

THE RELEVANCE OF SPEECH ACT THEORY FOR RESEARCH ON THE
ACQUISITION OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE BY SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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1. Introduction

In this session the focus is on the theme question of what linguistics has to offer the language teaching profession, - as opposed to other language professions. Language teachers and language teacher trainers often draw attention to areas where greater input from linguistics is required for addressing various kinds of problems that language teachers experience. There are great expectations of linguistics for solving some of these problems, and there are a number of suggestions as to how linguistics may be able to satisfy certain needs. This paper will address the general question from a slightly different angle: I shall illustrate an instance in which linguistics not only *may*, but in fact already *has* made a contribution to second language acquisition research.

More precisely, this paper will consider how theories underlying the communicative approach¹ to second language teaching have been informed by the speech act theory which Austin and Searle developed. I shall give an indication of how certain concepts that feature centrally in particular second language acquisition theories, in fact have their origin in a more general linguistic theory, i.e. a theory of language use.

I shall start out with a few very general remarks, and then I shall proceed

- (i) to describe briefly what Austin and Searle's speech act theory hypothesises, and then

- (ii) to indicate how Austin and Searle's conceptualization of speech acts informed certain second language acquisition theories.

The communicative approach to second language teaching was introduced when research results proved that successful acquisition of grammatical competence in a second language does not guarantee successful performance in an ordinary language use situation². It is argued that language teaching practices should assist second language learners in achieving the kind of proficiency that will enable them to communicate successfully.

According to Fraser, Rintell and Walters (1980:75) everyone learning a second language recognizes that such a study involves more than just acquiring "the sounds, the grammar, and the new vocabulary". It also involves acquiring the ability to use the language effectively in a social setting. Although there is general agreement that second language learning involves the acquisition of such *sociolinguistic competence*³, there is still no consensus about the exact nature of this particular kind of competence. Various studies focusing on aspects of language use that indicate internalized knowledge of pragmatic rules, offer suggestions of the constituents of sociolinguistic/communicative/ pragmatic competence.

Interestingly, the speech act theory which Austin and Searle developed between 1962 and 1969, highlighted certain aspects of language use which were the focus of second language acquisition research of the 70's.

2. Outline of the Austin-Searle type of speech act theory

J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts was first set out in a series of lectures that were posthumously published. This theory is accepted and worked out in more detail by J.R. Searle⁴.

I shall present a description of the Austin-Searle theory here, which is necessarily much reduced. I have selected only as much as is necessary to support the general point, that this theory has provided a basis for much of the research on acquisition of pragmatic competence.

Certain early theories of language use⁵ claim that the primary function of language is to represent and communicate factual information. Another claim of such early theories is that the sentences of a language are primarily factual statements which are either true or false. In such theories the acts and intentions of speakers are not taken into account. Wittgenstein (1968: par.43) challenges these theories by pointing out that we perform various tasks with language, of which stating facts is only one. Austin (1962:5-6) agrees with Wittgenstein, when he calls attention to types of utterances such as (1) that cannot be accounted for in terms of truth or falsity.

(1) I promise I will come.

Language, Austin says, is a phenomenon that involves intentional acts by speakers who employ conventional devices, such as words and sentences, in accordance with abstract sets of rules⁶. Speakers are said to use utterances to perform specific acts, i.e. in uttering a sentence a speaker is doing something⁷. Austin distinguishes three basic senses in which saying something is doing something: in speaking, a person can perform locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts.

(i) Locutionary acts

A locutionary act is an act of saying; it is the production of a meaningful utterance. For example, a person may utter a sentence such as (2) in speaking. The locutionary act is performed regardless of any particular, contextually determined meaning the utterance may convey, or may be intended to convey, and regardless of whether the utterance is a reprimand, an insult or whatever.

(2) You are such a fool.

Austin (1962:99) characterizes such an act as the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference.

(ii) Perlocutionary acts

A perlocutionary act is an act performed by means of saying something; it is the bringing about of effects in the hearer, such as belief, anger, distress or laughter, by means of uttering a sentence. Such effects are determined by the illocutionary force of the utterance as well as by the particular circumstances in which the utterance is produced⁸. Searle (1969:25) explains the notion of a perlocutionary act with the following examples: "by arguing I may *persuade* or *convince* someone, by warning I may *scare* or *alarm* him/her, by making a request I may *get her to do something*, by informing her I may *convince her* ..."

(iii) Illocutionary acts

An illocutionary act is an act performed in uttering a sentence; it is the making of a statement, an offer, a promise, etc. In Searle's theory every utterance has a particular illocutionary force by virtue of which it has status as a statement, an offer, a promise, a request, etc. The illocutionary force of an utterance conveys what the speaker

intends to do with the particular utterance. Thus the illocutionary force determines what type of illocutionary act the utterance is meant to be. The theory assumes that illocutionary force⁹ is an aspect of meaning that cannot be captured in a truth-conditional semantic theory.

