CHAPTER 5

Speech acts

5.1 SPEECH ACTS AND PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics is to do with how language is used in context and the relationship between language use and language form. It deals with various aspects of non-literal meaning, aspects of meaning which are not taken into account by the code/conduit model of communication referred to in Chapter 1. These aspects of non-literal meaning are dealt with under designations such as: speech acts; conversational implicature; the Cooperative Principle, politeness and relevance. In this chapter we will focus on speech acts; we will deal with the other topics in the next chapter.

5.2 DEFINITION OF SPEECH ACTS

An early discourse analyst, Labov (1972: 121), stated that ‘[t]he first and most important step in the formalisation of Discourse Analysis is to distinguish what is said from what is done’. Discourse Analysis should thus fundamentally be concerned with the functional rather than the formal features of language. The term ‘functional’ is suggestive of ‘language functions’, as in ‘functions’ and ‘notions’ in language teaching, if you are already familiar with the field. Indeed, this is what we will be talking about here, although we will use the more usual term in Linguistics and Pragmatics of ‘speech acts’. With speech acts, then, we are concerned with the functional, or communicative, value of utterances, with language used to perform actions – actions such as greeting, inviting, offering, ordering, promising, requesting, warning, and so forth.

5.3 FORM AND FUNCTION

Sentences can be accounted for in terms of form or function. Consider the following three sentences:

I need help.
Can you help me?
Help me!

In terms of grammatical form, these sentences would be labelled declarative, interrogative and imperative, respectively. However, given the right circumstances, they might share the same function of seeking help. So form and function are different. The same function may be performed by a variety of forms. Conversely, the same form may express (given the right situation) a variety of functions. Consider the utterance ‘Can you help me?’, which is an interrogative. In some circumstances, this
might be interpreted as a request for help. In other circumstances, it might be a question about my ability to help the speaker. Traditionally, the three grammatical forms of declarative, interrogative and imperative are presented in language teaching materials as equivalent to, respectively, statements, questions and commands. The above examples demonstrate that this is somewhat misleading. Consider some possible ways of requesting a light for a cigarette.

Do you have a light?
Got a light?
Do you have a match?
Got a match?
A light please!
A light!
Give me a light please!
Could you give me a light?
Could you give me a light please?
I'm out of matches.
My cigarette needs lighting.
I was wondering if you had a light.
I wonder if you have a light.

These are just some of many possibilities. Some are interrogatives and others are not. Now consider some ways of issuing a command:

Be quiet!
Will you be quiet?
You must be quiet!
You are requested to be quiet.

The first of these commands is an imperative, but the other three are not.

5.4 WHY STUDY SPEECH ACTS?

Speech acts are important for us for two reasons. First, they can be seen as a basic unit in Discourse Analysis, just as sentences or clauses are the basic unit in grammar; as Searle et al. (1980: vii) put it:

the minimal unit of communication is not a sentence or other expression, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, … etc.

Second, the use of speech acts, or functions, again like sentences in grammar, can be used as an organisational principle for language teaching.

5.5 PERFORMATIVES

Austin (1962), in his book ‘How to Do Things with Words’, and Searle (1969, 1975, 1976), with his work on ‘speech acts’, considered the nature of what they called ‘performatives’. Austin started by identifying a special type of verb in which the uttering of the verb is also the doing of the action:
I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth.
I bet you fifty dollars.
I order you to leave.
I suggest you work harder.

These verbs are called performatives. Austin informally estimated there to be somewhere between one and 10,000 performatives, based on a perusal of a dictionary, a point we will return to later.

According to Austin, as can be seen from the above examples, performative utterances are expressed with a performative verb in the simple present tense and active voice, prefaced by the first-person singular pronoun, I. They can also be expressed in the first-person plural – We promise to pay you back – and in the second-person passive – You are requested not to smoke. Performative utterances may furthermore be prefaced by hereby to emphasise the performative nature of the utterance – I hereby resign from this committee.

### 5.6 ILOCUTIONARY FORCE

From the identification of performative verbs, Austin moved on to note that there are other ways in which performative meanings can be expressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With Performative</th>
<th>Without Performative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are requested to leave</td>
<td>Please leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I insist that you come</td>
<td>Do come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I promise to pay you back</td>
<td>I will definitely pay you back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suggest you do it again</td>
<td>Why don’t you do it again?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These types of meaning are referred to as **illocutionary forces**, or **illocutionary acts**, the speaker’s intention in making an utterance. The language forms used to signal the performance of a speech act, such as please in requests or do in insists, may be referred to as illocutionary force-indicating devices (IFIDs) (Levinson, 1983). Certain speech acts may be conventionally associated with certain IFIDs. Requests, for example, are often realised by modals such as would you/could you and the word please. Warnings are often accomplished with the negative imperative don’t, as in Don’t step on my blue suede shoes! Suggestions are often performed by means of Why don’t you?, as in the example above, Why don’t you do it again? Advice is often given using the conventional pattern Have you ever thought of …?

