Speech acts and language teaching

John Flowerdew  Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Introduction

Previous surveys of speech act theory are to be found in Schmidt and Richards (1980) and, in this journal, Levinson (1980). As some time has now passed since the publication of these two articles, a new look at developments in this important area of linguistic theory for language teaching is perhaps now due. Whereas the two previous articles were very much on the theoretical side, more of a balance between theory and practical applications will be presented here.

The tremendous impact of functional approaches bears witness to the significant influence of speech act theory on language teaching. Although more recently there has been something of a return to renewed emphasis on language structure, it is probably safe to say that the use of language functions (speech acts) in syllabus and materials design is here to stay, whether as a central organising principle, as originally proposed by Wilkins (1973, 1976), or as a secondary one, with functions developing around a core grammatical component, along the lines proposed by Brumfit (1979).

Although, as Hawkins (1981: 167) points out, the germ of the functional syllabus can be found as far back as Sweet’s The practical study of languages (1899) and was developed further by Palmer (1917) and Ogden and Richards (1923), its adoption in contemporary times is attributable to Wilkins (1973, 1976) and his proposals for a ‘notional syllabus’.

Wilkins, basing his ideas on Jespersen’s notional categories in The philosophy of grammar (1924), proposed three types of meaning unit: semantico-grammatical categories, categories of modality, and categories of communicative function. The last of these three, categories of communicative function, are related by Wilkins to the speech act theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).

Theoretical background

Although the fundamental ideas put forward by Austin and developed further by Searle are well known, this survey would not be complete without at least a brief restatement of them.

Austin made a distinction between two fundamental functions of language, which he called locutionary and illocutionary. The locutionary function is the use of language to convey the literal meaning of the words and the grammatical structures of an utterance; it is concerned with the transfer of factual information. The illocutionary function is used to convey what Austin referred to as ‘force’ and which he defined as ‘how it (language) is to be taken’ (Austin, 1962: 73); it is concerned with the creation of some sort of effect on the addressee. Of course, it is unlikely that an utterance would fulfil only one function to the exclusion of the other. Thus ‘to perform a locutionary act is in general, we may say, also, and in eo ipso to perform an illocutionary act’ (Austin, 1962: 98). To take a simple example, the locutionary function of an utterance such as It’s cold in here is to convey the literal meaning regarding the temperature in the particular place where the utterance was made; the illocutionary function of the utterance, depending on the circumstances, might be to request (to turn on the heating).

Individual illocutionary acts (or speech acts, as Searle preferred to call them) are defined according to ‘felicity conditions’ (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1965, 1969), i.e. the conditions which must pertain for the successful performance of a particular speech act. The following, for example, are the conditions for the act of promising:

- a future act on the part of the speaker must be predicted;
- the speaker must believe that the hearer would prefer the promised act to be performed to its not being performed;
- the promised act must not be something the speaker would be expected to do anyway;
- the promise must be made only if the speaker intends doing the promised act;
- the making of the promise counts as an obligation to carry out the action.

1 An example of a recent ‘structural’ course book is Headway (Soars & Soars, 1986). Early functionally organised course books are Say what you mean in English (Andrews, 1975), Penguin Functional English (Watcyn-Jones, 1978) and Approaches (Johnson & Morrow, 1979). Course books using a combination of grammatical and functional organisation are Encounters (Garton-Sprenger, 1979), Meanings into Words (Doff, Jones & Mitchell, 1983), Checkpoint English (Whitney, 1984), Break into English (Carrier & Haines, 1985), and Time for English (Vincent & Keane, 1986).
In Searle (1969), there are analyses along these lines of the acts of requesting, asserting, questioning, thanking, advising, warning, greeting, and congratulating.

Speech acts may be performed indirectly. Indirect speech acts are defined by Searle (1975: 60) as, 'cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another'. Thus, for the example above, It's told in here, an indirect speech act of requesting is performed by means of a direct statement of fact.

Speech act taxonomies

Initial interest in speech acts on the part of language teaching (Wilkins, 1973, 1976; van Ek & Alexander, 1975) focused on the development of ordered inventories of classes of acts for incorporation into syllabuses. The problem that immediately arises in organising a syllabus based on categories of illocutionary meaning is finding a suitable organising principle. Considerable work has been carried out in this area on the part of linguists and philosophers. Levinson (1981: 21, note 3) refers to 'the considerable interest on the part of linguists and philosophers in the classificatory enterprise'. In this section we will review this work. At the same time we will look at applications in the field of language teaching syllabus design.

The first attempt at classification of speech acts and the one which presumably provided a model for Wilkins (he refers to it in the text of Notional syllabuses and it was the only one produced at that time) was that of Austin (1962). Taking as his starting point the illocutionary verbs of English (which he estimated to be anywhere between 1,000 and 10,000), Austin tentatively divided them into five general classes, as follows:

1. Verdictives - the giving of a verdict, as by a jury or umpire etc. - e.g. estimate, reckon, appraise;
2. Exercitives - the exercising of power, rights, or influence - e.g. appoint, vote, order, urge, advise, warn;
3. Commissives - e.g. promising or otherwise undertaking - promise, contract, undertake;
4. Behabatives - a miscellaneous group, having to do with attitudes and social behaviour - e.g. apologise, congratulate, commend;
5. Expositives - the clarifying of reasons, arguments and communications - e.g. reply, argue, concede, assume.

It is interesting to set these categories beside the six categories proposed by Wilkins:

1. Judgment and evaluation - e.g. approving, disapproving, estimating;
2. Suasion - e.g. persuading, commanding, warning;
3. Argument - e.g. reporting, asserting, requesting, rejecting;
4. Rational enquiry and exposition - e.g. comparing, defining, explaining;
5. Personal emotions - e.g. pleasure, displeasure, sorrow;
6. Emotional relations - e.g. greeting, flattering, thanking.

