech Act Theory to foreign language teaching and teachers of a foreign language should cultivate a learners' linguistic competence as well as pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Speech Act, Pragmatic Competence, Intercultural Communication

Introduction

In recent years, English as a lingua franca has emerged as a means of communication between speakers with different first languages, which drives English teaching to become increasingly important in non-English speaking countries including China. At the same time, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers are trying to improve English learners' language competence comprehensively so that English learners can communicate with English speakers effectively based on polite and proper verbal exchanges. However, despite being able to speak English fluently there is often a pragmatic dissidence in various speech acts that may reduce the communicative intent (Cortazzi & Jin, 2008; Goh & Kwah, 1997; Rao, 1996, 2002). In other words, a good-willed speech act in one culture may be considered ill-mannered in another, with a potential consequential result of misunderstanding or breakdown of an intercultural conversation, or may even cause offence to the other side. Hence, it is believed that an effective and successful communication between interlocutors rests upon proper and polite speech acts.

This paper briefly introduces the Speech Act Theory with specific mention of Austin and Searle's concept of Speech Act. It is followed by a discussion on perspectives of intercultural communication and an examination on variations of performative speech acts, especially in light of different cultures. Giving the current situation of EFL teaching in the Chinese context, the suggestion of applying Speech Act Theory in teaching EFL is proposed. It is argued that Speech Act Theory should be applied in foreign language teaching and language teachers need to not only cultivate students' linguistic competence but also to develop pragmatic competence (the use of language).

Speech Act Theory

In attempting to convey a meaning, people do not only create utterances involving grammatical structures and words, they also carry out actions via those utterances. In this case, John Austin (1962) firstly introduced Speech Act Theory and John Searle (1969) further elaborated it from the fundamental principle that language is used to carry out actions. Since then, Speech Act Theory has become influential not only within philosophy, but also in linguistics, psychology, literary theory and many other scholarly disciplines (Green, 2007). Speech Act Theory, with a significant contribution to interpersonal communication, promotes a lot of scholars to investigate the ways in which people utilize language to manage the social interaction (Bowe & Martin, 2007; Gass & Neu, 1995; Thomas, 2006; Vanderveken, 2009).

Austin's concept of Speech Act

Austin (1962) is acknowledged as the creator of Speech Act Theory. Based on a comparison between constative utterances and performative utterances, Austin refers 'constative utterances' to those utterances which are used to describe or constata something, and those which thus are true or false, and 'performative utterances' to those utterances that not only perform a speech act beyond the assertion but also at the same time describe the speech act. Austin also especially points out some characteristics of performative utterances including active voice, a performative verb in the present sense, first person subject and an indirect object in second person singular (you).

According to Austin, the speech act itself can be divided into three component acts which underlie the issuing of an utterance: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act "includes the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction and the utterance of them with a certain 'meaning'" (Austin, 1962, p. 94). That is to say, locutionary acts are those acts which convey literal meaning with the help of a given syntax and lexicon (For example, it is cold in here). An illocutionary act is viewed as the force carried with words or sentences (To illustrate, by telling someone "It is cold in here", someone is actually asking someone else to close the window). It is the act performed in saying the locution. The last is perlocutionary act which means the consequential effect of utterance on an interlocutor or the change caused by the utterance (For instance, someone closes the window because of someone else's statement).

