Exploring the Use of Austin's Theory of Illocutionary Acts in Different Social Interactions

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Abstract. This paper reviews how Austin's illocutionary act theory is used in face-to-face communication and online communication. In the aspect of face-to-face interaction, this paper places attention on the use of polite language and interaction in ESL (English as a second language) classrooms. In terms of online interaction, this paper explored interaction on Facebook and the use of memes, emoticons, emojis and stickers. After reviewing several research, this paper concluded that when talking face-to-face, the level of formality, gender, and cultural background affects people's polite language. In ESL classrooms, the power, distance and rate of imposition affect teachers' and students' choice of language. However, the result of speech acts preference on Facebook is conflict. Previous research pointed out that memes can be categorized as communicative speech acts. Evidence shows that positive emoticons are preferred, which can improve friendships and vice versa. The review of literature contributes to further studies on the illocutionary act analysis of ESL classrooms in China and the communicative effectiveness of memes on the receivers.

1. Introduction

The article reviews the key literature concerned with the analysis of speech acts in face-to-face interactions and online communications based on Austin's illocutionary act theory [1].

On the one hand, people frequently use speech acts such as apologies, requests, etc. in daily conversation. However, these speech acts sometimes are used differently by each individual; and thus will lead to different reflections from the recipients.

On the other hand, social media, such as Facebook, has gained great popularity for internet users to express themselves; and people use memes to fulfil emotional cues. However, there is still a lack of understanding about internet users' preference for speech acts when communicating online; and what kind of functions can memes act.

Therefore, this article will first give an overview of speech act theory; then show research results about the general patterns and preferences of illocutionary acts in different social interactions, along with what factors contribute to these preferences. In terms of social interactions, this article focuses on face-to-face interaction and online interaction, which will contribute to future study of cross-cultural speech acts analysis in Chinese English learner and how the recipients receive different kinds of emoticons.

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2. Overview of Speech Act Theory

When people speak, they intend to achieve a certain purpose, whether expressing emotions or initiating an argument, which can be called a "speech act". "Speech act" is the act of successfully passing down information to the hearer, including criticism, invitations, requests etc. [1]. Austin formed the bases of speech act theory and categorized speech acts into three types: locutionary acts (the act of conveying literal meaning), illocutionary acts (the act of expressing the speaker's intention) and perlocutionary acts (the consequences brought about by the utterance) [1]. Besides, Austin also distinguished force from meaning and suggested that illocutionary force is equal to the speaker's meaning or extra meaning [1]. In addition, an indirect speech act is one in which a person performs an illocutionary act, but wants the hearer to know its real intention. In the example of It is cold here, the speaker's illocutionary force is asking the hearer to turn up the heat [2].

In the upcoming sections, Searle's speech act framework, and Weigand's dialogical speech act framework will be mentioned [3][4][5].

Searle divided speakers' utterances into five categories [3][4]: 1) **Representatives**: speech acts of stating a specific idea or belief, that the speaker regards as true. 2). **Directives**: speech acts of trying to get the listener to do

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something, such as requests or commands. 3) **Commissives**: speech acts of committing the speaker to some future action. 4) **Expressives**: speech acts of expressing feelings and attitudes toward an existing state. 5) **Declarations**: speech acts of bringing about immediate changes by saying something.

Weigand's taxonomy of speech acts consists of four types of speech acts by analyzing both the action of speakers' and listeners' [5]: 1) **Declaratives**: speech acts of an utterance that changes institutional affairs. 2) **Exploratives**: speech acts of an act of searching for information. 3) **directives**: speech acts of a claim of purpose and expects a future action by the interlocutor. 4) **Representatives**: speech acts of an utterance based on a claim to truth and aim at acceptance.

3. The Application of the Illocutionary Act Applied

This section will focus on different social situations where Austin's theory of illocutionary act is applied and briefly introduce several previous studies concerning face-to-face interaction including the use of polite language and language in ESL classrooms, and online interaction, mainly focusing on analyzing speech acts on Facebook and the use of emoticon.

3.1. Face-to-Face Communication

3.1.1. The Use of Polite Language

This section mainly discusses Austin's theory of illocutionary acts hidden behind people's daily use of polite language. This section will focus on the studies in terms of apologies, requests, and invitations since an apology is an expressive "illocutionary act" and politeness is the reason for indirect requests or invitations [6-7]. The roots (foundation) of politeness theory go back to the work of Grice and the theory of the cooperative principle (CP), which has four conversational maxims which include quality, quantity, manner and relevance), is believed to be its foundation [8][9].