Although Wilkins's taxonomy is in many ways similar to Austin's, it differs in certain respects. A very close correspondence can be made between Austin's verdictives and Wilkins's judgement and evaluation, and between Austin's exercitives and Wilkins's suasion. Austin's expositives, on the other hand, would seem to include both Wilkins's argument and rational enquiry and exposition, whilst Austin's behabatives are again broken down by Wilkins into two groups: personal emotions and emotional relations. There seems to be no place, however, in Wilkins's taxonomy for Austin's class commissive.

Developing out of the initial work of Wilkins, the 'Threshold Level' (van Ek & Alexander, 1975) is a specification of the first-stage needs of learners of European languages. The 'Language Functions' component of this specification is broken down into six categories:

1. Imparting and seeking factual information;
2. Expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes;
3. Expressing and finding out emotional attitudes;
4. Expressing and finding out moral attitudes;
5. Getting things done (suasion);

Austin, Wilkins, and van Ek are all at pains to stress the ad hoc nature of their taxonomies. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are open to a number of criticisms.

Searle (1976: 9), for example, lists six difficulties with Austin's taxonomy. They are, in ascending order of importance: (1) a confusion between illocutionary verbs and illocutionary acts, (2) not all the verbs are illocutionary verbs, (3) too much overlap of the categories, (4) too much heterogeneity within the categories, (5) many of the verbs don't fit the category they are listed under, and (6) there is no consistent principle of classification.

Criticisms along similar lines have been made of Wilkins's framework. Stratton (1977), for example, has complained that all taxonomies such as those of Wilkins are incomplete and are based on subjective decisions on the part of the analyst. Brumfit (1981: 91) sees Wilkin's framework as 'the beginning of a taxonomy', but claims that the categories are 'plucked out of the air'.

With regard to criticisms of this type it is worth pointing out the advantage of a model such as the 'Threshold Level', where the classification is developed out of the putative needs of users of the foreign language. So long as the functions listed correspond
to the needs of the learner, the viability of the classificatory framework as a watertight system will be of less importance. In addition, as van Ek (1975: 26) points out, practical applications of an experimental nature are able to provide feedback which can lead to modifications in the lists. Thus problems along the lines of those specified by Hill (1977), for example, concerning gaps and inconsistencies in the framework, can be ironed out.

Turning now to Searle's own attempts at speech act classification, here we see an attempt to develop a more principled framework. Searle (1969) initially considered the possibility of classifying speech acts through a specification of felicity conditions, acts being grouped according to shared conditions. However, this proved not to be feasible because the conditions needed to specify various acts are too varied (Searle, 1969: 69).

As a result of this impasse, Searle (1976) was led to adopt a different approach, basing his classification on at least 12 criteria, three of which, however, are the most important:

1. Illocutionary point – the things we do with language – this is not the same as illocutionary force: the illocutionary point of a request is the same as that of a command, i.e. to get the hearer to do something, whereas the illocutionary force is clearly different.

2. Direction of fit – how the words uttered relate to the world, e.g. with statements words fit the world, i.e. the truth of the utterance is determined according to whether they correspond with the state of the world. With requests the world must change to fit the words, i.e. the world must be changed to fulfil the request.

3. Psychological state – e.g. stating involves belief in the proposition, promising involves intending, requesting involves wanting.

Applying these criteria, Searle claims that illocutionary acts can be reduced to just five basic types of speech act:

1. representatives – acts which describe states or events in the world, they commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition – hypothesise, suggest, swear;

2. directives – acts which attempt to get the hearer to do something, the speaker wants the world to change to fit his words – command, request, invite;

3. commissives – acts which commit the speaker to doing something in the future, they involve the intention of the speaker to match the world to his words – undertake, promise, threaten;

4. expressives – acts in which the speaker expresses feelings regarding a state of affairs that the expressive refers to, but does not presuppose or assert – thank, congratulate, welcome;

5. declarations – acts which in their uttering change the world, e.g. declaring, as in I declare you man and wife, naming, as in I name this ship 'Titanic'.

If Searle's taxonomy is indeed valid, then this would represent a powerful tool in the hands of the designer of a language teaching syllabus, for there would be, as he says (Searle, 1975: 22–23) 'a rather limited number of basic things we do with language', and these could form the basis of the syllabus.

It is probably true to say that Searle's taxonomy has been the most widely accepted of those produced to date. Hancher (1979) reviews five competing classifications of illocutionary acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1976; Vendler, 1972; Ohmann, 1972; and Fraser, 1974), finding Searle's system 'tighter and more consistent' than Austin's and more 'economic' than the others (Hancher, 1979: 3). Nevertheless Hancher proposes two further categories to be added to Searle's system: 'conditionals', acts which have both commissive and directive force, e.g. inviting, offering, bidding, and 'cooperative' acts, acts which involve more than one agent, e.g. a gift, a barter, a sale, or a contract.

Bach and Harnish (1979), like Hancher, accept the basic framework of Searle's taxonomy, their constatives, directives, commissives, and acknowledgments, corresponding to the first four of Searle's categories. Searle's fifth category, declarations, is handled by their 'conventional illocutionary acts'.

Coulthard (1985: 25), whilst favourable towards Searle's system, is more tentative in his support: 'Searle's proposals are obviously a first but very suggestive attempt at classification...'.

Edmondson (1981a), on the other hand, is more overtly critical, seeing two flaws in Searle's taxonomy. First, while Searle notes that Austin classifies English illocutionary verbs, and not illocutionary acts (1976: 8), Searle seems to do the same thing (see below on this question of illocutionary acts vs. illocutionary verbs). Second, the five-category classification appears to be arbitrary – why are there five basic things we can do with language? – the distinguishing criteria are not applied systematically.

Modifications to Searle's framework are suggested by Leech (1983). Leech, who like Edmondson is careful to point out that Searle's taxonomy is of illocutionary verbs, as opposed to acts, accepts Searle's first four classes, but excludes the fifth, declarations, on the grounds that it is not typical of illocutionary acts, being more concerned with 'ritual', than illocution (Leech, 1983: 180). In its place Leech adds an additional class, 'rogative', whose characteristic is 'question introducing', and which includes such verbs as, ask, inquire, query, and question.