Searle' concept of Speech Act

Building on Austin's Speech Act Theory, John Searle, Austin's successor, develops 'linguistic theory' and proposes 'linguistic acts'. Contrary to Austin who stresses a performative verb, Searle (1969) emphasizes subject to the conditions and rules: that is how a listener responses to an utterance. He explicitly associates speech acts with the production, interpretation and meaning of an utterance, and explores what the speaker means or intends, what the utterance conveys, what the hearer appreciates, and what the rules govern the linguistic elements. Based on these points, Searle concludes that there are indeed only illocutionary acts in that the central linguistic unit is a speech act rather than a sign. Besides, speech acts are restricted to two types of rules which reflect different status: regulative rules (expressed as imperatives), and constitutive rules (expressed as more definitional). Given the speech act as the basic unit of communication, Searle (1969) places speech act at the very crux of the study of the language, meaning, and communication. He proposes some terms that are commonly used for such as request, promise, apology, compliment, complain, or invitation. These descriptive terms for different kinds of speech acts apply to the speakers' communicative intention in producing an utterance. Focusing on the illocutionary acts, Searle defines five classes of speech acts including assertives, directives, commissives, expressive, and declaration.

In addition, in the light of the views of intentionality in Speech Act Theory, Searle (1975) further proposes 'indirect speech acts' and suggests that understanding of the indirect meaning depends on the speaker and hearer's mutually shared knowledge and the hearer's rationality and inference. The use of indirect speech acts which is linked with politeness purposes can promote interlocutors to achieve an effective communication. In effect, the varied use of speech acts could result in different politeness effects and lead to successful interpersonal communications.

Other researches related to speech acts

On the basis of Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory, some relevant theories have been developed such as Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature and Cooperative Principles (1989), Lakoff's po-

liteness rules (1973) and Leech's Politeness Principles (1983). The Cooperative Principle (CP) is composed of four maxims which include quality, quantity, relation and manner (Grice, 1989), and the politeness rules are formality, deference and camaraderie, with two rules of pragmatic competence: "be clear" and "be polite" (Lakoff, 1973). Also, Leech, another famous linguist, builds his pragmatic theory and puts forward Politeness Principles which are designed to "minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs; maximize (all things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs" (Leech, 1983, p. 81). Leech suggests that, in the conversation, participants should follow the politeness principles as being: 1) Tact, 2) Generosity, 3) Approbation, 4) Modesty, 5) Agreement, 6) Sympathy (see Leech, 1983).

Evidence shows that all of these foresaid theories have made great contributions to language use study and intercultural communication (Bowe & Martin, 2007; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Hsieh (2009) claims that Speech Act Theory can adequately work as a threshold of the investigation of language in communication and give a basic explanation of the linguistic construction of the sentences under scrutiny. However, as the conceptions of politeness tend to vary across cultures, there exist different expressions in the speech acts which may result in pragmatic failure in culturally different settings. Thus, understanding those differences becomes very important to effective and successful intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication

Communication is "dynamic, interactive, and irreversible contextual" (Gay, 2000, p. 79). It is a continuous and even-changing activity that occurs between people who interact and attempt to influence each other. It is irretrievable in that its effects cannot be changed or altered once a communication takes place, in spite of taking efforts to amend them. Porter and Samovar (1991) argue that communication is controlled by the rules of social and physical contexts in which it occurs, while culture is the rule-governing system that defines the forms, functions and contents of communication. Thereby, understanding the connections between culture and communication is critical to improving intercultural interactions.

Successful communication not only involves the participants' mutual understanding but also the polite and proper verbal exchanges. Evidence shows that people with different cultural backgrounds find it particularly difficult to communicate with each other (Fielding, 2006); also, the communication involving people from different cultures can go wrong more easily than those who share the same cultural background, because the meanings and understandings in some utterances associated with culturally specific conventions tend to be indirect and implicit. This means that a communicative flexibility is very important for comprehending the implied meanings behind some speech acts to achieve a satisfactory communication between culturally different interlocutors (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982). Flexibility is an indispensable component of communication competence (Parks, 1994). In the intercultural interaction settings, competent communicators should have ability to adjust their communication to meet different situations, with the most effective and appropriate behaviors and expressions (Chen & Starosta, 2008). However, not everyone possesses such communicative flexibility (Wardhaugh, 2009). Evidence shows that due to the lack of such flexibility, there might be a severe breakdown in some intercultural interactions since culturally different people tend to depend very heavily on their own cultural background when explaining or interpreting speech (Wardhaugh, 2009). It is therefore suggested that foreign language learners need to develop this communicative flexibility, this ability to cross cultural boundaries (Sullivan, 2002).

