

Interdisciplinarity in language, speech acts and discourse: an overview

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Abstract

Speech acts and discourse are pragmatic events in which humans communicate through the use of language in society. In speech acts, natural sentences or utterances which perform certain functions on the hearer as communicative intentions are the presumptive goals. But the actions cannot perform without certain felicitous conditions such as preparatory, sincerity and essential conditions, and paying close attention to contextualization as a resource for meaning recovery. Similarly, language is the acme of discourse at the metapragmatic level in which the entire society accounts for meaning as a dynamic process, even as current thinking guides and moulds society through persuasive discourse. This study is an attempt to make a clear distinction between speech acts and discourse devoid of ambiguity and trace their relationship within the pragmatic domain.

Keywords: Language, communicative event, speech act, discourse, pragmatic

Introduction

Any discussion such as the one we have at hand definitely requires a satisfactory or at least an explanation of the fundamental concept of the term “language”. This is because at the root of the entire exposition is the allied and seeming networking of language in its numerous manifestations. But the phenomenon called language means different things to different people, not in its core meaning of conceptualization but in its characteristics and scope. For instance, Hall (1969) views language as the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory symbols. Bloch and Trager (1942) define it as system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. Lyons (1981, p.3) remarks that “language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols”. While the Random House Dictionary of English (1966, p.106) notes that language is “any set or system of linguistic symbols as used in a more or less uniform fashion by a number of people who are thus enabled to communicate intelligibly with each other.” The list of such instructive views about language is endless and what is central in all of this is that language is essentially a means of communication between individuals.

Language is the means through which a society functions as members communicate with each other, express their feelings and desires, emotions and so on (Anyadiegwu & Obi-Okoye, 2009). Anybody can imagine how society would look like without the means of language and language can be better understood through its characteristics, some of which include, conventionality, arbitrariness, productivity and so on (Alo, 1995). Language is indispensable in society and that gives it credence for endless research in its nature and how it works. Today, it is through language that civilization, knowledge and culture are passed on from generation to generation. It is inseparable from human society and every normal human kind finds recourse in language in his daily living with others in society (Syal & Jindal, 2012).

Language, an all important aspect of social behaviour performs different functions and therefore studied at various levels of descriptions. Although new, an independent field called pragmatics is concerned with utterances as phonology is to sound as syntax is to sentences. Mey (2001, p.5) likens

pragmatics to Chomsky's notion of performance, that is, the way an individual manipulates language as different from competence, representing an individual user's knowledge of the language and its rules. Levinson (1983, p.3) adding his views, explains that pragmatics is the study between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of language. Use of language and contextualization constitute the major contributions of this view.

But as outlined earlier, human communication takes place chiefly by means of language and pragmatics is seen as the province in the use of language in human communication determinable by conditions set festering by the society. Ostman (1988 b, p.28) looks at all the units of analysis, such as the unit of analysis in semantics, he says meaning, then the unit of analysis for pragmatics, he says is "the functioning of language". Unarguably, pragmatics relates to how language functions, the relationship between language users and how utterances are interpreted, the ability of language user to match sentences with appropriate context are part of the domains of pragmatics (Emezue 2006, p.22).

The acknowledged utility of pragmatics invites a widespread research since its establishment as an independent body. Pragmatics affords us to have a fuller and deeper understanding of language use, and a more general reasonable account of human language behaviour. For example, a pragmatic view examines the problems of endangered languages around the world and tells us exactly what to do. Linguists need not just to go there and describe, but provide the need and arsenals to fight what has been called "Linguistic genocide" (Stutnabb-kangas & Philipson, 1994). Pragmatic sub disciplines which the discussion will turn to are, speech acts and discourse.

Speech acts vs. discourse

In pragmatics, we try to relate meaning to context of utterance in which we consider language as action performed by a speaker. It is pertinent to mention that when a speaker utters a sentence, this utterance performs an act. The performed act by a speaker in relation to a hearer based on the prevailing conditions of the time is what is known as speech-act (Emezue, 2009). These conditions which enable a hearer to discover meaning in an expression include: shared previous knowledge or cultural background between the interlocutors, that is, the speaker and the listener and the reasons for the performance of the act (Ndimele, 1999). Therefore, the context of the utterance and meaning that is involved is in the speaker's intention to convey certain messages and may not be explicit in the expression.

Serious work to consider meaning as part of an utterance or speech act was started and initiated by the philosopher Austin in 1960, with the publication, *How to do things with words*. According to Ndimele (1999), speech act theory is to analyse the roles that utterances play in relation to the behaviour or attitudes of the speakers and hearers in interpersonal communication. He suggests that speech acts theory is "communicative ability defined with respect to the intentions of the speaker while talking and the effects of his speech on the listener" (Ndimele 1999, p.107).