An interesting adaptation of Searle's classification, because it was developed specifically with language syllabus design in mind, is that of Willis (1983). Willis points out that speech act theorists are concerned with discrete utterances and thus make
no allowance for how the function of utterances might relate to other utterances in the ongoing discourse. In order to take account of this interactive role of utterances, he accordingly adds three categories to Searle's list. 'Metacommunicatives' are acts which 'call attention to problems in communication and request repair' (Willis, 1983: 142). They are normally questions, such as Sorry? What? Why do you say that? Structives are acts whose function is to mark boundaries in the discourse. They occur at the beginning of an interaction to mark an opening, and at the end of an interaction to mark a closing. Thus, for example, I wonder if you could help me? might mark an opening, whilst O.K. that's it, then. See you next week, might mark a closing. Willis's third extra category is 'Elicitation'. Searle included questions under 'directives', but Willis prefers to view them as a separate category functioning interactively to elicit instances of the other four major classes.

Working again from a language teaching perspective, Arndt and Ryan (1986), like Willis, are aware of the interactive nature of utterances. They not only take account of the links between the illocutions in discourse, however, but also the links set up between locutions, or propositions, as they prefer to call them. They thus propose a three-way classification of communicative functions: the referential function – basically a reworking of Searle; the interactive function – how utterances relate one to the other; and the coherential function – how propositions relate one to the other.

A somewhat different approach to speech act classification is that of Martin (1981). Working within a Hallidayan framework, speech function is handled under the semantics of the 'mood' system, as adapted from Halliday (1976, 1980). Martin specifies just seventeen speech acts, all of which can be generated from the following network (Martin, 1981: 58):

```
Speech function

Address other
Express self

1. Initiating
2. Mediating
3. Responding
4. Calling
5. Giving
6. Demanding
7. Content confirming
8. Role
determining
9. Goods and services information
```

Because the categories in this system are constrained grammatically, via the mood system, Martin overcomes the problem encountered by other systems, pointed out by Edmondson and Leech, of classifying speech acts on the basis of lexis. The system is capable of further subclassification, for example to take into account politeness; or rearrangement, to make it appropriate to different registers.

In this section we have seen that Levinson was indeed right in claiming there to be considerable interest in the classificatory enterprise on the part of linguists and philosophers. In addition, this section has shown the interest in the application of these ideas to language teaching syllabus design. If any conclusion can be drawn from this discussion, it is perhaps that it is surprising that more interest has not been shown on the part of language teachers in developing and/or adopting more principled frameworks for language teaching, along the lines of Searle.

**Speech acts in combination**

The work on speech acts reviewed so far has concentrated for the most part on single speech acts; the assumption is that the speaker stands in front of the hearer and performs a speech act. Of course, as Searle himself (1979: 27) has pointed out, life is not like that; life goes on with whole series of sequences of speech acts. What is required to complement speech act theory, therefore, is a theory of conversation, a theory of how speech acts combine in connected discourse.

For the language teacher the particular significance of a theory of conversation based on speech acts is that it will enable him to show the learner, in a principled way, not only ways of performing particular speech acts, but also ways of combining them together. Work of particular relevance to language teaching in this area has been carried out both by sociologists, under the heading of the ethnography of communication, or conversational analysis, and by linguists, under the heading of discourse analysis. We can do no more here than highlight some of the key findings of the work of these two fields for language teaching, providing references to more extensive reviews.

1. **Conversational analysis – adjacency pairs**


We will focus here on the concept of adjacency pairs, because work on adjacency pairs tries to specify rules according to which one speech act combines with another. Adjacency pairs are closely related, stereotypical pairs of speech acts, which are claimed to be a recurrent feature of conversation (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Schegloff, 1977). Pairs which have been identified (McLaughlin, 1984: 69) include Question–Answer; Summons–Answer; Greeting–Greeting; Compliment–Accept/Reject; Closing–Closing; Request–Grant/Deny; Apology

72
State of the art: speech acts and language teaching

- Accept/Refuse; Threat-Response; Insult-Response; Challenge-Response; Accuse-Deny/Confess; Assertion-Assent/Dissent; and Boast-Appreciate/Deride.

It will be noted that for some adjacency pairs the second pair part is reciprocal, that for some there is only one appropriate second pair part, and that for some there is more than one (Coulthard, 1985: 69).

Adjacency pairs are defined by Schegloff (1977: 84–5) as having the following features: (1) two-utterance length, (2) adjacent positioning of component utterances, (3) different speaker producing each utterance, (4) relative ordering of parts (i.e. first pair parts precede second pair parts), and (5) discrimination relations (i.e. the pair type of which a first pair part is a member is relevant to the selection among second pair parts.) The key point here is (5), which accounts for how one utterance circumscribes what follows. This notion is developed further by the concept of ‘conditional relevance’ (Schegloff, 1972: 76). According to the principle of conditional relevance, one utterance provides for the relevance of a following type of utterance by setting up an expectation of what is likely to follow: if the expected type of utterance does not occur, then it is ‘an event’ and is deemed to be ‘officially’, or ‘notably’ absent (Schegloff, 1972: 76).

It is important to note the difference between this type of rule and the rules of syntax. In syntax sequencing rules are obligatory – for example a subject is followed by a verb – , but with adjacency pairs this is not the case. Gumperz (1982) refers to Sacks's use of the term ‘maxim’ rather than rule, ‘to suggest that interpretations take the form of preferences rather than obligatory rules’.

A refinement to the concept of conditional relevance is provided by the further notion of ‘preference’ (Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Levinson, 1983; Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). As has been pointed out, some first pair parts are not restricted to one possible expected response. For example, the expected response to an invitation is either an acceptance or a refusal. By appealing to the notion of preference, however, possible responses to first pair parts can be characterised as either ‘preferred’ or ‘dispersed’. Preference is not a psychological characterisation here (although, as Coulthard (1985: 70) points out, it may have a psychological basis), but a linguistic one, for preferred responses are typically structurally simpler, whilst dispersed responses tend to be marked by various kinds of structural complexity. This structural complexity includes delays, prefaces, accounts, and declination components (see Levinson (1983: 334–5) for details and examples).

