

A comparative analysis of English and Vietnamese indirect requests

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Abstract: As Vietnam is in a period of developing the country and broadening cooperation relations with foreigners, the role of English is getting more and more important. English has been used as an international language all over the world and as a means of communication with different purposes. For this reason, Vietnamese people want to acquire English for a variety of purposes. They study English to communicate with people from other countries where English is used as a native, second or just foreign language, to read English materials, or to pass the national secondary school exams. With such an important role, different aspects of the English language have been studied to gain different goals. In the area of cross-cultural communication, speech acts have been widely and carefully studied since they are highly culture-specific. They are conventionalised and governed by the rules of speaking characteristics of specific speech communities, therefore, interference or transfer may easily occur when speakers of different cultural backgrounds interact, which results in misunderstandings and communication breakdown (Suu, 1990).

Keywords: Requests, speech acts

I. Introduction

In general, speech acts are acts performed through the use of utterances to communicate. To communicate is to express a certain attitude, and the type of speech act being performed corresponds to the type of attitude being expressed. For example, a statement expresses a belief, a request expresses a desire, and an apology expresses a regret. As an act of communication, a speech act succeeds if the audience identifies, in accordance with the speaker's intention, the attitude being expressed. However, a problem which is commonly found in cross-cultural communication is the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said' (Miller, 1974 cited in Thomas, 1983).

Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to parse their sentences or to understand their words ... a far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker's intention.

In speech act theory, an utterance usually has two kinds of meaning: locutionary meaning (also known as propositional meaning) which refers to the basic literal meaning of the utterance conveyed by the particular words and structures in the utterance and illocutionary meaning (also known as illocutional force) which relates to the effect the utterance has on the listener.

For example, in *I am hungry* the locutionary meaning is what the utterance says about the physical state that I am hungry (nothing in my stomach). The illocutional force is the effect the speaker wants the utterance to have on the listener. It may be intended a request for something to eat.

Obviously, understanding the illocutionary meaning behind the utterance is often crucial to successful communication. But the relationship between the surface form and its underlying intention is not always straightforward. As in the classic example of Searle (1975):

Can you pass the salt?

The surface form of the utterance is an interrogative and so expresses a question which normally expects an answer. But the speaker's goal in uttering it is very different. It is a request, where the speaker tries to get the listener to pass him/her the salt. The act of requesting the listener to pass the salt is performed indirectly by performing another communicative act – asking the listener about the ability to pass the salt. The speaker in this case has performed an indirect speech act, which Searle defines to be an utterance in which one speech act is performed indirectly by performing another. Indirect speech acts have been proved to be puzzling for its characterised inherent semantic ambiguity or opacity.

Thus, this study aims to

Review the existing theory on indirect speech acts (their definition, characteristics, scale and relationship with politeness will be discussed.)

Discuss the common strategies in English and Vietnamese requesting.

Examine the scale of indirectness in English and Vietnamese requesting.

While the main research method is literature review, an empirical experiment will also be conducted to examine strategies and scale of indirectness in English and Vietnamese requesting.

II. Literature Review

The review of literature is organised into three parts: (1) Speech Act Theory (Generalisation of Speech Acts), (2) Indirect Speech Acts, (3) Indirectness in English and Vietnamese Requesting. The first part aims to review the literature on the definition, levels and classification of speech acts in general. The second part concerns with the existing theory on indirect speech acts, which includes their definition and characteristics, scale and relationship with politeness. The third part seeks the literature on the requestive strategies in English and Vietnamese as well as discussing the scale of indirectness in these requests.

1. Speech Acts Theory:

If we adopt illocutionary point as the basic notion on which to classify uses of language, then there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language; we tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes, and we bring about changes through our utterances. Often we do more than one of these at once in the same utterance. (Searle, 1975:369)

The theory of speech acts has long been studied. It was first formulated by the philosopher John Austin in a series of lectures which are now collected into a short book called *How to do Things with Words* (Austin, 1962). These ideas were then further developed by other scholars such as Searle (1969, 1975), Labov and Fanshel (1977), Bach and Harnish (1979), Edmondson (1981), Recanati (1987), Allan (1994).