Often the literal meaning of an utterance is apparent while its illocutionary force is not. An utterance such as (3), for example, can be issued as a statement, a conclusion or a warning.

(3) That bull is very angry.

According to Austin (1962:133-134), if the force of a particular utterance is not directly obvious, a paraphrase of the utterance can indicate the underlying illocutionary force. For example, the illocutionary force conveyed implicitly in (4) is explicated in (5).

(4) I'll bring it tomorrow.

(5) I promise I'll bring it tomorrow.

If a speaker intends to warn somebody of an imminent danger there are various conventional means for performing such an act, at his/her disposal. Speakers (S) and hearers (H) are said to know the various devices by which an act of warning (or promising, complimenting, encouraging, etc.) can be performed. Conventional means¹⁰ by which S can warn H that a bull is going to charge, include at least (6) - (8) below.

(6) Be careful, that bull is going to charge.

(7) That bull is going to charge!

(8) Aren't you afraid that the bull is going to charge?

Speakers use various devices in order to be specific and unambiguous about the intended force of their utterances. An explicit performative verb can indicate the intended illocutionary force, as in (9) below, though less overt devices are also available. Mood or emphatic pronunciation can indicate that an utterance such as (10) below is intended as an order; the use of a particular adverb, as in (11), can indicate a promise; or the use of a conjunctive particle, as in (12), can indicate that the utterance is intended as a conclusion¹¹.

(9) I hereby declare you the Mayor of Casterbridge.

(10) Shut it!

(11) I'll definitely be there.

(12) Therefore, they found him guilty.

The Austin-Searle kind of speech act theory is primarily concerned with illocutionary acts. The more general term *speech act*¹² has come to be used exclusively in reference to the illocutionary act. Austin (1962:98) claims that all utterances are the performance of some kind of illocutionary act. He presents guidelines for a systematic classification of the various kinds of acts performed in speaking. Searle refines the classification Austin proposed: first he identifies a number of classification principles, and then on the basis of these he characterizes five classes of illocutionary acts, namely

- constatives, such as statements,
- requestives, such as requests, orders, or suggestions,
- commissives, such as promises,
- expressives, such as compliments, or congratulations,
- declaratives, such as christening, or appointing.

According to Searle (1969:16) an illocutionary act is the basic or minimal unit of linguistic communication. Successfully performed illocutionary acts allegedly satisfy particular felicity conditions. Such felicity conditions are specifications for appropriate language use.

In summary, the main thrust of this speech act theory can be described in terms of what the theory attempts:

Austin and Searle's speech act theory attempts to determine which kinds of rules enable language users to attach appropriate illocutionary forces to particular utterances. It also attempts to define and analyze the various kinds of illocutionary forces related to various kinds of illocutionary acts. Further it attempts to explicate the necessary conditions for the successful performance of each particular kind of illocutionary act¹³.

In the following section I shall indicate how particular concepts which Austin and Searle introduced in the theory set out above, are accepted in the description of pragmatic competence in certain second language acquisition theories.

3. Components of pragmatic competence set out in second language acquisition theories informed by Austin and Searle's speech act theory

As I indicated above, earlier second language acquisition theories focused on learners' acquisition of grammatical competence. After 1970 second language acquisition theories were adapted to make provision for the acquisition of something more, i.e. for the acquisition of knowledge of rules for language use. In these more recent theories the notion of *pragmatic competence*, or *communicative competence*, features regularly and centrally. The so-called communicative approach

to second language teaching draws on these particular language acquisition theories.

What I would like to indicate now, is how certain hypotheses about the nature of the task facing the second language learner engaged in acquiring pragmatic competence, have been informed by the speech act theory described in the previous section.

I shall refer to three different studies in the area of second language acquisition, in which researchers are concerned with the notion of pragmatic competence. These studies have at least one thing in common, namely their attempts to clarify the kinds of competence that second language learners need to acquire. Linguistics has assisted researchers in determining the constituents of pragmatic competence - even if the various researchers organize such constituents differently.

(i)

First, there is the research done on the acquisition of pragmatic competence by Fraser, Rintell and Walters (1980) in which they distinguish between

- (a) linguistic competence and pragmatic competence, and
- (b) pragmatic competence and communicative competence.

(a) The authors define *linguistic competence*¹⁴ as "the knowledge required to construct or understand well-formed sentences of the language".

Pragmatic competence, in contrast, is "the knowledge required to determine what such sentences mean when spoken in a certain way in a particular context". It is the latter kind of knowledge that will enable second language learners to perform the various speech acts of requesting, apologising, and the like in a social context.