The concept of adjacency pair thus provides the language syllabus designer or materials writer with a unit to work with above the level of the single speech act. The key point to bear in mind here, though, is the non-obligatory nature of the sequencing of pair parts. The language syllabus can thus only provide models, not rules.

(ii) Discourse analysis

An alternative model of speech acts in combination is to be found in the so-called Birmingham school of classroom discourse analysis. The model, set out in Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), proposes a hierarchical structure of discourse units consisting of acts, moves, exchanges, transactions, and culminating in the category lesson. The key interactive unit is the exchange, which is typically made up of three moves – initiation, response, and follow-up. Moves are the smallest contribution a speaker can make to an exchange. They are made up of one or more acts, e.g. elicit – to request a linguistic response, informative – to provide information. The relationship between moves and acts is rather like that between words and morphemes in grammar; the move is the minimal free unit, whereas the act has no structure of its own. There are 22 classes of act. Acts are characterised in terms of their interactive, as opposed to their illocutionary function, and thus differ from the speech acts of Searle or the communicative functions of Wilkins. Above the level of the exchange the description of the larger units is much less precise, although transactions are characterised as being marked by ‘frames’ realised by forms such as well, right, now, etc...

This outline of the original model is of necessity extremely condensed and lacking in detail. Subsequent to the initial work by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) the Birmingham model of discourse has been developed further (Sinclair, 1980; Burston, 1980; Coulthard & Montgomery, 1981; Sinclair & Brazil, 1982). The reader is referred to this work for more details of the model and subsequent developments. Birch (1982) reviews the work of the Birmingham school of discourse analysis and assesses its relevance to communicative language teaching.

What distinguishes the Birmingham approach from conversational analysis is its attempt to relate language function to language form. Burston (1980: 139) characterises the Birmingham model as a ‘rigorous linguistic approach to the analysis of spoken discourse’. Another difference between the Birmingham model and conversational analysis is in the approach to data. Whereas the conversational-analysis handling of data is somewhat selective – Burston (1980: 119) refers to ‘the exciting, but less rigorous, notions and approach to data’ which characterise such work – the Birmingham model takes one situation, that of the formal school classroom, and seeks to develop a system of analysis which is capable of explaining all of the data in that situation.
In accordance with this more rigorous approach, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 15–17) specify four criteria for the linguistic description of discourse: (1) the descriptive system must be finite; (2) the symbols or terms in the descriptive apparatus should be precisely relatable to their exponents in the data; (3) the whole of the data should be describable; the descriptive system should be comprehensive, and (4) there must be at least one impossible combination of symbols.

It is interesting to note how conversational analysis does not fulfill any of these criteria. Concerning (1), the total number of adjacency pairs is not specified, new categories typically being created to fit new data; concerning (2), there is no attempt to give a precise definition of the pair parts in adjacency pairs (Edmondson, 1981b); concerning (3), as Edmondson (1981b) has again pointed out, there is a tendency to select the data because of its susceptibility to the analysis; and concerning (4) there is no attempt to specify hard-and-fast rules for possible combinations of pair parts, second pair parts being only specified as conditionally relevant or preferred.

The Birmingham approach is thus more rigorous in terms of descriptive adequacy than is conversational analysis. On the other hand, in so far as applications of the two models to language teaching are concerned, the concept of adjacency pairs can be applied to a wide variety of interactive situations, whereas the Birmingham studies are primarily concerned with the discourse of ‘traditional’ classrooms and thus do not provide a model upon which to base syllabuses or materials for language teaching. (Coulthard, 1985, does, however, report a course developed by Johns for teachers which involves an explicit presentation of a simplified version of the model.)

What the Birmingham model has done for language teaching is to demonstrate, in a more general way, that there is structure above the individual speech act, and that this needs to be taken into account in syllabuses seeking to promote the development of communicative competence on the part of language learners. Conversational analysis, on the other hand, provides a more readily applicable, if less watertight, model.

(iii) Teaching speech acts in combination

Let us turn now to some of the practical applications of work on speech act sequences. It is now widely agreed among those concerned with functional approaches to language teaching that the sequencing of acts needs to be taken into account. Reference in the previous section on speech act taxonomies to the work of Willis and of Arndt and Ryan with their categories of ‘interactive acts’ has already pointed in this direction.

Widdowson (1979: 248) was one of the earliest to highlight the deficiencies of the early functional syllabuses in focusing on acts in isolation. In Widdowson’s terms speech acts, or functions, are only the ‘components of discourse’, not ‘discourse itself’.

Trim (1984), whilst conceding that this is an area not developed in the Threshold Level specification, claims that the need for the learner to handle ‘chains of speech acts’ has been recognised by the Council of Europe since its earliest days. He cites Trim (1973) and Bung (1973) as evidence for this claim. He draws the analogy with chess (Trim, 1984: 124): ‘As, say in chess, to know the rules of the game and the different moves that can be made is no guarantee of being able to develop winning combinations.’

Wilkins (1981: 86), arguing that the categories presented in Notional syllabuses need to be integrated into a fuller view of language behaviour, states:

The language functions are by their very nature interactive. A disagreement requires something to disagree with and will elicit reactions from other participants. [Pedagogic] Units will therefore have to be devoted not to one but to several functions.

Munby (1983: 7) has suggested that his model for communicative syllabus design be modified to incorporate ‘what is currently known about how the smaller discourse units (speech acts)...cluster to form sequences’.

