

The Reflection and Influence of Indirect Speech Act in Daily Communication

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Abstract

Indirect speech act is a kind of common speech act in which the speaker does not mean literally. The definition of Speech Act was first posited by Austin who is a British philosopher. Instead of indicating, it more emphasizes on getting things done when people are making use of language, which concludes the linguistic view of words and acts. Indirect Speech Act not only attracts large amount of scholars' attention but also are widely applied in people's daily conversations. From this point of view this thesis tries to analyze some human being daily actual dialogues to explore the implication of Indirect Speech Act so as to help people avoid misunderstanding in our daily utterances.

Keywords

Indirect Speech Act; Speaker's Intention; Communication; Understand.

1. Introduction

Influenced by Wittgenstein's theory of meaning as use, Austin (1962) and later Searle (1969) developed a systematic account of what people do when they speak. Thus, the relation between what people say and what people act by saying is found. A distinction is made by Austin (1962) in the theory of speech acts between three different types of act involved in or caused by the utterance of a sentence. A locutionary act is the saying of something which is meaningful and can be understood. For example, saying the sentence "Open the door" is a locutionary act if addressees understand the words "open", "the", "door" and can identify the particular door referred to. An illocutionary act is using a sentence to perform a function. For example, "Open the door" may be intended as an order or a piece of advice. A perlocutionary act is the results or effects that are produced by means of saying something. For example, opening the door would be a perlocutionary act. It is not individual words or sentences that are the basic elements of human communication, but rather particular speech acts that are uttering words and sentences, namely illocutionary acts or performed in illocution. To this extent, speech acts theory pursues language theory as a part of a comprehensive pragmatic theory of linguistic behavior.

The Speech Act posited by Austin more emphasizes on getting things done when people are making use of languages, which embodies the linguistic view of words and acts. In 1975, Searle raised the Indirect Speech Act Theory based on Austin's early study which illustrates that one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by performing another. In other words, an Indirect Speech Act contains the performance of two distinct speech acts because people usually express something with some certain purposes in their daily dialogue. As a result, people do not speak in direct way in everyday actual conversations because of politeness and other reasons. Thus, people prefer to use indirect speech to express their real intentions. Searle's achievement, to a great extent, is that he combines Speech Act theory with Conversational Implicature put forward by Grice. Since Austin's Speech Act, Searle puts forward Conversational Implicature theory from the perspective of conversational. He thinks that violation of Cooperative Principle is a sign of implicature existing which helps people to identify the meanings of speech. Conversational

Implicature theory explains why the literal meaning of the words or sentences are different from their actual truth-value meaning, which is similar to Searle's Indirect Speech Act theory.

In recent years, Indirect Speech Act theory attracts many modern linguists' great attention. Many scholars in the linguistics field engage in this theory from aspect of linguistics, cognition, philosophy and psychology. When the author collects the resources, the author realized that Indirect Speech Act not only attracts large amount of scholars' attention, but also are widely applied in people's daily conversations. From this point of view this thesis tries to analyze some human being daily actual dialogues to explore the implication of Indirect Speech Act so as to help people avoid misunderstanding in our daily utterances.

2. The case analysis of Indirect Speech Act

Indirect Speech Acts compared with Directed Speech Acts take longer to process on the part of the hearer, because people have to infer about the meaning intended under their mutual background. Furthermore, because it doesn't correspond to the structure of an utterance, people could have some special reasons to avoid direct expression deliberately. Namely, indirect expression can help people to achieve the ideal effects of communication without embarrass and misunderstanding.

This part will mainly concentrate on studying the function of Indirect Speech Act in some sentences. Consider the following examples:

a. [Customer telephoning a restaurant]

I'd like to book a table for tomorrow night.

The utterances (a) is a direct request and it is also a polite request. The customer telephones a restaurant and says this is not only hope the restaurant to "book a table" for him or her, but also "want the restaurant to write down his or her personal information at that time as a record of booking and leave a table for her or him for tomorrow night".

b. [Military officer to subordinate]

You will hold this position until reinforcements arrive.