The actual use of the language in performing or recognizing such speech acts, is identified as *pragmatic performance*.

(b) *Pragmatic competence* focuses narrowly on the level of utterances. *Communicative competence* includes the speaker-hearer's knowledge of rules for use of language in conversations. It even includes relevant nonverbal aspects of language use.

Fraser, Rintell and Walters draw directly on the work of Austin and Searle in formulating the assumptions that underlie their research into the second language learner's acquisition of pragmatic competence. They assume:

1. Every language has the same basic set of speech acts, such as requesting, apologising, declaring, etc., with the exception of certain culture-specific ritualized acts such as baptizing, doubling at bridge, excommunicating, etc.
2. Every language makes available the same set of strategies for performing a given speech act.
3. Languages will differ with respect to when a particular speech act will be appropriate, and what particular strategy ought to be used. For example, in certain language communities a speaker won't swear when promising would be adequate; or, where congratulations are appropriate in one language community, the same would be inappropriate in another language community.

(ii)

Second, Canale and Swain (1980) accept that the goal in second language teaching is to guide learners in acquiring a high degree of communicative competence. Their study is aimed at yielding a precise definition of communicative competence, i.e. they attempt to establish clearly what the content and boundaries of communicative competence are.

Canale and Swain (1980:4) refer to the work of Campbell and Wales (1970) and of Hymes (1972) which draws attention to speakers' ability to produce and understand utterances which are not only grammatical, but particularly are appropriate to the context in which they are made. They propose a notion of competence that is broader than the notion of grammatical competence, i.e. communicative competence. These researchers identify communicative competence as a subcomponent of a more general language competence. To them a speaker/hearer's communicative competence is his/her knowledge of how language is used to perform communicative functions (i.e. speech acts) in social contexts, as well as knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse.

Canale and Swain suggest a theory according to which communicative competence is composed minimally of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. I shall not pay further attention to the first and the last of these components, because our interest is primarily with the other: speech act theory has informed Canale and Swain's hypotheses concerning socio-linguistic competence in particular. They propose that this component of communicative competence is made up of two sets of rules: sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse. The sociocultural rules of use are those which specify the ways in which utterances are produced and understood appropriately. They focus on the extent to which certain propositions and communicative functions¹⁵ are appropriate within a given sociocultural context. So, Canale and Swain's conceptualization of communicative competence testifies to the access they had to Austin and Searle's conceptualisation of speech acts.

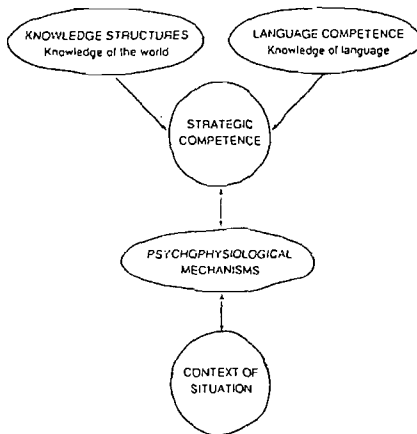
(iii)

Third, Lyle F. Bachman (1990:81 ff.) finds that if we want to test the degree of language proficiency second language learners have achieved, we need clear definitions of the particular abilities we wish to measure. He gives a description of the "communicative language ability" which is consistent with the hypotheses of Canale and Swain. In general terms he proposes that the ability to use language communicatively involves "competence in language" and the "capacity for implementing/using this competence".

Bachman (1990:83) explicitly underscores the view propounded by Austin and Searle that communication is more than the simple transfer of information. He suggests that the *communicative language ability* has three components:

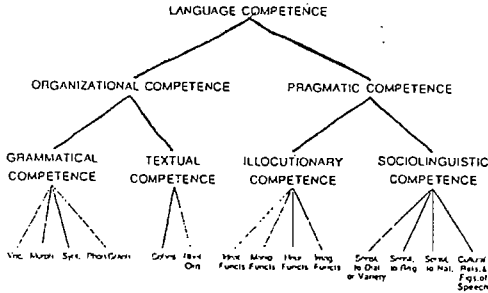
- (i) language competence
- (ii) strategic competence
- (iii) psychophysiological mechanisms

He (1990:85) illustrates the interactions of these components with the language use context and the user's other knowledge structures, with the following diagram:



Components of communicative language ability in communicative language use

Then he focuses on the sub-component of language competence, again with a diagram (which he stresses is merely a visual metaphor and not a theoretical model)¹⁶:



Components of language competence

He distinguishes between *organizational competence*¹⁷ and *pragmatic competence*:

Bachman's notion of pragmatic competence includes (a) *illocutionary competence* (knowledge of the pragmatic conventions for performing acceptable language functions, i.e. speech acts), and (b) *sociolinguistic competence* (knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions for performing language functions appropriately in a given context). The former refers to a more universal kind of knowledge, while the latter refers to a more language and culture specific kind of knowledge.