When we come to look at course materials being produced more recently we do see the results of this new awareness. One of the earliest examples of course materials incorporating combinations of functions is the Strategies series (Abbs, Ayton & Freebairn, 1975). Thus Unit 1 of Strategies introduces offering and inviting along with accepting and refusing; Unit 2 introduces asking for information along with giving information. In this way students can immediately practise combining one function with another in interactive sequences. Rosner, Shaw, Shepherd, Taylor and Davies (1979) employ the ‘interaction sequence’ as the organising principle for the functional thread of their course book, Contemporary English. Instead of listing individual functions they provide an index of sequences. Sequence 1 is ‘requesting things, responding and acknowledging’, another sequence is ‘making invitations, declining and accepting’, another is ‘complaining, apologising and accepting apology’. Another course book series influenced by conversation analysis is English for Life (Cook, 1982). This course is organised around ‘exchanges’, which are defined as parts of a complete conversation, made up of several functions (Cook, 1982: 3–4). Other examples of course books employing combinations of functions as an organising principle are Challenges (Candlin & Edelhof, 1982), Meanings into Words (Doff, Jones & Mitchell, 1983), and Basic Oral Communication Skills (The British Council, 1984).
Speech acts and the learner

In this section we will consider the question 'What is it that the second language learner has to learn in relation to speech acts?' It may seem in some ways odd that this fundamental question should only be introduced here and not at the beginning of this paper on speech acts and language teaching. However, it was only after the introduction of functional syllabuses that this question started to be asked. We are thus following the development of the application of speech act theory as it occurred. As so often in language teaching, theory followed practice.

Cook (1985) suggests that there are three factors which need to be considered in determining what the learner has to learn in relation to language functions: (i) a set of functions for use in the second language; (ii) a set of ways of interpreting and realising functions; (iii) a set of sequential and situational factors influencing the choice of function and realisation. These three factors will provide the framework for this section.

(i) A set of functions for use in the second language

It is clear that if it is accepted that the concept of speech acts characterises one aspect of a native speaker's proficiency in his language, then the second-language learner will also need eventually to possess an equivalent set of speech acts relevant to his use of the second language. Just as the native speaker requests, threatens, promises, etc., so must the second-language learner be able to perform these acts. But do these speech acts have to be learned? Can it not be argued that they are part of an account of communication in general and not part of an account of any one particular language (Kempson, 1977: 73)? If this is so, then given that all intelligent human adults have the ability to communicate, could it not be expected that speech acts be carried over from one language to another?

The question being posed here is in fact whether or not speech acts are universal, a question which itself has stimulated considerable interest in recent years, and indeed is 'still hotly debated' (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1987: 11). Fraser, Rintell and Walters (1980: 79) claim that speech acts are basically universal, barring certain culture-specific ritualised acts such as baptising, doubling at bridge, and excommunicating. Schmidt and Richards (1980: 138), however, point out that in spite of the assumption by the majority of researchers that the same classes of speech acts hold for all languages and all speech communities, no ethnographic research has been carried out to confirm or disprove this assumption. Cook (1985: 191) claims that there are at least some exceptions to the 'putative universality of all language functions'.

Hudson (1980: 111), taking a sociolinguistic stance, stresses the cultural aspect of speech acts: 'If speech-act categories are cultural concepts, we might expect them to vary from one society to another, and that is...what we find.' To support his claim, he cites examples from an exotic community, that of the Tzeltal Indians of Mexico. The Tzeltal, it appears (Stross, 1974), have an extremely rich terminology for classifying speech acts, including such categories as 'talk in which things are offered for sale', or 'talk in which the speaker has spread the blame for something, so that he alone is not blamed'. In selecting an exotic community as an example, Hudson draws attention to the likelihood, given the cultural dependence of speech acts, of a correspondence between diversity of culture and diversity of speech acts. This, of course, will be an important consideration for second-language teaching. The need for the teaching of speech acts will be likely to increase in proportion to the diversity of the cultures.

But we need to go further than this in the discussion of speech act universals. Even where speech act categories may appear to be common to two languages, this may be an illusion. Lexical systems across languages are not isomorphic; seemingly equivalent words do not necessarily carry the same referential meaning across languages. Thus, for example, although English greet might be translated into Spanish as saludar, the two words may not refer to exactly the same activity in the two languages. Similarly, other language equivalents of English speech act verbs such as promise, complain, congratulate, etc., are likely also to refer to activities which are not exactly equivalent. In short, what is a promise, a complaint, or a congratulation in one language may not be the same thing in another language. Wierzbicka (1985) discusses this question fully.

One area where there does seem to be agreement in so far as speech act universals are concerned is that of the three speech acts of stating, questioning and commanding. As Lyons (1981: 186) points out, it is generally accepted that no human society could exist in which acts of these kinds have no role to play; in addition most, if not all, of the culture-specific acts can be seen to belong to sub-classes of these three acts. These three classes of acts, then, stating, questioning and commanding, can be seen in some way as fundamental.

In so far as language teaching is concerned, it is probably fair to say that little consideration has been given to this question of speech act universals. Most syllabuses and course books have tended to assume the learner is familiar with the acts the syllabus or course is organised around, i.e. that speech acts are indeed universal, and have concentrated on teaching the learner how to match these functions with selected realisational forms. Notional syllabuses and
the Threshold Level, in fact, assume the functional categories to be taught can be applied to any European language.

Blum-Kulka et al. (1987) make the point that the limited number of speech acts and languages which have been contrasted pragmatically, together with the complexity of the issues involved in setting up valid analytical categories for cross-cultural purposes, make the question of speech act universals a difficult one to resolve. Perhaps it is time, nevertheless, at least to start to address this question in so far as it relates to language teaching.

(ii) A set of ways of interpreting and realising functions

Just as there is no consensus regarding the extent to which speech act categories might correspond across languages, so there is disagreement as to how much coincidence there is between the ways these categories are realised.

For Cook (1985: 191), ‘While many realisations of particular functions are universal...data is still lacking to confirm this hypothetical universality for the whole range of functions’. Cook’s own experimental work, he claims, provides limited data which suggests a correspondence across languages for the acts of requesting and thanking. In this work, learners of English as a foreign language, when stimulated to realise the acts of requesting and thanking in English, offered no aberrant realisations. However, this evidence is far from conclusive, as Cook himself admits, being based on very limited data.

Various writers provide support of a more introspective nature which points in the opposite direction to Cook and suggests that there is variation in speech act realisation forms. Schmidt and Richards (1980: 140), for example, point out that whereas in English a request form such as I request that...can be made more explicit and given a quasi-legal flavour by the addition of hereby, in French a similar distinction might be conveyed by quite different means, such as the use of a more elaborate verb form, e.g. Je vous prie de bien vouloir, as opposed to the simpler Je vous prie.