Speech act theory brings to fore that utterances are capable of producing far-reaching consequences in our daily lives. Utterances can either deny us or restore our freedom, restore us to privileges, commit us to a course of action, change an existing state of things and so on (Ndimele, 1999). The original ideas of speech acts theory were developed by Searle (1969) but Austin (1960) talks of distinctions between different aspects of speech acting. First, is the locutionary aspect, the activity we engaged in when we say some things. It is the act of producing grammatical and meaningful utterances from the hearer's point of view. One example may include; 'Please, bring the clock'. It is grammatical and meaningful. The locutionary act of this expression can be fulfilled if individual words, as well as their relationship in the sentence are clearly understood.

Second, illocutionary act is performed by the speaker by virtue of the utterance he produces. This may be a request, a question, a command, an apology and so on. For instance, if someone says "I do", in response to a question, "Do you take this woman to be your wedded wife?" at a wedding ceremony. This then has performed an action. When an utterance attains the status of a promise, a request, a command or even a threat it is intended for its illocutionary act (Ndimele 1999, p.111).

The third, is the perlocutionary act concerned with the effect a speaker's utterance has on the addressee. Emezue (2006) illustrates this with a man with a big paunch stomach, who was jokingly said to be pregnant. Also, a statement like, "You don't look your age", can give rise to a chain of different reactions. It might flatter or give joy to a young person. The effect a statement has on the hearer is what is meant the perlocutionary act of that statement.

Noting these facts, communication is successful when the addressee understands the speakers intentions, we mean the hearer to recognise the intended illocutionary act of an utterance known as illocutionary uptake. Austin (1960) avers that there are certain requirements needed for the accomplishment of illocutionary act. They are called felicity or appropriate conditions, namely, preparatory, sincerity and essential conditions. The preparatory condition refers to the right which the person performing the speech act has. When there is a misfire, the perlocutionary effect cannot be produced. The sincerity condition demands that the person performing a speech act must do it sincerely in good faith and he is not lying. And the essential condition refers to the speaker's true commitment to the act that he has just performed.

For a pragmatic understanding, Searle (1969), claims that there are five speech act categories that human beings can perform by the use of language which include the following: representative, directive, declarative, expressive and commissive. Representative is the speech act whose function is to describe the processes, states, or events in the world and which the speaker is committed to the truth of what he has just said. They include assertions, claims, and prediction and so on. For example:

This is my building.

I thank you for your support.

They will honour the invitation.

Speech act can be used in the form of a directive where language function to influence or act upon a target audience and cause them to carry out an instruction. This piece of instruction may be a verbal response or even a physical action in the form of a command, request, questioning, pleading etc. For example:

Close the case.

Please, see her through.

What can they offer?

Declarative speech act is the utterance which functions to change immediately the state of affairs in the world once it is made. Examples are, marrying, baptizing, and arresting, passing a sentence and so on, as outlined.

This is my husband

I name my daughter, Martha.

I hereby sentenced you to five years imprisonment.

Expressive speech act makes explicit the speakers feelings and attitudes towards some state of affairs or situations. Examples include, apologizing, congratulating, thanking and condoling, appreciating and so on, as outlined.

I sincerely thank you for the support.

I apologize for being able to settle your case.

You must know that I am angry with you.

Similarly, the commissive speech act commits the speaker to some future course of action in the world. Examples include, promising, warning, offering, vow, as indicated below.

I can never leave you suffer.

I shall stand as a witness against you.

I will report you to the bishop.

A quick glance at the discussion so far reveals that speech acts studies are of great consequence in a pragmatic life. It describes what Austin (1960) claims we do with words and we have seen a number of functions that human beings can perform using that instrument of language. But as Mey (2001, p. 126) notes, "as pragmatists, we should pay serious attention to contextual conditions when describing speech acts, and in general, peoples use of language". The emphasis for contextual conditions is simply stressed because if they are not met, then there will be no speech act despite what is said or written by any one. For example, Mey continues that court sentences and other legal documents are

invalid unless pronounced and promulgated by duly appointed magistrates using official channels. There lies the efficacy of speech acts.

On the other hand, discourse analysis is another specialised area where meaning can be derived in relation to context. Similarly, it is widely known among linguists that meaning is situated in both intra linguistic and extra linguistic contexts (Nati, 2005). The former refers to the context in which that piece of language occurs, while the later is the content of the external world (Syal & Jindal 2012, p. 160). In the world we are, people produce texts to get across a message, to express ideas and beliefs, to explain something, to get other people to do certain things, or to think in a certain way. The intention underlying these communication purposes is referred to as discourse, for it informs the creation of the text and its motivation (Widdowson 2007, p. 6-7).