Abbas et al. performed quantitative research on the way Pakistani English users apologize based on Brown and Levinson's concept of politeness strategies [10] which consisted of four strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness bald on-record, and off-record [11]. Blum-Kulka et al. provided an explanation suggesting that "on-record" means "direct" or "conventionally indirect". Hence, "bald on-record" equals "direct", whereas "off-record" means "indirect" [12]. As a result, based on previous studies suggesting that the identity of the speaker (gender and relationship) and situational awareness affects people's choice of language [13], Abbas, et al. concluded that a majority of subjects would use direct and less formal language to apologize to friends of the same gender and use "positive politeness" strategy to friends of the opposite gender. In addition, the "positive politeness" strategy was frequently used by subjects to apologize to strangers regardless of gender.

Ghazzoul's study considered cultural differences as the main factor in the choice of politeness strategies and investigated polite requests and invitations between Arab EFL learners and English native speakers [14]. The result suggested that using a direct request or invitation to express politeness is preferred by Arab subjects. However, for British subjects, the findings suggest that they tend to use indirect strategies. Therefore, their invitations may be seen as a lack of hospitality and the hearers may be confused about their requests.

The study done by Abbas et al. was thorough since 15 different kinds of situations were analyzed and 193 participants' data were collected. The level of formality and gender also influence their choice of politeness strategies (I.e. people tend to use less formal and more direct language to apologize to friends of the same gender.) [10]. However, these two factors may only be suitable for studies on subjects who have the same cultural background. While this paper agrees with the results, this pattern may not be universal since it did not consider cultural differences. However, Ghazzoul provided valuable insight into which evidence showed that the speech act theory does not apply to all cultures, since conversation habits are distinct across cultures, although the number of subjects in Ghazzoul's study is relatively small.

3.1.2. ESL Classroom

Austin's illocutionary act theory can also be seen in the ESL classroom concerning two aspects: the speech act of request in a classroom (Malaysia) and the process of second language learning. Based on Bluma-Kulka and Olshstain's Cross-Cultural Speech Act Research Project (CCSARP) framework, which consists of three levels of directness in requests: direct-level requests, conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect requests (each has subcategory of strategies) and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory [15][11], Thuruvan, et. al [16] performed research investigating the type of request strategies used by subjects and what contributes to their choice of strategies. According to D (social distance), P (power) and R (the rate of imposition) proposed by Brown and Levinson [11], the result of the study indicates that students appear to be less polite when talking to their peers and more polite when talking to teachers, whereas teachers are less polite to students.

Sometimes what people say cannot be comprehended literally. Therefore understanding the implied meaning of an utterance has become an indispensable part of language acquisition because of the appearance of the concept of communicative competence [17][18][19]. Therefore, teachers attach great importance to the functional use of language in social contexts. Studies done by Holtgraves and Taguchi suggested that non-native speakers are capable of interpreting implied meaning, though the speed and accuracy depend on learners' proficiency [20][21].

A few studies on the use of illocutionary act in ESL classrooms has been done in China. However, further studies in China can refer to the results of Thuruvan's work, since the CCSARP framework, which the study is

based on, categories 9 requests strategies that are commonly used in real life. Besides, the factors (D, P and R) proposed by Brown and Levinson are indispensable in the study of the relationship between students and teachers due to their noticeable class relations.

3.2. Online Communication

3.2.1. Facebook

Internet users share their thoughts and daily life through social media, such as Facebook. Hence, social media platform displays a part of one's identity. Through the speech act analysis of Facebook status updates, Ilyas et al.'s study shows the communicative function of the status, as well as how participants' identities are represented through their posts [22].

Ilyas et al. studied communicative function revealed in Facebook updates based on Searles' speech act framework, which categorizes speech acts into five types [22][4]. The data showed that the most frequently used speech acts are expressive acts (33.33%), demonstrating that emotional expression is an indispensable part of self-expression. Moreover, 28.07% are assertive acts, which shows that people are eager to let others know what they are doing. Additionally, Ilyas et al. introduced a new type of speech act called poetic verses, that is, posters share poems online and want others to enjoy them and only 2.9% of the updates fall into this category.

The interaction between posters and comments can be seen as a real dialogue. Hence, much more recent research done by Tsoumou investigated language use in political Facebook interactions using Weigand's dialogical speech act framework, which consists of four types of speech acts [5][23]. Unlike the previous study using Seale's speech act theory pointed out that expressive acts are the most frequently used speech act on Facebook, evidence in Tsoumou's study suggested that explorative utterances outnumber the other three [23]. Because as mentioned before, explorative acts are essentially a form of question meant to produce answers from the listeners or a speech act that offers information to the listeners [5]. Therefore, in politically-oriented Facebook, especially during election season, information is key to the candidates and voters.