Searle (1975) was probably the first to address the question of speech-act realisations across languages, pointing out that a request form such as Could you hand me that book? would sound extremely odd if translated into Czech. Searle maintains that what he refers to as the mechanisms for indirect speech acts (i.e. literal and implied force) are universal across languages, but ‘at the same time the standard forms from one language will not always maintain their indirect speech act potential when translated from one language to another’ (Searle, 1975: 181). The reason for this, he believes, is that because indirect speech act realisations are idiomatic, those idiomatic sentences which become entrenched as conventional devices for indirect speech acts will be likely to vary from one language to another.

Riley (1981) compares the range of speech acts which forms in one language (French) can realise with the range of speech acts a similar structure can realise in other languages (Swedish and English). Taking the structure If (si, om) + conditional clause, it can be used to realise the three acts of hypothesising, requesting confirmation, and suggesting in both French and colloquial Finnish/Swedish, but in English it can only be used to hypothesise, not to confirm or suggest. What this implies is that the Swedish or French learner of English needs to learn that these forms cannot be used in English for requesting confirmation or suggesting. On the other hand the English learner of Swedish or French needs to learn that the same form that he uses for making hypotheses can also be used (in appropriate contexts and with appropriate prosody) for requesting confirmation and suggesting.

As well as contrasting different forms for realising the same speech acts across languages, Riley reverses the process and looks at how one speech act can be realised by various forms in different languages. Again he shows considerable differences in the possible forms. Another point raised by Riley is the interesting question of whether there are speech acts which can be realised verbally in one language and non-verbally (i.e. via intonation or paralinguistically) in another language.

In contrast to the claims of Schmidt and Richards, Searle, and Riley, concerning the cross-linguistic discrepancy in speech act realisation patterns, more recent empirical research reported by Blum-Kulka and Olshaint (1984) points in the opposite direction. Blum-Kulka and Olshain’s research was carried out as part of a project known as the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP), which looked at the speech act realisation patterns of the speech acts of requesting and apologising across six languages (see Blum-Kulka et al., in press, for a review of this work and collection of papers).

For requests it is claimed that for every language studied there is a finite set of strategies, running along a continuum from direct to indirect, and which are realised in linguistically fixed ways, as follows.

(1) ‘mood derivable’
   (Leave me alone)
(2) ‘explicit performative’
   (I'm asking you not to park the car here)
(3) ‘hedged performative’
   (I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier)
(4) ‘locution derivable’
   (Madam, you'll have to move your car)
(5) ‘scope stating’
   (I really wish you'd stop bothering me)
(6) ‘language-specific suggestory formula’  
(Why don’t you get lost)

(7) ‘reference to preparatory conditions’  
(Could you clear up the kitchen, please)

(8) ‘strong hints’  
(You’ve left this kitchen in a right mess)

(9) mild hints  
(I’m a nun (in response to a persistent boy)).

Apologies demonstrate a similar fixed set of means of realisation. In contrast to requests, however, realisation strategies for apologies can take one of two forms: (1) an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) (performative verb) which selects a routinised formulaic expression of regret such as be sorry, apologise, regret, excuse, etc., or (2) the use of an utterance which contains reference to one or more elements from a closed set of specified preconditions which must hold true for the apology act to take place, e.g. the cause for X, S’s responsibility for X, X’s willingness to offer repairs for X or promise forbearance (that S will never happen again).

Before this question of the universality of speech act realisation patterns can be settled, it seems that a lot more empirical research into different acts, of the type reported by Blum-Kulka and Olshain, is needed.

In order to look into cross-cultural questions of speech act realisations the CCSARP project undertook as a starting point an analysis of native-speaker realisation patterns for the two acts under study. This is an important area of enquiry in its own right, as far as language teaching is concerned. The specification of the realisation patterns for the teaching of language functions has until now been based on introspective data. Wilkins (1976) concentrated on specifying the categories of speech act, merely providing random examples of their possible realisation patterns. The Threshold Level, which is a more complete syllabus specification, provides a listing of the realisations for all the functions specified, but based on introspection. Lee’s A study dictionary of social English (1983) is based on the functions used in the Threshold Level, but being aimed at more advanced learners, provides more realisations for each function; again, however, the realisation patterns provided seem to be based on introspections. There would thus seem to be a place for empirical research along the lines of that reported here to provide data concerning the most frequent realisation patterns of the speech acts employed in functional syllabuses.

Most data available along these lines, however, is to be found as the basis for contrastive work. This work is summarised in the introductory chapter to Blum-Kulka et al. (1987), who mention the following: Kitagawa (1980) – realisation patterns of asents in English and Japanese; Coulmas (1981) – highly routinised acts such as thanks and apologies in Japanese and a number of European languages; Stenstrom (1984) – questioning strategies in English and Swedish; Amzilotti (1983) – rhetorical questions in Italian and English; Barnlund and Araki (1985) and Daikuhara (1986) – compliments in Japanese and American English.

(iii) A set of sequential and situational factors influencing the choice of function and realisation

Even if it were accepted that the set of speech acts and the set of realisations are the same in two languages, there is still the possibility that the choice of act or realisation may vary across languages according to the situation in which it is uttered. Thus if two languages were both to have the speech act of requesting, and the same set of realisations for requesting, it might still be the case that a particular form for requesting would be used in a particular context for one language and a different form in the same context for the other language. This is indeed one of the findings of the work reported in Blum-Kulka and Olshain (see also House-Edmondson, 1987, and Kasper, 1987).

The results of Cook’s (1985) experiment with the speech act of thanking indicated that learners did not need to acquire the function of thanking, and that they had little difficulty in learning that thanking can be realised by the long form thank you and the short form thanks; the problems only arose when the learner had to decide when to use thank you and when to use thanks.

