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Speech Acts in Written Advertisements: Identification, Classification and Analysis

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Abstract

The Speech Act Theory was first introduced by philosophers and then approached by pragmatists and discourse analysts. While philosophers and pragmatists deal with speech acts in fabricated texts, discourse analysts focus on their occurring in real discourses. Another important distinction between these two lines of research is that philosophy and pragmatics study speech acts in isolation, while discourse analysis points to their linear and hierarchical organisation, trying to identify recurring patterns in various genres. The present paper approaches speech acts from an interdisciplinary perspective. Using a series of illocutionary force indicating devices, the paper identifies, classifies and analyses the types of speech acts used in written advertisements. The findings point out the advertisers' preference of using some speech acts over others with the aim of obtaining the intended effect on the target audience. This quantitative analysis is performed on a corpus of eighty-four written advertisements selected from various newspapers and magazines, and the results can be viewed as genre-defining.

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1. Introduction

The Standard Speech Act Theory appears as a reaction to a philosophical doctrine of the 1930s, called *logical positivism*. According to logical positivism, a sentence can be either true or false to the reality for which it stands otherwise it is “strictly speaking meaningless” (Levinson, 1994:227). This would mean that most ethical, aesthetic, literary discourses and everyday utterances are meaningless. At the very beginning, Wittgenstein (1921/1961) is one of the fervent proponents of this doctrine, but he soon changes his stand and underlines that “meaning is use”

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(Wittgenstein, 1958: 43) and that utterances are explicable in relation to the role they play in different activities or *language-games*.

In the same period, Austin begins his lectures on speech acts (lectures published posthumously in the book *How To Do Things With Words*). Austin adopts a similar stand to that of the later Wittgenstein and points out that “the total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (Austin, 1962:147). He defines speech acts as expressions of psychological states (e.g. embarrassment, gratitude, irritation, regrets, etc.) or of involvement in social interaction (e.g. ordering, requesting, promising, warning, etc.). Austin (1962:108) also emphasises that, in uttering a sentence, three kinds of acts are simultaneously performed:

a. *a locutionary act*, which presupposes the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference (i.e. the study of meaning);

b. *an illocutionary act*, which presupposes the making of a request, statement, promise, offer, asking a question, issuing an order, etc. in uttering a sentence, on account of the conventional force/ intention associated with it or with its explicit paraphrase (i.e. the direct achievements by the conventional force associated with the issuance of an utterance);

c. *a perlocutionary act*, which presupposes the bringing about of effects on the addressee(s) by uttering the sentence, these effects depending on the circumstances of the utterances (i.e. all the intended and unintended effects/ consequences caused by a particular utterance in a particular situation).

Another philosopher, Searle (1994), sheds more light on the issue of speech acts, which he defines as “the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication” (1994:16). He supports this claim by stating that “speaking a language is performing speech acts” (1994: 16). The production of speech acts is governed by “certain rules for the use of linguistic elements” (1994:16). He calls these rules *constitutive rules* and distinguishes them from *regulative rules*:

“[...] regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behaviour; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate inter-personal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behavior. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games. The activities of playing football or chess are constituted by acting in accordance with (at least a large sub-set of) the appropriate rules. Regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules. Constitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules.” (Searle, 1994:33-34)

What Searle tries to outline is that speaking a language is like playing a game, because both of them are rule-governed forms of behaviour:

“Speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior. To learn and master a language is (*inter alia*) to learn and to have mastered these rules” (Searle, 1994:12)

From this perspective, Searle (1994:42-50; 62-71) points out that the constitutive rules describe the *sentence/utterance meaning* and help the hearer decode the *speaker meaning*, on the one hand and on the other they govern the use of Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID). By Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID), he understands the linguistic devices used to determine the illocutionary force of an utterance, for example word order, stress, intonation contour, punctuation, verbs, especially per formative verbs, adverbs, etc. Where the context and the utterance clearly indicate that the speaker commits to do what s/he says, it is not necessary to explicitly use an IFID in performing an act.

In their philosophical approach to speech acts, Austin and Searle study them in isolated sentences or fabricated utterances issued in a given context. More insight is brought into this issue by discourse analysis which studies speech acts, not in isolation, as it happens in philosophy or pragmatics, but in sequences occurring in natural discourses. Discourse analysis stresses that speech acts are “actions by nature” (Superceanu, 2000:76) and consequently should be studied with the theory of actions (van Dijk, 1992:167-183), which distinguishes between actions and acts. *Acts* are defined as intention-successful doings and *actions* as acts which require further consequences in order to be purpose-successful (van Dijk, 1992:176-177). From this perspective, “the intention has the action itself as its scope” (van Dijk, 1992:174) and the purpose is defined as “a mental event in which an agent represents the GOALS of the action” (ibidem, 1992:174). Any statement of purpose can answer a Why-question

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