In our every day life, we carry out different physical acts such as cooking, driving, eating, gardening, getting on the bus. Besides, we also accomplish a great deal by verbal acts. In face-to-face conversation, telephone calls, job application letters, notes to a

friend and a multitude of other speech events, we perform verbal actions of different types. Clearly, language is the principal tool we use to accomplish hundreds of tasks in a typical day, as Yule (1996: 47) says: "In attempting to express themselves, people do not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words, they perform actions via those utterances..... *Actions performed via utterances are generally called speech acts* and, in English, are commonly given more specific labels, such as apology, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise, or request".

Austin (1962) identifies three distinct levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself. He distinguishes the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, and what one does by saying it, and names these the 'locutionary', the 'illocutionary' and the 'perlocutionary' act. In other words, a locutionary act is the saying of something which is meaningful and can be understood. An illocutionary act is the use of the sentence to perform a function. A perlocutionary act is the results or effects that are produced by means of saying something (a perlocution is Hearer's behavioural response to the meaning of the utterance). The example given by Cook (1989) illustrates these acts. Suppose a private utters these words to the sergeant 'I've been scrubbing these boots all morning and they won't come any cleaner.' The three acts can be interpreted as follows:

The locution: a statement conveying information that the speaker has been cleaning his boots all morning

The illocution: to challenge the sergeant's order

The perlocution: to undermine the sergeant's authority, or to be cheeky, or to escape the duty of cleaning the boots.

In the above example, the private is performing all these speech acts, at all three levels, just by uttering certain words.

A number of different classifications of speech acts can be found today. However, there have been two major approaches to classifying speech acts: one, following Austin, is principally a lexical classification of illocutionary verbs; the other, following Searle 1975, is principally a classification of acts. Austin (1962) identified five classes of illocutionary verbs which were refined and extended to seven by Vendler (1972) as follows.

Expositives: expounding of views, the conducting of arguments and the clarifying of usages and of references. e.g. *state, contend, insist, deny, remind, guess*.

Verdictives: the giving of a verdict e.g. *rank, grade, call, define, analyze*.

Commissives: commit the speaker e.g. *promise, guarantee, refuse, decline*.

Exercitives: exercising of powers, rights or influences e.g. *order, request, beg, dare*.

Behabitives: reaction to other people's behaviour and fortunes e.g. *thank, congratulate, criticize*.

Vendler's two extra classes are:

Operatives: e.g. *appoint, ordain, condemn*.

Interrogatives: e.g. *ask, question*.

Searle (1975) lists 12 differences between speech acts that can serve as bases for classification, but he uses only four of them to establish five classes of speech acts. They are ILLOCUTIONARY POINT, DIRECTION OF FIT between the words uttered and the world they relate to, THE EXPRESSED PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE, and PROPOSITIONAL CONTENT. And the five kinds of speech act Searle recognises are:

Commissive: a speech act that commits the speaker to doing something in the future, such as a promise or a threat.

Declarative: a speech act which changes the state of affairs in the world.

Directive: a speech act that has the function of getting the listener to do something, such as a suggestion, a request, or a command.

Expressive: a speech act in which the speaker expresses feelings and attitudes about something, such as an apology, a complaint, to thank someone, or to congratulate someone.

Representative (also called *Assertive*): a speech act which describes states or events in the world, such as an assertion, a claim, or a report.

(cited in Richards, J.C., Platt, J. & Platt, H., 1992)

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Nghiên cứu cụm danh từ ... (tiếp theo trang 151)

3. Kết luận

Có thể nói cụm DT luôn đóng một vai trò rất quan trọng đối với bất kỳ ngôn ngữ nào bởi nó thường được xem như một thành phần cơ bản trong việc tạo nên một câu hoàn chỉnh và có nghĩa. Tuy vậy, hầu hết các ngôn ngữ cũng sẽ xuất hiện sự khác biệt nhất định trong việc sử dụng cụm DT bất kể chúng có thể mang nhiều đặc điểm tương đồng về cấu trúc câu. Trong quá trình dạy và học tiếng Anh, việc nắm được sự giống và khác nhau giữa cụm DT từ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt là vô cùng cần thiết nhằm giúp giảm thiểu việc mắc lỗi sai trong câu. Nghiên cứu này sẽ tiến hành khảo sát và so sánh về cấu trúc

ngữ nghĩa-cú pháp giữa cụm DT tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, từ đó góp phần giúp người học và người dạy có thể xác định và giảm thiểu những lỗi sai thường gặp phải trong quá trình học tiếng Anh. Bài viết cũng đưa ra một số đề xuất ứng dụng trong hoạt động dạy học tiếng Anh dựa trên những vấn đề được thảo luận.

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