This question of the appropriateness of realisational forms according to situation has been investigated by Thomas (1983, 1984), who refers to difficulties on the part of the non-native speakers in this area as sociopragmatic failure. Thomas enquired into the question of why non-native speakers often seem over-assertive or domineering. The explanation she provides is that they employ as communication strategies certain linguistic features which for the native speaker are inextricably linked with the language of unequal encounter (interactions in which one participant is in a position of authority relative to the other, e.g. police/suspect, teacher/pupil). Thus, to take one of Thomas’s examples, the phrase I’m asking you to...might in a suitable situation be taken by a native speaker to be a command, as when a teacher says to a student I’m asking you to stop talking. In Russian the literal equivalent proshu vas is not considered as a command, but merely a (polite) device for going on record. Thus a Russian student of English might say something to his teacher like I’m asking you to look at my work, which in an appropriate situation might well be perceived by the native speaker as face-threatening and domineering.

Experimental research by Rintell (1979) has considered the effect of the situational features of
age and sex on the appropriateness of speech act realisation patterns for requesting and suggesting. Whilst in Spanish and English the age of the addressee had an effect on the type of speech-act realisation chosen, the sex of the addressee had an effect in Spanish, but not in English.


As well as differences in patterns of speech act realisation according to situation, differences have been recorded in the likelihood of a particular speech act being used at all. Cohen and Olstain (1981) have demonstrated that in certain situations speakers of Hebrew are less likely to express apology than are English speakers.

If speech act realisation patterns vary according to sequential and situational factors it is important to find out what exactly these features are. Janicki (1985) lists 12 factors which provide a first step in this direction. He refers to problems of a mismatch between situation and realisation pattern as 'socio-linguistic deviance', and the 12 factors which he sees as likely to contribute towards it as follows.

(1) Sex – how the sex of a speaker is compatible with when, how and what he or she says.

(2) Time

(a) Real time – the tendency of non-native speakers to use obsolete forms;

(b) Apparent time – the tendency to use forms not used by speakers of a particular age category.

(3) Social roles – the patterns of behaviour that are expected of people of a particular category or position, e.g. mother, passer-by, student, teacher, friend.

(4) Social relationship – e.g. superior/inferior, equal/equal, insider/outsider.

(5) Topic – some topics are not acceptable in certain cultures, others are not expected to be introduced by foreigners, still others impose restrictions on the contribution from foreigners, e.g. social criticism may only be acceptable in a modified form from a foreigner.

(6) Sociolinguistic rules scheme – control of ordering, sequencing, and stylistic patterns beyond the level of the sentence.

(7) Integrated sociolinguistic rules – how speech acts are realised (this, of course, we have dealt with already).

(8) Formality – non-native speakers often use linguistic items which are either too formal or informal.

(9) Directness – this would apply in particular to the realisation of such speech acts as refusing, requesting, etc.

(10) Politeness – different societies may apply rules of formality, deference, and camaraderie (Lakoff, 1975) to different degrees.

(11) Conversational analysis – this would include turn-taking rules, interruption rules, rules of overlapping, rules for refraining from speaking, rules for cohesion and coherence.

(12) Speech act analysis – the relation between the proposition and the function-indicating device (this, of course, we have dealt with already).

As Janicki points out, this is only a first attempt at specifying the categories for an analysis of socio-linguistic deviance – he uses the term 'pre-taxonomic' – and the critical reader will have noted that some categories overlap, whilst he might wish to substitute and/or add others. Nevertheless, this listing gives an indication of the sort of things which would need to be considered in an analysis of the sequential and situational factors with which the non-native speaker has to familiarise himself.

One important point needs to be made in relation to Janicki's framework in so far as it relates to the foreign-language speaker. The social role 'foreigner' imposes certain linguistic rights and obligations which are different from those of the native-language speaker. Although it may be the case, therefore, that the foreigner's linguistic behaviour is in some ways different from that which would be expected of the native speaker, this does not necessarily mean that it is not appropriate behaviour for a foreigner. To take one concrete example, in Arabic a large number of speech act realisations are prefaced by religious allusions, many, or indeed most of which, would not be appropriate if uttered by a non-Muslim foreigner. The omission of these allusions would thus not be considered 'deviant' use of the language, but rather acceptable 'foreigner' use of the language. This question is discussed in Littlewood (1983).

Problems of speech act theory for language teaching

This section will look at three outstanding theoretical problems of speech act theory which are of particular relevance to the practice of language teaching.

(1) Function and form

A fundamental question for speech act theory is the relation between function and form, between the speech act and the language used to realise that speech act. As many writers have pointed out, there is no clear one-to-one relation between the two. A request can be realised by an interrogative such as Can you open the window? but also by an imperative, Open the window, please. On the other hand Can you open the window? as well as functioning as a request, in different circumstances might function as a
question concerning ability. As Levinson (1983: 265) puts it, ‘What people “do” with sentences seems quite unrestricted by the surface form (i.e. sentence type) of the sentences uttered.’ If this is indeed the case, then there appears to be an insurmountable problem for the syllabus designer who seeks to specify and grade the possible realisation forms for the functional categories selected for a syllabus. However, there is a way out of this apparent impasse. This is provided by the concept of indirect speech acts and the associated concept of literal force. Thus, in appropriate circumstances, our example above of *Can you open the window?* would have the direct, or literal, force of a question, but the indirect force of a request. It has been argued (Lyons, 1977, 1981) that in English there are three fundamental literal forces – statements, questions, and commands – which correspond to the three sentence types – declarative, interrogative, and imperative.

What this suggests for language teaching is that perhaps the literal forces for the three basic sentence types could be introduced first and the indirect forms later. A procedure along these lines has in fact been proposed by Wilkins (1983). Of course we are still left with the problem of the various possible indirect forms. But one possibility would be that the notion of directness vs. indirectness might be extended further and realisation patterns (as classified, for example, by Blum-Kulka and Olshatn (1984) above) could be graded according to their position on this scale. This is in essence suggested by Hatch (1981).

The strength, directness, clarity, and nonambiguous nature of the form of each of the speech acts may make them more or less transparent for the learner. In terms of markedness theory, the most common, most neutral forms of each speech act should be the easiest for learners to acquire.