This conventionalised nature of many commonly used speech acts presents a challenge for language teaching and raises questions about the traditional associations between the three sentence types and their stereotypical functions of stating, questioning and commanding. Typically, declarative forms are used to make statements, interrogatives are used to ask questions and imperatives are used to issue commands. However, these functions (speech acts) are not always expressed by their most closely associated forms. Questions may be realised by rising intonation. Commands may be realised by the modal verb will and emphatic stress: You will go to work today! This is a further reminder of the lack of one-to-one fit between form and function, as noted in section 5.3, above.

### 5.7 INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

Another challenge to traditional assumptions about the relation between form and function is presented by what are referred to as **indirect speech acts**. Indirect speech acts are ‘cases in which one
Illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another’ (Searle, 1975: 60). If we take as an example the utterance, ‘Can you pass the salt?’, this is simultaneously a question about the hearer’s ability to pass the salt and a request to pass the salt. The second meaning is the indirect speech act. There are two types of indirect speech act: conventionalised and non-conventionalised. Conventionalised speech acts make use of conventional forms which are recognised by the speech community as typically associated with a given speech act, as in Can you pass the salt (requesting), Would you like to (inviting), Why don’t you (suggesting). Non-conventional speech act realisations depend more on the specific context for their interpretation. Thus, in a very hot room, an utterance such as It's too hot in here might be intended as a request (to turn on the air conditioner), or, at a concert, an utterance such as The music is about to start might be intended as a request to stop talking.

As you will be aware from our examples of the relation between form and function in section 5.3 above, it is possible to phrase speech acts in many different ways. The choice of realisation will depend on the relationships between the interlocutors and the degree of imposition involved. If you have a close relationship with your interlocutor, then, in general, you can be more direct. If, on the other hand, the imposition is great, even if your interlocutor is a friend or relative, you will need to be more indirect.

Look at the range of possibilities for complaining about a meal in a restaurant.

Waiter, get the manager immediately.
Waiter, I insist on seeing the manager.
Waiter, I want to see the manager.
Waiter, I'd like to see the manager please.
Waiter, if it's not too much trouble I'd like to see the manager.
Waiter, I don't suppose I could see the manager, could I?

(from Carter et al. 2001)

Both conventionalised and non-conventionalised speech acts can pose difficulties for second-language learners, but the conventionalised ones are specifically more problematic in second-language contexts, for the reason that learners may not be aware that certain language forms are conventionally associated with particular speech acts. Thus learners may not realise that ‘Would you like to do the washing up?’ can serve as a request or even, as in my own childhood, a command, and is not a question about whether one would enjoy doing the washing up or not. Or they may not realise, if they are French, for example, that the conditional, si on (if you), is not used to make a suggestion in English, unlike in French. Thus a French-speaker intending a suggestion with an utterance in English such as, ‘If we went to the cinema’ (‘Si on allait au cinema’, in French), might be misinterpreted, more appropriate verbalisations being ‘Would you like to go to the cinema?’ or ‘Let’s go to the cinema’.

However, non-conventional speech acts can also pose problems, in so far as, although they are not conventionalised in terms of the specific language patterns employed, they may be conventionalised in terms of the conditions in which they are performed. Thus in Arabic it is conventional that if you compliment someone on some article of clothing or other personal belonging, it is customary for them to offer the item in question as a gift. In Arabic cultures, it is therefore not a good idea to compliment people very much on their personal belongings or they will feel obliged to offer them to you. To take another example, in certain French-speaking cultures, an appropriate way to ask someone if they want to use the toilet is to ask if they want to wash their hands. This is not a recognised convention in Anglo cultures, where one is more likely to ask if one wants to use the bathroom or toilet (in fact there are variations between American and British culture on this issue too). Visitors to France may thus be perplexed by their hosts continually asking them if they want to wash their hands.
5.8 FELICITY CONDITIONS