However, as mentioned earlier, different cultures may encompass particular utterances to carry out some acts. Allan (1986) claims that in intercultural communication, any utterances can be understood to have illocutionary speech acts, but, when we try to translate an utterance with a certain illocutionary act into another language, there may be various kinds of interpretations. To illustrate, the greetings between native speakers of English could be 'Good morning', 'Hello, how are you' (Van Ek, 1975). On the contrary, in the Chinese context, two very common greetings could be translated to 'Have you eaten?' and 'Where are you going?' If such utterances are performed to ask the native speakers of English as a greeting, they might feel confused at this 'inquiry' or would misinterpreted as an invitation (Gass & Neu, 1996).

Thus, misunderstanding between two interlocutors who do not share the same culture can easily occur due to the disparity of the performative speech acts especially concerning different cultures. Pearce (1994) asserts that people with different cultural backgrounds may appreciate a performative speech act in different ways. For example, while the remark 'Your wife is really pretty' is regarded very natural and appreciated by Westerners, it could be considered offensive or impolite by Chinese people. Therefore, according to Pearce (1994), some differences related to speech acts should be taken into account in foreign language teaching and learning. Those differences include the differences in coverage of speech acts that people can perform, differences in the diversity of speech acts, differences in rules of performing speech acts, differences in the acceptance of new message and the differences in attitudes to the conversation.

A language learner needs to handle those aforementioned differences so as to develop the ability of performing appropriate speech acts in different contexts. But it can be difficult to identify the illocutionary force of speech acts. Thereby, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) specifically introduce "speech act set" which refers to the routinized ways in which a certain speech act can be patterned. They suggest that speech acts should be deliberated as sets of formulas which act upon the same purpose. With the speech act of apology as an example, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) propose five strategies in performing an apology including an expression ('I am really sorry'), an admission of responsibility ('it is my fault'), an excuse/explanation ('I couldn't catch the bus'), an offer to make amends ('I will buy another container') and a promise of nonrecurrence ('I will never do it again').

According to those strategies, Gass and Neu (1996) believe that if communicators can control the speech act sets for a certain speech act in the language in which they converse, they will be more likely to become successful speech acts users. Different cultures, even different communities in the same culture may have different rules in carrying out the speech acts, so it is very important to understand the sets of formulas associated with the speech acts in intercultural communication. Besides understanding the cultural differences between the source language and the target language, foreign language learners need not only to acquire speech act knowledge as part of language acquisition but also to understand the sets of formulas of speech acts to achieve successful communication (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980; Flor & Juan, 2010; Yalden, 1987).

Applying Speech Act Theory to EFL Teaching in China

Evidence shows that EFL teaching in China traditionally tended to focus on the development of students' linguistic competence, ignoring pragmatic competence (Cortazzi & Jin, 2008; Goh & Kwah, 1997; Harvey, 1985; Rao, 2002). As a result, many Chinese EFL learners, even though possessing good mastery of English grammar and vocabulary, still fail to make use of appropriate speech in their communication with native speakers of English (Cortazzi & Jin, 2008; Goh & Kwah, 1997; Rao, 1996, 2002).

According to Leung (2005), communicative competence involves both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. In other words, linguistic competence alone is not enough for a language learner to be competent as language is not just about syntax and lexis (Krasner, 1999). Language learners have to know the culturally proper ways to offer greetings, make requests, show apologies, express thanks, agree or disagree with others (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). They should be aware of behaviors and intonation patterns which are appropriate in their own speech community but may be considered differently by others with different cultural backgrounds. In other words, language learners should acquire pragmatic competence. Possessing this capability, language learners will be able to identify how different communicative functions are realized in English and how these communications can be successful in certain situations (Porter & Samovar, 1991).