Actually, the utterance (b) is a order but it is a polite order. The speaker of the utterance could have said " Hold this position until reinforcements arrive.", using a imperative sentence to express his meaning. However, the speaker adds "You will" and he takes the hearers into consideration and show respect for them. The exact meaning that he wants to express is that "no matter what happens, you can't retreat and you should stick to your post until the reinforcements arrive".

c. [Customer to barman]

I'll have the usual.

Obviously, the speaker of the utterance (c) is a regular guest of the bar and maybe the speaker has a good relationship with the barman. He says "I'll have the usual" rather "as usual" or "a bottle of beer", for he wants to use politeness strategy to show respect and try to maintain the friendly relationship with the hearers. The meaning the speaker hopes to present perhaps is "as usual, beer ,whiskey or some other drinks".

d. [Mother to child coming in from school]

I bet you're hungry.

This is a sentence that a mother says to her child. The actual purpose of the mother is not to bet with her child, but to express that "I guess you are hungry now, and I have prepared some delicious food for you". As soon as you hear this utterance which said by a mother to her child, you can know that this mother is a sensitive mother, she loves her child very much, what is more, she have a very good relationship with her child. So she can "bet" or talk with her child in a very casual way.

e. [Bank manager to applicant for an overdraft]

We regret that we are unable to accede to your request.

The utterance (e) is a polite refusal. But the bank manager do not convey directly the refusal like “Your quota has been overdrawn, so you can not withdraw any money at all”, which is the exact meaning the manager wants to express. In contrary, the manager tries to use a polite way to express the meaning, for the applicant is the bank’s customer, so as a manager, he or she should show his or her politeness and professional quality.

f. [Fortune-teller to customer]

You will meet a tall dark stranger.

When we listen this sentence in our daily life, we may not attach any importance to it. However, when a fortune-teller tells a customer, it probably just means that “ you will meet a person who is tall and dark”, but tells you that “in the near future, you will meet a tall dark person, you should pay attention to him or her, because he or she may help you or be harmful to you in some respects”. Although the fortune-teller does not say much words, but his or her implication is obvious.

g. [Doorman at a nightclub to aspiring entrant]

You must be joking.

The utterance (g) is not a polite expression. The doorman says “You must be joking”, which is not used to crack a joke with the entrant but to express that “you do not belong here so you should not come here” to as a advice, or “your ability, your impression or your identity is not compliance with the nightclub, it is not fit for you to work here” to as a refusal. Although (g) and (e) are both refusals, utterance (e) is more polite than utterance (g), while (g) seems to be more offending between the speakers.

3. Conclusion

Indirect Speech Act is a common linguistic phenomenon used in human being’s daily social activities. Compared with Direct Speech Act, Indirect Speech Act aims at smoothing the tough words and avoiding the impoliteness. Thus, it is a significant means for people to improve the actually daily communication functions. Through the above analysis of some sentences of Indirect Speech Act, some useful pragmatic functions are found in our daily conversations. What is more, people can further understand each other in the process of information exchange and make better use of the indirect expression. In addition, communication depends on culture background to some degree, so people have to study the differences in different cultures so that they can avoid misunderstanding and behave themselves appropriately in various occasions, and in turn promote the communication and enhance the friendship between their fellow countrymen and all friends and even all people through the world.

Language has the characteristic of indirection. In daily communication, people is often not bluffly to express their intentions, but tend to express themselves in some way indirectly. This kind of “beat about the bush” phenomenon in language use is the indirect speech act. The problem that the Indirect Speech Act theory intend to solve is how the hearer deduce the indirect illocutionary force, such as the pragmatic meaning from the speaker’s literally means. If the hearer wants to successfully understand the indirect speech act, he or she should make full use of the specific situation, language facts and the systematic contact between the behaviors, and have the relevant experience and inferential capability.

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