How is it that we recognise when a particular speech act is being performed? According to Austin (1962), certain logical conditions, referred to as felicity conditions, need to apply for this to happen. Felicity conditions are thus the logical conditions or expected circumstances necessary for the (felicitous/happy) performance of a given speech act. The general condition applies to all speech acts and requires that the participants in an exchange understand the language and that they are serious in what they are doing. The propositional content condition specifies the content of an utterance; for example, a request must be about a future act by the hearer, while a promise must be about a future act by the speaker. The preparatory condition sets out the conditions which must hold prior to the performance of the speech act. For example, a request assumes that the speaker believes the hearer is able to perform the requested action and that the hearer would not do it without being asked; a promise assumes that the action will not happen by itself and that it will have a beneficial effect. The sincerity condition requires that, for a request, the speaker genuinely wants the hearer to do the act; for a promise it requires that the speaker genuinely intends to do what s/he says s/he intends to do. The essential condition refers to what the utterance counts for; with a request, the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to have the hearer perform an action; a promise counts as a commitment on the part of the speaker to do something.

5.9 SPEECH ACT TAXONOMIES

A lot of research has gone into classifying speech acts (illocutionary forces). This is important for language teaching, because a systematic classification of speech acts offers a way of organising a language teaching syllabus. There have been two possible approaches to classifying speech acts. The first way, based on Austin’s concept of performative verbs, is to group them together according to semantically similar classes. Thus speech acts such as state, contend, insist, deny, remind, guess could be labelled as expositives (that is, expounding something), while promise, guarantee, refuse, decline could be labelled as commissives (that is, committing the speaker to some course of action), and order, request, beg and dare could be grouped together as exercitives (that is, exercising of powers, rights or influences). The five categories which were put forward as a tentative framework by Austin (1962) are as follows:

1. verdictives – the giving of a verdict, as by a jury or umpire – for example, estimate, reckon, appraise;
2. exercitives – as mentioned above, the exercising of power, rights or influence – for example, appoint, vote, order, urge, advise, warn;
3. commissives – for example, promising or otherwise undertaking – promise, contract, undertake;
4. behabitives – a miscellaneous group, having to do with attitudes and social behaviour – for example, apologise, congratulate, commend;
5. expositives – the clarifying of reasons, arguments and communications – for example, reply, argue, concede, assume.

The second way of classifying speech acts is Searle’s (1976) approach. Searle used a number of criteria to classify speech acts, the main ones of which are as follows:

- *Illocutionary point*: the purpose of the speech act; for example, the purpose of a request is to get someone to do something for you; the purpose of a promise is to undertake to do something in the future; the purpose of description is to present a representation of something.
SPEECH ACTS

- Direction of fit: to make the words match the world, for example, a description, or to make the world match the words, for example, a promise.
- Speaker’s psychological state (also referred to as the sincerity condition) – a description expresses a belief about something; a promise expresses an intention to do something; an apology expresses a regret about something.

Using these criteria, Searle came up with five categories of speech act, as follows:

1. Representatives – they relate to states or events in the world – assert, swear, define, report, etc.
2. Directives – they attempt to get the hearer to do something, e.g. command, request, invite.
3. Commissives – they commit the speaker to doing something in the, e.g. undertake, promise, threaten.
4. Expressives – the speaker expresses feeling regarding a state of affairs that the expressive refers to, e.g. thank, congratulate, welcome.
5. Declarations – Austin’s performatives; acts which in their uttering change the world, e.g. I declare you man and wife.

Searle’s taxonomy, in spite of critiques, has been the one that has been the best received and most applied.

5.10 SPEECH ACT TAXONOMIES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Speech act taxonomies have been developed specifically for language teaching syllabus design (van Ek & Alexander, 1989; Wilkins, 1976). Wilkins (1976), in his work on Notional Syllabuses, presented a framework similar to that of Austin, as follows:

1. judgement and evaluation – for example, approving, disapproving, estimating;
2. suasion – for example, persuading, commanding, warning;
3. argument – for example, reporting, asserting, rejecting;
4. rational enquiry and exposition – for example, comparing, defining, explaining;
5. personal emotions – for example, pleasure, displeasure, sorrow;
6. emotional relations – for example, greeting, flattering, thanking.

The following is the set of categories developed by the Council of Europe for the Threshold syllabus (van Ek & Alexander, 1975), a syllabus designed to be applied to the teaching of the languages of the various Council of Europe member countries.

- imparting and seeking factual information (e.g. identify, report, correct, ask);
- expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes (e.g. agree, disagree, deny, accept, offer, express capability);
- expressing and finding out emotional attitudes (e.g. express pleasure/displeasure, surprise, hope, satisfaction);
- expressing and finding out moral attitudes (e.g. apologise, forgive, approve, regret);
- getting things done (suasion) (e.g. suggest, request, invite, advise, warn, instruct);
- socialising (e.g. greet, introduce, take leave, attract attention).