Therefore, EFL teachers should help students develop both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence (Gass & Neu, 1996). As Kramsch and Thorne (2002) declare, to have linguistic competence does not mean that a speaker has communicative competence in that language; though our grammar or structure may be correct in that language, we may not speak it tactfully and appropriately in intercultural communication when we speak a foreign language (Thomas, 2006). Thereby, it is believed that pragmatic capacity plays a critical role in the tactful and felicitous use of a language in different settings. It is the key of the success in different interactions.

With this respect, EFL teachers in the Chinese context, while teaching the linguistic form of English, should also consider providing knowledge concerning speech acts preformed in English so as to develop students' pragmatic competence (Flor & Juan, 2010; Hinkel, 1999). English teachers need to help students understand socially appropriate communication, and offer satisfactory performatives in different social and cultural settings such as how to offer a request with respect and politeness (Flood, 2003). For instance, Chinese EFL learners should know the utterance "Hey you, come here" may be a linguistically correct request, but it is not a culturally felicitous way for a student to address a teacher; or "Sit down please" could be appreciated as improper by Westerners.

In order to help language learners acquire standard, polite and universal English, Li (1984) argues that language learners should be exposed to 'Authentic Language' of English. That means learners should practice the target language in real life to achieve communicative purposes. For this point, EFL teachers in China may design various learning activities to foster students to be engaged in meaningful and authentic language use instead of in merely mechanical practice of language patterns (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). It is believed if EFL teachers can incorporate the knowledge of speech acts into those activities through Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is presently thought to provide a style of teaching and learning that is beneficial to language learners (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), language learners may learn and utilize the target language more effectively and successfully (Lee & VanPatten, 2003; Littlewood, 2007; Newby, 2006).

To achieve this, an illustration is provided by the use of various authentic sources from the native speech community (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). English movies, TV shows, news broadcasts and so on can make students engage in authentic cultural experiences. With those resources, students may be asked to discuss in groups or to write reviews. Moreover, EFL students can role play some situations (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). For example, how an inappropriate greeting is used or a miscommunication is acted out based on cultural differences. Meanwhile, other students observe the role play and try to identify the reasons for the inappropriateness or the miscommunication. Then, they can be encouraged to act out the same situation using a culturally appropriate form of address. It is believed that this kind of training and practice can help language learners improve their pragmatic competence effectively (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

In addition, speech acts are always associated with culture, so linguists believe that students will master a language only when they learn both its linguistic and cultural norms (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Therefore, language teachers, when teaching English especially in terms of the usage of English in certain circumstances, need to take into consideration cultural factors and imbed culture in the linguistic forms that students are learning. To illustrate, teachers can integrate cultural features into an explicit topic of discussion associated with linguistic forms to make students aware of those cultural features presented in the language.

Obviously, Speech Act Theory plays a significant part in EFL teaching and learning. It is also associated with politeness as well as good behaviors in intercultural communication. Thereby, Kasper (1989) and Schmidt and Richards (1980) suggest that foreign language learning should include not only the learning of speech act categories, but also the education in the politeness principles and strategies laid down in speech acts.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has reviewed Speech Act Theory and its significance to language learning. It has also examined the differences of speech acts in culturally different settings. Given that an effective communication involves not only the communicators' common understanding but also polite and proper verbal exchanges, it is evident that speech acts play a significant role in intercultural communication. Not only does Speech Act Theory carries the linguistic rules related to utterance, but also leads language learners to use this language appropriately and effectively. Due to the diversity of various speech acts in culturally different situations, language learners should understand relevant knowledge and rules related to the speech acts. Besides, in consideration of the current situation of EFL teaching in China, it is recommended that EFL teachers need to introduce Speech Act Theory in the class and deliver relevant knowledge to help students become capable of performing appropriate speech acts in intercultural communication.

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