Here I shall pay attention only to the "sub-sub-component" of illocutionary competence. Bachman (1990:90-92) refers explicitly to information drawn from speech act theory in describing this particular kind of knowledge of language users:

1. Speakers and hearers know that certain sentences can function as assertions, warnings, requests, etc. For example, they have the pragmatic knowledge that a sentence such as (13) below can be used to request that a door or window be closed, and that a sentence such as

(14) below can be used to warn someone to stay away from the barn.

(13) It's cold in here.

(14) There are rats in the barn.

2. Speakers use illocutionary competence in getting someone to leave with an utterance such as (15) below, in getting the neighbours' children to turn down their music with utterances such as (16) or (17)) below, etc

(15) Here are your car keys.

(16) Is it possible for you to turn down the volume?

(17) I have got a terrible headache.

Here Bachman relies particularly on the work of Austin and Searle which indicates the various devices by which a speaker can signal the intended illocutionary force of an utterance¹⁸.

3. Illocutionary competence is used in encoding as well as in decoding the illocutionary forces of utterances. For example, a speaker knows that (18) below can be used as a request that the hearer leave, and the hearer will recognize an utterance such as (18) as such a request.

(18) Do you know what time it is?

4. Conclusion

What I have given here, is a bit of a bird's eye view on speech act theory on the one hand, and on certain components of second language acquisition theories on the other. The aim has merely been to give an indication of at least some areas of research

related to language teaching, to which linguistics has made a not too insignificant contribution. It is clear that a great deal of the work concerning the second language learner's acquisition of pragmatic competence, draws heavily on speech act theory in that researchers rely on a number of key concepts which were provided by Austin and Searle.

NOTES

1. It is important to note here that I am not evaluating the communicative approach; even if one has a fair amount of misgivings about assumptions underlying this particular approach, or about the ways in which such an approach is manifested in actual teaching, - considerations concerning the adequacy of the particular approach are irrelevant for the moment.
2. cf. Ellis, 1985:229 ff., Stern, 1983:229-230, 341ff., Widdowson, 1978:18-19, Wilkens, 1972:146.
3. Different terms are used in the literature: besides *sociolinguistic competence*, there is reference to *communicative competence* and *pragmatic competence*. These terms are used to refer to similar phenomena. Various scholars to whom I shall refer in par. 3 later on, give a description of what they mean with the term they prefer. The term *communicative competence* is used most often in the description of this type of competence, and is probably the one language teachers know best. However, I shall prefer the term *pragmatic competence*, unless it is necessary to use the term particularly favoured by a given researcher.

4. Austin's lectures were delivered in 1955, but only published in 1962 under the title *How to do things with words*. Searle explicates the theory in *Speech Acts*, as well as in two articles, *A general taxonomy of illocutionary acts* and *Indirect speech acts*. Various other books and articles by Searle, as well as by other scientists, have been published since, many containing suggestions for adapting the theory. However, the sources mentioned here provide the basis of what is recognized as the Austin- Searle type of speech act theory.
5. Cf. Wittgenstein's earlier work, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, first published in 1933. Fann (1969:5,8 ff) describes the view Wittgenstein propounded in the *Tractatus*, that the essential function of language is to depict or to describe the world.
6. Cf. Searle (1965:223-225) for an explanation of various kinds of rules that may be considered here.
7. Cf. Levinson (1983:231-236) for more details on how saying something can be taken as doing something.
8. Cf. Lyons (1977:730) and Levinson (1983:236) for more detailed discussions of how utterances can produce particular effects.
9. Cf. Lyons (1977:731) on the view that the illocutionary force may be part of the meaning of a sentence, rather than part of the contextually determined meaning of the utterance.
10. Searle (1975b:68) argues that not only direct speech acts with explicit performatives, but often also indirect speech acts are constituted conventionally.
11. Cf. Levinson (1983:232,233) for more details on illocutionary force indicating devices.

12. Cf. Levinson (1983:236) for particulars of use of the term *speech act*.
13. Cf. Searle (1969:137) for more details on the various kinds of felicity conditions.
14. Although the term *competence* is often used in reference to both knowledge and ability, the authors prefer here to exclude the notion of ability.
15. What these SLA-researchers refer to as *communicative functions*, are what Austin and Searle have termed *speech acts*.
16. The authors note that in language use all these components interact; they are not separate and independant as the diagram may suggest.
17. Briefly, this kind of competence includes *grammatical competence*, i.e. the knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonology, and *textual competence* which includes the knowledge of conventions for joining utterances together to form texts.
18. Cf. par.2 above.

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