Using this taxonomy as a framework, the Council of Europe applied it to anticipate particular linguistic realisation patterns that might be expected of learners at this Threshold Level of learning (it was targeted primarily at 16-year-olds), stating that they are selected according to the ‘most likely and urgent needs’ (van Ek & Trim, 1998: 27) of the target learners. Figure 5.1 shows the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Imparting and seeking factual information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Identifying (defining)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1</td>
<td>(With suitable gesture) this (one), that (one), these, those</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2</td>
<td>It is + me, you, him, her, us, them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.3</td>
<td>the + be + NP/this, that, these, those</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.4</td>
<td>I, you, he, she, it, we, they + be + NP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Reporting (describing and narrating)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1</td>
<td>NP + say, think + complement clause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2</td>
<td>He says the shop is shut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Correcting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1</td>
<td>As 1.1 and 1.2, with contrastive stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2</td>
<td>(correcting a positive statement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.1</td>
<td>No (+ tag)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.2</td>
<td>How far/much/long/hot, etc.?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.3</td>
<td>Why did you say that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3</td>
<td>Negative sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4</td>
<td>(Correcting a negative statement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.5</td>
<td>Positive statements (with intensifying do)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Asking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1</td>
<td>(for confirmation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1.1</td>
<td>Interrogative sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1.2</td>
<td>Declarative sentences with high-rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1.3</td>
<td>Statement and question tag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2</td>
<td>For information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2.1</td>
<td>wh- questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2.2</td>
<td>Please (can you) tell me + subordinate clause/ + NP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.3</td>
<td>Seeking information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Asking (for confirmation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.1</td>
<td>Yes, No (+ tag)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.2</td>
<td>(for information)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.3</td>
<td>(seeking identification)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.4</td>
<td>Expressing and finding out attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.5</td>
<td>Expressing agreement with a statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.6</td>
<td>(with a positive statement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.7</td>
<td>Of course.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.1 Specification of speech acts and their possible realisation patterns for imparting and seeking factual information (van Ek & Trim, 1998: 28–29, adapted). NP, noun phrase.
specification of speech acts and their possible realisation patterns (referred to also as exponents) for imparting and seeking factual information.

The Threshold approach to language teaching subsequently fed into the design of the widely used Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). As stated on the Council of Europe website (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/dnr_EN.asp), Threshold level approaches help make the textbooks more motivating and facilitate the development of more realistic and transparent evaluation systems.

5.11 CROSS-CULTURAL AND INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS

Considerable work has been done on how speech acts are performed across languages and cultures. Some of this work focuses on native speaker performance on a given speech act (referred to as Cross-cultural Pragmatics), while other work (referred to as Interlanguage Pragmatics) focuses on how learners acquire the ability to perform a given speech act in a target language. Speech acts which have been the focus of most intensive study in both approaches are requests, refusals, apologies and compliments.

Olshtain and Cohen’s (1983) work on native speaker realisations of apologies is typical of the cross-cultural approach. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) specify the felicity condition of the speech act, that is, that the speaker has said or done something for which s/he feels the need to make amends. Five strategies, together with typical linguistic realisations, are identified, as follows:

1. An expression of an apology
   - An expression of regret: I’m sorry.
   - An offer of apology: I apologise.
   - A request for forgiveness: Excuse me.

2. An expression or account of the situation: The bus was late.

3. An acknowledgement of responsibility:
   - Accepting the blame: It’s my fault.
   - Expressing self-deficiency: I wasn’t thinking.
   - Recognising the other person as deserving apology: You are right.
   - Expressing lack of intent: I didn’t mean it.

4. An offer of repair: I’ll pay for the broken vase.

5. A promise of forbearance: It won’t happen again.

(cited in Ellis, 2008: 176)

The premise underlying this research is that, where the realisation patterns of speech acts across cultures and languages vary, there is a danger of transfer, of applying patterns from the L1 to the L2. Descriptions of individual speech act realisation patterns provide teachers and learners with the information they need (suitably presented, of course) to discover where the target language and the L1 overlap and, therefore, where positive transfer is likely and – where there are differences – where negative transfer is likely.

In the example just cited, there are actually two levels of knowledge required to understand or express an apology: the choice of an appropriate strategy (listed form 1–5, with substrategies in some cases) and the actual language used to realise the strategy. Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) refer to these two types of knowledge as sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic. The failure to master either or both can result in what Thomas (1983) refers to as cross-cultural pragmatic failure.
Paltridge (2005/2006) gives examples of both types of failure. For sociopragmatic failure he gives the example of a Thai worker being criticised in front of his co-workers by a foreign manager for being regularly late for work. In Thai culture, this would be inappropriate, as it would result in loss of face. A Thai manager would be more likely to talk about the problem of lateness in general terms or would talk to the individual concerned in private.