(ii) The size of speech act realisations

Related to the form–force relation is the question of the size of the realisation of any act. Examples of stereotypical speech act realisations are normally presented in the form of a single sentence; but an act can be realised by less than a sentence (e.g. agreement can be expressed by a simple *Yes*), or by more than one sentence (e.g. a promise in the form of a formal oath might take many sentences) (Schmidt & Richards, 1980: 132). In addition, an act need not be limited to one speaker turn, but may extend over several (Schmidt & Richards, 1980: 132; Brown & Yule, 1983: 233). For example, a request or a warning may be spread over a number of utterances in an interaction. To complicate things further, one utterance can express more than one act (Labov & Fanshelf, 1977: 29; Brown & Yule, 1983: 233). Thus a student who asks the teacher *Would you speak more slowly please?* is simultaneously requesting action, asserting that the teacher speaks too fast, and reporting difficulty (Richards & Schmidt, 1983: 126).

Again, though, a similar criterion for grading might be applied here as for direct/indirect speech acts, i.e. to teach realisations involving a sentence or less first and then to develop the more complex forms later.

(iii) The indeterminacy of speech act categories

The speech act theories of Austin and Searle take as their point of departure an analysis of illocutionary verbs. This whole approach has come in for criticism from Leech (1983) on the grounds that it appears to assume that speech acts and verbs in English are in a one-to-one relationship. In reality, Leech claims, as we have also suggested above in the section on speech act taxonomies (Edmondson, 1981a) and in the discussion of speech act universals (Wierzbicka, 1985), there is no such one-to-one correspondence: ‘it is to commit a fundamental and obvious error to assume that the distinctions made by our vocabulary necessarily exist in reality’ (Leech, 1983: 177).

For Leech, illocutionary forces are indeterminate and cannot be neatly pigeonholed into categories. He outlines three types of indeterminacy. The first kind of indeterminacy is that illocutionary force is often a matter of degree rather than kind. For Searle, ‘requesting’ and ‘ordering’, for example, would be two distinct categories of directive, but for Leech, in practice, the distinction is scalar. As the following list of examples illustrates, it is difficult to say at what point a ‘request’ shades into an ‘order’: *Shut the door/ Will you shut the door?/ Can you shut the door?/ Could you shut the door?/ I wonder if you’d mind shutting the door?* etc. (Leech, 1981: 336).

The second kind of indeterminacy is that illocutions are often deliberately ambivalent, i.e. they share the characteristics of more than one force. Leech cites tag questions as a good example here. In the utterance *You will come, won’t you?*, the initial assertion in the first part (which allows no comeback on the part of the hearer) is softened by the tag question in the second part (which allows the hearer the chance of refusing). The overall effect is neither that of an order nor of a question; rather we might say that it is a ‘pressing invitation’.

The third kind of indeterminacy is related to what Leech refers to as the ‘duality of meaning’ of indirect speech acts. For example, the utterances *Will you open the window?* and *Open the window*, according to Searle, might both be classified as commands. However, it would be wrong to say that they are both ways of saying the same thing. Rather, we would say that by virtue of being a question, instead of a direct command, the first of
the two forms is a more polite variant of the latter.

In order to take into account the scalar nature of illocutionary types, Leech proposes a modification to Grice's theory of conversation (Grice, 1975) and the addition of an extra principle, which he calls a politeness principle (Leech, 1981, 1983). According to the politeness principle, it is in the interests of the speaker, in making an illocution, to indicate credit or benefit and not to cause offence to the hearer. Thus an utterance such as Open the window would be considered impolite, as it might cause offence; an indirect illocution, ascribing benefit to the hearer, would be more polite and thus be more likely to achieve the aim of getting the window opened. The politeness principle can thus explain various degrees of directness in illocutionary forces in terms of degrees of politeness.

It would seem clear that the modification Leech proposes to speech act theory is a valid one in so far as he is undoubtedly right in his claim that speech act categories are not cut-and-dried, but merge one into the other. However, as far as second-language syllabus design is concerned, it is still true that the categories proposed by Searle and others offer a useful organisational framework. It may well be that in applying this framework account can be taken of the politeness principle and the scalar nature of speech act categories, but however much we want to take account of this (it may be that more emphasis would be placed on it the more advanced the target audience for the syllabus), the categorial structure will offer a powerful initial heuristic. Another point in favour of the categorial structure is that the metalanguage used to describe the categories, corresponding as it does to illocutionary verbs, will be more readily transparent to teachers and learners.

At the same time it must be admitted that given that speech act categories are based on illocutionary verbs, there is bound to be a certain 'fuzziness' in what is understood by the various terms. Labov (1973) has shown through his experiments with the word cup that although there is general agreement among experimental subjects when presented with various cup-like images as to what constitutes a cup, there is also a certain amount of disagreement and uncertainty. In the same way it seems likely that words denoting speech act categories, such as request, promise, complain, etc., whilst being fairly transparent, are also likely to be subject to the same sorts of indeterminacy. However, just as this has not stopped language teachers from teaching the meaning of cup in English, so there seems no reason to stop trying to teach the meaning of 'request'.

Conclusion

This paper has focused upon some of the key areas of speech act theory as they relate to the teaching and learning of a second language. As has become apparent, there remain a number of problematic areas in speech act theory of great importance for language teaching. But the practice of language teaching cannot always wait for linguistic theory to provide the answers to pressing practical problems. The teaching of language functions will thus no doubt continue, new insights from speech act theory being drawn upon as and when they develop.

Cook (1985: 194) has described the sort of theoretical underpinnings that a functional syllabus would ideally be based upon.

A truly functional syllabus...needs to be based on an accurate description of functions and realisations and their interaction with the situation and the sequence of discourse; it needs to make a principled decision about the relationship of these to second language learning and consequently what needs to be taught (Cook, 1985: 194).

The review of the literature in the preceding pages has attempted to provide at least a framework of the available body of knowledge on which to base such a principled decision. In addition it has attempted to show some of the areas where further work is necessary. A lot of research on speech acts and language functions has been carried out since the publication of Notional syllabuses, but it is nevertheless probably true to say that we are still in the early stages of this work.

References


State of the art: speech acts and language teaching


State of the art: speech acts and language teaching