Discourse, crystal (1992, p. 25) notes is “a continuous stretch of language larger than a sentence, often constituting of coherent unit such as a sermon, argument, joke or narrative”. Stubbs (1983, p.1), on the other hand, holds this view that discourse studies relate to the “organization of language above the sentence or above the clause and therefore the study of large linguistic units such as conversational exchanges or written texts”. In the views of both contributions is the unanimity that discourse studies not words or bits and pieces of language, but texts in the form mentioned by both. Yet, a significant remarking phrase in Crystal’s (1992) definition is constituting of coherent unit,” then whatever that should be called a discourse must have coherence in thought, that is a relationship in the events that took place. Therefore, unity of communicative intentions in any discourse is an important element in the dynamics of the entire process.

In Beaugrande (1981), instructive discussions were made and seven criteria were noted which have to be fulfilled before any work must be qualified as a discourse. These include, cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativeness, situationality, and intertextuality, but a particular work may not contain all of these. Beyond these qualities, a discourse must have certain links within it. Flowerdew (2013, pp.33-38) discusses these as substitution, ellipsis, reference, conjunction and lexical cohesion. Links in discourse are divided in two: those facts present in the analysed text, and contextual. The aforementioned links refer to the former, and from the fore going it is clear that discourse does not focus only on the correctness and connectedness of a single sentence. Rather, it focuses on the general outcome of the production.

Discourse studies have the rationale for a contextualised and suprasentential consideration of language use based on the intuition that knowing a language is more than just knowing the sentence and vocabulary, but it includes the role of participants in a conversation. To be able to do so is to account for what is referred to as the context of situation in which that particular event occurs and how the units of language combine together in realising the overall discourse (Emezue, 2006). The original notion of concept of context of situation was Malinowski’s (1923) brain child but was elaborated by Firth (1957, p. 206) where he claimed that “voices should not be entirely disassociated from the social context in which they function”. Hymes (1962) has a non-controversial treated of context of situation in terms of form and content, setting, participant, end, key, medium, genre, and other interactional norms in which language use is situated.

In discourse studies, Flowerdew (2013, p. 3) has reeled out various approaches to analysis. Some of them include: register analysis, which studies the features of a particular field; cohesion, coherence and thematic development, which examines how a text is welded together structurally and functionally; pragmatics, which is concerned with language in the actions it perform; conversation analysis, taking a micro analytical approach to spoken interaction; genre analysis, corpus-based discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, as a number of key approaches. In his publication, *The Archaeology of knowledge*, Foucault (1972), became one of the Europe’s key theorist of the subject of discourse in modern times.

The relationship between speech acts and discourse in language studies may be better described in some of the ways it can be highlighted. Speech acts is the performed act by a speaker in relation to the hearer and the conditions that enhance meaning recovery at the time the speech is made (Ndimele, 1999). It is language in use, the doing of things in the world with words. Although, there is no one –on-one correspondence between words we utter and speech acts performed, the ultimate goal is the expression of communicative intentions (Emezue, 2006). Two conditions for discovery of meanings include, shared knowledge and the reasons for the performed act. Speech acts mostly function in dialogue for instance, a request, question, promise, threat and so on. Speech acts places a significant role in structuring the numerous activities of human talk. Speech act in its linguistic context,

the entire world context, and its effects clearly manifested is recognised as situated pragmatic act (Mey, 2001).

Discourse is more than using a language, and Mey (2001, p. 190) describes it as "all human language activity which ultimately underlies the laws of the greater universe of discourse, understand as the entire context of human language-in-use". It involves all societal activities implicitly and explicitly-values, norms, rules and laws and all conditions of life, social, political, economic and cultural. Discourse is referred to as the metapragmatic condition, x-rays the fabric of society; the practice of society as it transcends the user and enables the individual to exist and co-exist with others. As a result, all speaking reflects, and are rooted in the structures of society metapragmatically (Mey 2001, p.192). For instance, in US, the current social discourse is devoured from the previously dominant issue of class distinctions but to other variables as race, gender, income, education and so on (Mey 2001, p.192). In summary, Emezue (2006, p. 22) notes that "context of situation determines the acceptability and appropriateness of what people say in relation to what is happening hence its relationship to pragmatics".

Conclusion

The ensuing discussion no doubt, places speech acts and discourse as pragmatic events in which humans communicatively use language in the context of society. In speech acts theory, the analyst investigates beneath the surface of events as it makes available to him the means of bringing to fore the context-based functions of the utterances of the speaker. On the other hand, discourse is a meta-pragmatic condition that is far beyond the collection and analysis of isolated or even 'live' sentences or utterances, but the activities of the discourse analyst represent the whole sociality in his environment commonly referred to as "fabric of society"

Speech acts studies are necessary as Searle, et al (1980), note that the minimal unit of communication is not the sentence, but rather it is the performance of certain kind of acts, such as making a statement, a request, giving orders, and so on. Also, speech acts can be used as an organizational principle for teaching and learning of language in the classroom. Similarly, discourse studies focus on the study of language in the context of use, and it is the vehicle by means of which communication takes place in society (Flowerdew, 2013). Discourse studies enhance communicative competence which Leung (2005) refers to as intellectual anchor, a predominant paradigm for language development throughout the world.

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