Paltridge's (2005/2006) example of pragmalinguistic failure is that of an English speaker failing to attach an address form such as chan or san to someone's name when speaking to a person in Japanese. In Anglo cultures, address forms tend to be less formal than in some cultures such as that of Japan. Indeed, many Chinese people adopt English names to be used when communicating with Westerners to avoid being addressed by their original Chinese given name (which they consider to be too informal for a relative stranger and should be reserved for family members and close friends). Another example of pragmalinguistic failure is the example above of a French learner of English who, transferring a pattern from French, might say 'if we went' as a suggestion.

Pragmatic breakdown is not limited to different cultures. There was a notorious criminal trial in the UK in the 1950s, involving two men, Derek Bentley and Chris Craig. Bentley, who was under arrest by the police, shouted to Craig, who had a gun, 'Let him have it, Chris!' Upon hearing this utterance, Craig shot and killed a policeman. The utterance is, of course, ambiguous, either meaning 'shoot him' or 'hand over the gun'. The prosecution claimed that the former was the intended meaning, while the defence argued that it was the latter. The judge sided with the prosecution and Bentley was sentenced to death as an accessory to murder and executed, only to be pardoned many years later.

The best-known work representing the second of the approaches to Contrastive Pragmatics mentioned above, Interlanguage Pragmatics, is the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989a, b; Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). This large-scale project focused specifically on requests and apologies across different languages and cultures, using primarily discourse completion tests (questionnaires which ask informants to write down how they would realise a given speech act in a given situation). The aim was to find out cultural differences between native and non-native speaker performance of requests and apologies at both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic levels. Languages and language varieties studied included American English, Australian English, British English, Canadian French, Danish, German, Hebrew and Argentinean Spanish.

The work of Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) is a good example from this project. Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) conducted three studies: a study of the performance of complaints by native speakers of Hebrew, a cross-cultural comparison of complaining by native speakers of Hebrew and of British and American English, and an interlanguage study, comparing complaint realisation by non-native speakers of Hebrew at intermediate and advanced proficiency levels with that of native speakers. The cross-cultural comparison displayed highly consistent response patterns across the three native-speaker groups. However, learners' complaints differed from those of the target group on all the measures employed in the study. Learners produced longer complaint utterances, chose more severe complaining strategies, and used more softeners and more intensifiers. Strategy choice was influenced by interlocutors' relative status, social distance and the hearer's obligation to have avoided the offensive act. The learners also produced longer utterances when the hearer's obligation was implicit, and they opted for more severe strategies than the native speakers when an explicit obligation had been violated. The non-native-speaker learners also displayed greater variability in their responses, indicating that they were not yet accustomed to target conventions.4

5.12 INSTRUCTED PRAGMATICS

As well as research on Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Pragmatics (speech acts), work has been conducted in a field which has been referred to as Instructed Pragmatics, the investigation of speech
act development in instructional contexts. Rose and Kasper’s (2001) Pragmatics in Language Teaching is a landmark text in this field. This volume investigated the teaching and assessment of second-language pragmatics in various contexts.

A notable recent study in this context and typical of the sort of empirical work which is going on in instructed speech act research is that of Taguchi (2012). Taguchi’s longitudinal study asked two questions: (1) What patterns of pragmatic development can be observed among different pragmatic functions and attributes in a second language (L2)? (2) In what ways do individual differences and learning context affect the course of pragmatic development? Forty-eight Japanese college students studying English in an immersion setting in Japan participated in the study and were asked to complete a pragmatic speech act task (requests and opinions). Results revealed a profound increase in the low-imposition speech acts, but a slow development of high-imposition speech acts. Qualitative findings revealed that learners’ history of participation and socialisation related to their speech act development.

A number of studies have investigated speech act development in study abroad contexts. A monograph by Barron (2003) investigated the development of social formulas, on the one hand, and the speech acts of offering and refusing, on the other, among Irish learners of German. In another monograph, Schauer (2010) examined the interlanguage pragmatic development of German learners of English at a British university, studying not only their pragmatic development, but also their pragmatic awareness.

Of a more practical nature, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) produced a set of lesson plans for the teaching of pragmatics, while Cohen and Ishihara (2005) also made available online speech act teaching and background material, but aimed at the teaching of Spanish and Japanese.