Both of the above two studies investigate people's preference for the usage of language on Facebook. However, they used two different speech act frameworks, since the material in Tsoumou's study is considered dialogues, thus, Weigand's dialogical speech act framework is more appropriate than other frameworks. Searle's speech act framework demonstrates the speaker's utterance, but he did not consider the reaction of the listener. Therefore, unlike the previous categorization of speech act proposed by Austin and Searle, Weigand developed a novel categorization from a new perspective, that is, she considers the listener's reaction based on a dialogic perspective.

3.2.2. Memes, Emoticons, Emojis and Stickers

Memes, emojis and stickers are frequently used by internet users to communicate with each other online. In Grundlingh's research, he pointed out that memes are speech acts and based on four main illocutionary acts distinguished by Bach and Harnish [24]. Evidence shows that a major part of memes falls into the type of communicative illocutionary acts and mainly the subcategories of constative and directive illocutionary acts [25].

Grundlingh focused on two types of memes, image macros and reaction shots. The image macro is a kind of meme that has a picture with text above and below the image in the macro and the reaction shots are an image macro with variation in structure or without text [25].

In Grundlingh's research, he suggested that memes have meaning potential, that is, memes are created to express something. Hence, memes consist of many modes and media that have different uses, such as using for jokes, expressing opinions and emotions, apologies, advice, questions, etc. (I.e. A mode is a way of communicating and media are channels through which communications are conveyed [26]) [25]. Grundlingh also applied a concept from semiotics, that is, multimodality, which stresses the importance of the social context and the resources available to create meaning [27]. Thus, the production and interpretation of memes can be analyzed from a multimodal perspective. Because for the counterpart to understand why a certain meme was used, a larger communicative context is indispensable [25].

In addition, an emoticon is an icon demonstrating an emotional status using keyboard characters to make up facial expressions, such as "=)". However, the term emoji, which originated from the Japanese "pictograph", also shows a person's state of feeling, using not keyboard characters but an actual pictograph. Stickers are also pictures that can have words, graphs or both on them. But stickers can only be used in messaging applications [28].

In a research review by Tang et al., they collected research from 1997 to 2017 on the topic of the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers in virtual communication [28]. The overall summary focused on four topics: communicative functions, contextual impacts, general behaviors and motives. Therefore, Tang et al. summarized previous research and concluded that: 1). Communicative functions: Using more emoticons and emojis, especially positive ones, can improve friendship and intimacy, however, overusing emoticons may lead to a negative impression toward the sender [29-32]. Additionally, on the level of cognitive communication, emoticons can reinforce the message's meaning and yet can barely twist the meaning [33]. 2). Contextual impacts: Evidence suggested that more emoticons are used in positive conversations (80%) than negative ones (20%) [34]. Also, there was a conflict result about the communication tasks' nature. One research pointed out that fewer emoticons were used in social contexts, while others show the opposite [35][36]. Studies also demonstrated that in asynchronous conversation, more positive emoticons were used and the use of emoticons can increase positivity, whereas, the result is the opposite in synchronous conversations [37][38]. 3). General users' behaviors:

Evidence showed that an emoticon will be frequently used if it is easy to interpret [39]. Also, females tend to use more emoticons. However, when males are engaged in conversations that involve females, they tend to use more emoticons [40][41]. 4). Motive: The research conducted by Chen and Siu discovered four motives of people using emoticons, emojis and stickers, namely, accuracy, sociability, enjoyment and efficiency [42].

Grundlingh thoroughly illustrated how memes can be considered speech acts using concepts from pragmatics and semiotics. Although most analyses are based on concepts from pragmatics, semiotics provides theoretical support that memes can be interpreted multimodally. Thus, Grundlingh offered a valuable insight which is the fact that memes can be recreated and reused in other contexts, which made the research more complex. Grundligh only analyzed two types of memes, but he critically pointed out that any meme may be created to fulfil an illocutionary act. In addition, Tang et al. presented a much thorough review of research concerning the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers online; and they also pointed out that there lack of research conducted in a natural communication environment, which this paper thinks is a significant perspective for future study.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, these cited studies showed people's preferences and patterns when using different types of speech acts. With all the evidence, it can be concluded that the level of formality, gender, and cultural background affects people's polite language in face-to-face interactions. While the D, P and R factors affect teachers' and students' choice of language. However, the result of speech acts preference on Facebook is conflict. One study shows that expressive acts and assertive acts are most preferred by senders [22]. The other one suggests that explorative acts are frequently used in political Facebook [23]. In addition, positive emoticons are preferred, which can improve friendships and women tend to use emoticons in online conversation more often.

However, there is a research gap in the aspect of cross-cultural speech acts analysis in Chinese English learners. As for the aspect of online interaction, there can be further investigations into how the recipients receive different kinds of emoticons.

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