

Local grammars of speech acts: An exploratory study

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Abstract

This study explores the possibility and the feasibility of developing a set of local grammars to account adequately for speech acts, exemplifying the exploration with a local grammar of request. It mainly aims to further speech act studies and to ultimately contribute to the on-going development of corpus pragmatics. Using a corpus compiled of transcripts of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, instances containing conventionalised forms of request are first extracted and then manually examined to make sure that all the remaining instances express requests and thus qualify for further analysis. Functional elements (e.g. *Requester*, *Requestee*, *Requested action*) designed specifically for a local grammar analysis of request are proposed. The subsequent analyses lead to the identification of 10 local grammar patterns of requests. The study shows that it is promising, though at the same time challenging, to develop local grammars of speech acts. The opportunities and challenges of using a local grammar approach to account for speech acts are further discussed. Implications and applications are also briefly discussed.

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1. Introduction

Speech acts generally mean that in saying something we are also doing something (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Speech act theory has been gaining popularity since its emergence and can be said to be one remarkable breakthrough in both pragmatic research and language philosophy; however, this does not mean that it is without critiques (e.g. Stubbs, 1983; Flowerdew, 1990; Geis, 1995: 12–32). One criticism has been that “despite the fact that the theory seems to emphasize language as social action, it has largely ignored actual language in use” (Stubbs, 1983: 485). Stubbs (1983, 2014) thus argues that speech act studies should be grounded in attested language use, rather than on invented examples. Exactly, authentic language use plays an important role in language and discourse studies. The importance of authentic data in pragmatic research has in fact been increasingly recognised by pragmatists, which has led to the development of a new research trend that combines both corpus methods and pragmatic concepts. This trend of research is commonly referred to as corpus pragmatics (Adolphs, 2008; Jucker et al., 2009; Taavitsainen et al., 2014; Aijmer and Rühlmann, 2015).

This study is situated within this general field; specifically, it looks into speech acts from a corpus linguistic perspective. One significant difference between the present study and previous corpus investigation into speech acts is that this study does not attempt to identify or annotate what kinds of speech acts there are in a given corpus (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Leech and Weisser, 2003; Weisser, 2015); rather, it explores the possibility of using the corpus-linguistic notion ‘local

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grammar' (see Section 2) to develop systematic and coherent descriptions of the realisations of speech acts, exemplifying the exploration with a local grammar of request.

Drawing on insights from previous studies (e.g. Searle, 1969; Bach and Harnish, 1979; Trosborg, 1995), request is defined here as an illocutionary act whereby a speaker addresses to a hearer that s/he requires some desired or intended action to be performed either for the benefit of the speaker, or the hearer, or both. The speech act 'request' is selected on three bases. First, it is performed on a daily basis and is a very complex phenomenon (Aijmer, 1996: 130). Second, since request is a face-threatening speech act and inappropriate performance of request may be perceived as rude or offensive, a systematic account of request would be of practical significance in that it can be used to instruct EFL learners to perform requests appropriately (Schauer, 2009). Third, expressions associated with request appear to be highly routinised, as has been shown in, for example, Aijmer (1996) and Usó-Juan (2010). This makes it possible to employ corpus investigation techniques to identify maximally instances of requests in corpora, as the greatest advantage of corpus search is to identify linguistic forms. The identification of requesting instances allows us to describe their regularities in use, which in turn contributes to a systematic and coherent description of request.

As noted in Garcia (2015: 31), "[o]f the specific types of speech acts ascribed to the directives category, requests are the most frequently mentioned, and probably the most frequently researched". Indeed, there has been a plethora of studies which have investigated the speech act of request (see, for example, Usó-Juan (2010) for a review). However, previous studies mainly focus on exploring request either from a cross-cultural perspective (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Wierzbicka, 2003), or within the field of interlanguage pragmatics (Achiba, 2003; Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012), or in different contexts (Dixon, 2015; Park, 2015). It appears that, to the best of the author's knowledge, no study to date has attempted to account for the realisations of speech acts both functionally and grammatically. By 'functionally and grammatically', I mean that the elements used in the description should not only reflect the function of the corresponding linguistic form in social contexts, but also resemble traditional grammatical analysis, that is, the elements used can in a way be seen as analogies of traditional grammatical elements (e.g. subject, object).

The present study proposes a possible approach to bridge this gap. It explores the possibility and the feasibility of developing a set of local grammars to account for speech acts. The aims are twofold. On the one hand, it aims to extend local grammars to account for speech acts and thus to further speech act studies; on the other hand, it aims to show the diversity of approaches or perspectives (e.g. local grammar in this study) that are available to carry out corpus-pragmatic research and ultimately to contribute to the on-going development of corpus pragmatics.

Investigating speech acts from a local grammar perspective would be of both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it offers a new approach for describing both functionally and grammatically the realisations of speech acts. Compared with traditional approaches to describing the realisations of speech acts, local grammars are more specific, more precise, and more consistent, as will be shown below. Further, local grammars of speech acts facilitate the establishment of the linguistic repertoire for performing one particular speech act. This has further pedagogical applications, in particular for the teaching and learning of how to perform socio-pragmatically speech acts in EFL contexts (Aijmer, 1996; Usó-Juan, 2010).

2. Local grammar

Local grammar is an alternative approach, as opposed to general grammars, to the description of language in use; it "seeks to account for, not the whole of a language, but one meaning only" (Hunston, 2002: 178). Initially, the motivation behind this approach is the realisation that even the most advanced parser cannot capture all the information in open-running texts, i.e. there are always 'leftovers'. The concept of local grammar is thus proposed by Gross (1993) to account for such linguistic areas (e.g. numbers, dates, names) that regular grammatical analysis could not cope with.

What is noteworthy is that the concept of local grammar is not only useful for dealing with those 'leftovers', but also for dealing with all areas of language in use. This has been extensively elaborated and exemplified in the work of Sinclair and his associates (Barnbrook and Sinclair, 1995, 2001; Hunston and Sinclair, 2000; Barnbrook, 2002; Hunston, 2003, 2011). The essential difference between Gross' concept of local grammar and the Sinclairian one lies in the role phraseological constructions play in linguistic description: phraseologies in the former are considered to be 'peripheral' whereas in the latter to be 'central' to the description and theorising of language in use. Provided corpus studies have shown that there is a phraseological tendency of language in use (Sinclair, 1991, 2004; Hunston and Francis, 1998, 2000; Hanks, 2013), it is arguable that the Sinclairian tradition of local grammar research would have much wider implications and applications. This paper thus draws on the Sinclairian concept of local grammar.

In the Sinclairian tradition, each local grammar deals with one meaning or communicative function only (e.g. evaluation, request). It takes into account the functions language fulfils in social contexts and therefore analyse each discourse unit in terms that are related directly to its discourse function. Put it another way, local grammar analysis involves the mapping of functional elements on to formal elements. This has also been discussed in, for example, Hunston and Sinclair (2000: 79) who note that "[t]he prospect of an alternative analysis based on a local grammar for each type of

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