5.13 METHODS FOR RESEARCHING SPEECH ACTS

We mentioned above that discourse completion tests were used to collect data in the speech act research discussed. Clark and Bangerter (2004: 25) identify the various methods used in the literature in collecting speech act data. They identify three approaches: armchair, field and laboratory. Jucker (2009) subclassifies these approaches as follows: armchair is subdivided into philosophic and interview; field is divided into diary, philological, conversation analytic and corpus; while laboratory is divided into discourse completion task and role play.

Armchair (the term is often used in a disparaging way) involves imagining examples of language use and making decisions relating to their appropriateness. Field research involves going out into the real world and collecting naturally occurring data. These data may be stored as field notes by the researcher in a diary, or, if conversational, they may be recorded and transcribed; with this latter method the language realising the given speech act must be extracted using various corpus tools (O’Keeffe et al., 2011). With the laboratory method, data are elicited in ‘laboratory’ conditions and participants in the research are asked to complete discourse completion questionnaires or to participate in role-plays. Each of these methods has its strengths and weaknesses (see Jucker, 2009, for discussion). The armchair method is the easiest, but it may not be reliable, being based on intuition; native-speaker intuition about language, it has frequently been shown, may be faulty. The field method has the advantage of using authentic data, but is extremely time-consuming and hence insufficient data may result from this method. Laboratory methods have the advantage of being suitable for the collection of large amounts of data (large numbers of participants may be asked to complete the questionnaire or perform in role-plays); however, because the data are elicited in artificial conditions, they may not correspond to naturally occurring language.

As stated by Jucker (2009: 1633):
the ideal research method for the investigation of speech acts … does not exist. … There is not even a method that is in a general way better than all the others. An assessment of a particular method always depends on the specific research question that the researcher tries to answer because the different methods vary enormously in their suitability for specific research questions.

5.14 CRITIQUE

5.14.1 My earlier critique

In an early article (Flowerdew, 1990), I discussed a number of problems in applying speech act theory to language teaching. Briefly, these issues can be listed under six headings, as follows:

1. How universal are speech act categories?

All languages and cultures have speech acts, but they may not be the same. As Wierzbicka (1987: 10) points out, Aboriginal languages do not have verbs that correspond to thank and apologise, but they have verbs for speech acts which have no names in English. On the other hand, Polish has two verbs which correspond roughly to English promise, but neither of which means exactly the same thing. Hymes (1962) claimed that the names of its repertoire of speech acts encode a culture’s view of its most relevant forms of talk. This view would seem to lend support to the idea of learning English based upon its set of speech act verbs. There is one important caveat, here, though. It needs to be acknowledged that the cultural rules that apply in all societies that use English are likely to vary. Those societies where English is a non-native institutionalised variety (for example, Nigeria, Singapore), in particular, are likely to have their own ‘interpretation of the world of human action and interaction’, to use a term from Wierzbicka (1987). Care needs to be taken to avoid cultural imperialism in the application of speech act theory to language teaching. Learners may wish to maintain their L1 cultural identity (LoCastro, 2003). Special care needs also to be taken where English is being used as a lingua franca between speakers from different cultural backgrounds.

2. How many speech acts are there?

If we take the number of performative verbs in English as indicative of the number of speech acts, then readers will recall that Austin (1962) estimated there to be somewhere between one and 10,000 performatives. Wierzbicka’s (1987) dictionary of speech act verbs contains just 231 entries, but this is not a comprehensive list. Similarly, based on a survey of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Wen (2007) estimated there to be 230 speech act verbs in English. This must be an underestimation, however, and is probably due to the fact that the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English is a learners’ dictionary. Gozzi (1991), based on a supplement to Webster’s Third Unabridged Dictionary, calculated that there were 75 new speech act verbs added to English in just one quarter-century, from 1961 to 1986. Given that there must be a very large number, at any rate, from a language teaching perspective, the question is how to handle such a large number. One approach is to apply Searle’s (1976) taxonomy of basic categories and then select what may be considered to be the most important ones. This is not an empirical approach and is based on intuition. The Council of Europe tried to make this process more empirical by starting with the framework of categories, loosely based on Searle, and illustrated earlier in this chapter. This is still introspective, but this framework was fleshed out by then conducting a needs analysis among the target
learners to find out what they consider to be the most important things they want to be able to do in
the foreign language (Richterich & Chancerel, 1980).

3. The contrast between specific and diffuse acts

de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) point out that there is a great difference between what they
call 'relatively well defined' (p. 117) speech acts such as promising or threatening and 'extremely dif-
fuse' (p. 117) speech acts such as stating, asserting or questioning. Individual illocutionary acts, as
we have seen, have been defined in terms of the conditions that must pertain for their performance.
However, the conditions pertaining for the performance of the more diffuse acts are not specifiable
in the same way as are those for the well-defined acts such as promising or threatening. For this
reason, no doubt, most of the work on individual speech acts is limited to a relatively narrow range
of the more easily definable acts, such as requests, apologies, compliments, thanking, and so forth.
What this means for the application of speech act theory is that a large part of what people actu-
ally do with language in performing the more diffuse acts is not susceptible to analysis in terms of
speech acts.

4. The size of speech act realisation forms

Although writers on speech acts acknowledge that the formal manifestation of a speech act does
not necessarily correspond to the single sentence6, there is nevertheless a tendency to take the
sentence as the standard speech act unit. A single act can be realised by less than a sentence (for
example, agreement can be expressed by a simple yes), or more than one sentence (for example, a
promise in the form of a formal oath might take many sentences). On the other hand, one sentence
can express more than one act. Thus a student who asks the teacher, ‘Would you speak more slowly
please?’ is simultaneously requesting action, asserting that the teacher speaks too quickly, and
reporting difficulty (Richards & Schmidt, 1983: 126). Furthermore, an act is not necessarily limited
to one speaker turn (Schmidt & Richards, 1980: 132; Brown & Yule, 1983: 233), but may be con-
structed over a number of turns (Thomas, 1983).

Obviously, as far as application of speech act theory is concerned, this question of size is a seri-
ous one. How is it possible to recognise in a spoken or written text, or specify in a syllabus inventory,
the linguistic realisation of a given speech act, if the possible size of that realisational form cannot
be specified? One approach that mitigates this problem is to focus on larger units of discourse,
using Conversation Analysis (see Chapter 7) (see, for example, Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006;
Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001; Walters, 2007).

5. Discrete categories versus scale of meaning

As was pointed out earlier, Austin (1962) based his estimate of the number of speech acts on the
number of performative verbs in English. He thus assumed that speech acts and performative verbs
are in a one-to-one relationship. This assumption has been criticised by Leech (1981, 1983) and
others (Edmondson, 1981; Wierzbicka, 1985) on the grounds that there is no reason to believe that
distinctions made in our vocabulary necessarily exist in reality. Searle was aware of this when he
stated that ‘the verbs “announce”, “hint” and “confide” do not mark separate illocutionary points but
rather the style or manner of performance of [the same] illocutionary act’ (Searle, 1975: 28).

Leech (1981) argues that speech acts are indeterminate and exist along a scale rather than
belonging to distinct categories. For example, it is difficult to say where the border might lie between
a request and an order. In language teaching, therefore, is a sentence such as ‘Open the door please’ to be presented to the learner as a request or an order?

What the scalar, as opposed to the categorical, nature of speech act categories means for application to language teaching is that exact specification or assignment of speech act realisation forms will be problematic.

6. Empirical versus introspective data

We have reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of how to collect speech act data above. Ideally, we would want to base a syllabus on the most authentic data we could find. As Boxer and Pickering (1995: 52) stated, The teaching of speech acts should first and foremost be based on spontaneous speech in order to capture the underlying social strategies of the speech behaviour being studied. This approach has been made much easier with the advent of easily searchable electronic corpora (see Chapter 9) (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). A number of studies have used corpora to investigate speech act behaviour (for example, Jiang, 2006; Koester, 2002; Schauer & Adolphs, 2006). Some studies have compared the language of given speech acts in English teaching course books with authentic data (for example, Jiang, 2006).

5.14.2 Grundy’s critique

Much more recent than my critique of speech act approaches to pedagogy, as summarised above, is one by Grundy (2012: 121), in a review of Ishihara and Cohen (2010). The list in Figure 5.2 presents what Grundy sees as the methodological stance of the book, with his own (contrary) view (in parentheses).

Grundy’s conclusion is that Ishihara and Cohen’s book ‘uses native-speaker pragmatic norms as a way of determining a socioculturally inspired learn-in-order-to-use language teaching

1. Teaching and Learning Pragmatics accepts the concept of intrinsic cultural difference in which foreign language learners find themselves at cross-cultural variance with native speakers. (English as a Lingua Franca learners need to establish a common culture, at least for the purpose of linguistic encounters with others, which will therefore be intercultural.)

2. Contexts are presumptive and prescribe appropriate linguistic routines. (Contexts are made relevant or even perhaps created by the way language is used, and are not therefore predetermined.)

3. Appropriate linguistic routines are best characterized as speech acts whose form is revealed through DCTs which enable model utterances to be determined. (The vast majority of utterances are highly context-sensitive and cannot be reduced to a set of formulas. Trying to do this is tantamount to endorsing the contradictory notion of a decontextualized Pragmatics.)

4. Model utterances can be presented to learners as targets and discussed metalinguistically. (Such a product-oriented approach overlooks the processes that speakers undertake in finding an optimal form for a meaning and that hearers undertake in finding an optimal meaning for a form.)

5. Explicit metapragmatic awareness and declarative knowledge are crucial to the development of L2 pragmatic competence. (Implicit metapragmatic awareness and procedural skill are at the heart of all normal language use.)

Figure 5.2. Contrasting methodological stances on speech act approaches in language pedagogy (Grundy, 2012: 121). DCTs, discourse completion tests.
methodology’ (pp. 121–122). This is in contrast to his own approach, in which ‘English is regarded as a plural system and in which a speaker’s identity is revealed in their own distinct pragmatic and metapragmatic choices’.

5.15 APPLICATION TO PEDAGOGY

Our discussion throughout this chapter has been within a context of pedagogic application. In this section, we will focus on some general principles for a pedagogical approach to speech acts. Clearly there is a need to go beyond the simplistic matching of communicative functions (speech acts) with social contexts and realisation forms. There is a need to develop awareness of the subtleties of context in affecting sociopragmatic and linguistic choice and meaning. This means a more consciousness-raising approach rather than memorisation of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic norms. Murray (2012) describes activities which might be involved in such an approach, as follows:

awareness-raising activities that prepare learners for noticing and include: focusing on speech acts in the performance of which deviation from the L1 norm is most critical to meaning and interpersonal relations; engaging learners in discourse completion tasks; using authentic materials; encouraging learners to become their own ethnographers and observe how speech acts are realised in the L2 in particular contexts of use and to contrast this with the L1; and incorporating native-speaker role plays into classroom activities as a focus of student observation.

Such activities might be incorporated into the sort of analytic model proposed by Barraja-Rohan (2000: 71) for the teaching of sociopragmatics, as in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3  A framework for developing pragmatic (speech act) competence (Barraja-Rohan, 2000: 71, adapted from Conversation Analysis to speech acts)
At the same time as developing the sort of awareness we have described, learners need to develop an understanding of their particular role with regard to the cultural context within which they are likely to operate. To what degree, if any, do they want to assimilate to another culture? As Ishihara (2010) puts it:

While it is important to ensure in instructional contexts that learners acquire receptive pragmatic competence to understand their interlocutors' intended meaning in the L2, teachers are advised not to expect learners to necessarily accommodate to perceived L2 norms. Instead, teachers could encourage learners to predict and observe the consequences of their pragmatic choices, that is, to critically analyze the sociocultural implications of their own language, as well as those of community members in terms of how identity, social practices, power structures, and affiliation with the community are constructed and negotiated.

There is thus a role for a critical approach to the development of speech act competence. Learners need to be encouraged to develop what might be referred to as critical pragmatic awareness. Crozet et al. (1999: 181) refer to the understanding that will be derived from such awareness as 'a third place'. This third place consists of a space between the learner’s native culture and the target culture, a space between the self and the other, or – where English is used as a lingua franca and is not the L1 of either interlocutors – a space between the learner’s culture and the interlocutor’s culture, neither of which may necessarily be what might be described as ‘Anglo’.

5.16 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Say if the verbs in the following utterances are performatives or not.
   1. You are reminded not to smoke in this office.
   2. I suggest you come back tomorrow.
   3. I declare this conference open.
   4. I can’t ask him to do it again.
   5. I love you.
   6. The room is cooled by the air conditioner.

2. The following is ambiguous regarding its status as a performative: explain why.
   I bet 50 dollars on that horse.

3. Think of possible language forms for realising the following speech acts:
   1. identify
   2. agree
   3. apologise
   4. request
   5. attract attention

4. Look again at the range of possibilities for complaining about a meal in a restaurant in section 5.7. Write down a set of realisation patterns like this for:
   (a) asking someone out on a date;
   (b) borrowing some money from a friend.

   Put them in the order you might grade them according to difficulty in a language course.

5. Make a list of possible realisation forms from the speech act of requesting in English and in
another language you know. Which forms are the same and which are different? What does this suggest for teaching?

6. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of a functional (speech act) syllabus as compared as to one organised along grammatical lines?

7. Consider the concept of critical pragmatic awareness, as explained in section 5.15. What form might this take in your own experience of second-language learning? Compare your view with that of others.

5.17 FURTHER READING