

# Language as Action

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# What is “discourse”?

- Discourse is:
- language above the sentence or above the clause
- a continuous stretch of spoken language larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit
- a stretch of language perceived to be meaningful unified, and purposive; language in use
- (viewed) as social practice determined by social structures

# Structural and functional definitions of discourse

- Structural or textual definition of discourse:

Discourse is a particular unit of language (above the sentence).

- Functional definition of discourse:

Discourse is a particular focus of language use.

# Structural approach to discourse

- Find the constituents that have particular relationships with each other and that can occur in a restricted number of arrangements;
- Problems: units in which people speak do not always look like sentences, or grammatically correct sentences.

## Example 1

(From “The Colour Purple”, Alice Wharton)

Jack is tall and kind and don't hardly say anything. Love children.  
Respect his wife, Odessa, and all Odessa Amazon sisters (Celie's  
Diary)

# Structural approach to discourse

- Examples, like *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously* (Chomsky);
- Solving the problem: adopt Lyons's distinction between **system-sentences** and text – **sentences**. System sentences are well-formed abstract theoretical sentences generated according to the existing grammar rules; text-sentences are context-dependent utterances or parts of utterances which occur in everyday life.
- **The discourse analysis will be concerned with text-sentences.**

# Functional approach to discourse

- Roman Jakobson: language performs six functions:
  - ✓ Addressor(emotive);
  - ✓ Context (referential)
  - ✓ Addressee (conative);
  - ✓ Contact (phatic);
  - ✓ Message (poetic);
  - ✓ Code (metalinguistic).

# Functional approach to discourse

- Utterances may have multiple functions;
- The major concern: discourse analysis can turn out into a more general and broader analysis of language functions. Or it will fail to make a special place for the analysis of relationships between utterances.

# Recent approach to DA

- Discourse is no longer studied for its own sake. **Discourse is viewed as a social practice.**
- M. Foucault, N. Fairclough



# Recent approach to DA

- Discourse is characterised as:
  - ✓ produced/consumed/monitored by social actors (producers/receivers of social practices);
  - ✓ shaped by social structures;
  - ✓ with social implications;
  - ✓ socially valued and regulated (production, reception and circulation).

# Recent approach to DA

- If in traditional studies discourses were analysed in relation to social processes that form them, then recently researchers started talking about bidirectional and complex relations between discourses and social practices:

Discourses of food  
“Healthy Food”



Social Practice  
Healthy lifestyle

# What Makes Discourse Different?

- Similarities (to monologues)
  - Anaphora
  - Discourse structure & coherence
- Key Differences
  - Turns and utterances
  - Grounding
  - Conversational implicature

# What Makes Discourse Different?

- Property #1: Turns and utterances
  - Speaker A ... then Speaker B ... etc.
  - Timing and turn-switching
    - Levinson (1983) suggests that less than 5% of American English dialogue is overlapped
    - Task-oriented dialogue ... even LESS overlap!
  - Natural conversation requires knowing
    - WHO should speak next ... and ...
    - WHEN they should speak

# What Makes Discourse Different?

- Property #1: Turns and utterances
  - Conversational Analysis (CA)
    - Sacks et al. (1974) argued that turn-taking behavior is governed by a set of rules
      - At each TRP (transition-relevance place) ...
        - A. If current speaker selects Speaker A as the next speaker, then Speaker A must speak next
        - B. If no speaker selected, any other may take turn
        - C. If no one else takes the turn, the current speaker may take the next turn

# What Makes Discourse Different?

- Property #1: Turns and utterances
  - Implications of Sacks' rules
    - Adjacency pairs
      - Question-answer ... Request-grant ... etc.
    - Interpreting silence
      - Refusal to respond? A “dispreferred” response?
  - TRPs generally at utterance boundaries
    - Utterance boundary detection critically important
    - Current boundary algorithms based on: Cue words, N-gram word or POS sequences, and prosody

# What Makes Discourse Different?

- Property #2: Grounding
  - Dialogue is a collective act requiring “common ground” (Stalnaker, 1978)
    - Listener must acknowledge (ground) the speaker’s utterances
    - Achieved through “backchanneling”
    - Listener indicates problems by issuing a “request for repair”

# What Makes Discourse Different?

- Property #3: Implicature

- Interpretation of an utterance relies on more than just the literal meanings
- Grice (1975, 1978)
  - Theory of Conversational Implicature
  - Proposed that what enables listeners to draw inferences are guided by a set of maxims (heuristics for interpretations)



# What Makes Discourse Different?

## ■ Property #3: Implicature

### □ Grice's Maxims (1975, 1978)

- Maxim of Quantity
  - Be exactly as informative as is required
- Maxim of Quality
  - Try to make your contribution one that is true
- Maxim of Relevance
  - Be relevant
- Maxim of Manner
  - Be perspicuous (Avoid obscurity & ambiguity)

# Austin's Speech Act Theory

Argues that truth conditions are not central to language understanding. Utterances do not only say things, they do things.

Distinction between constatives and performatives.

Performatives cannot be false, but they can fail to do things.

Performatives are not a special class of sentences. Some sentences are explicitly performatives, others can be implicitly.

The performative/constative distinction does not really exist.

Rather, they are special cases of a set of illocutionary acts.

# Speech Acts

- Austin (1962)

- An utterance in dialogue is an ACTION

- Speech acts

- Performative sentences uttered by an authority (they change the state of the world)

- Any sentence in real speech contains

- Locutionary act – utterance with particular meaning

- Illocutionary act – asking, answering, promising, etc.

- Perlocutionary act – effect upon feelings, thoughts, etc.

# Speech Acts

## ■ Searle (1975)

### □ All speech acts classified as

- Assertives – suggesting, boasting, concluding, etc.
- Directives – asking, ordering, inviting, etc.
- Commissives – promising, planning, vowing, etc.
- Expressives – thanking, apologizing, deploring, etc.
- Declarations – performatives (state-changing)

# Speech act theory

- Developed by two philosophers: **John Austin** and **John Searle**;
- Austin (“How to do things with words”): some sentences are used not just to state something, which is true or false:

## Example 1

I apologize.

I declare the meeting open.

- These sentences are used to **do** things. They are **performatives**/ vs. all other utterances – **constatives**.

# Speech act theory

- Differentiation between performatives and constatives:  
adverb “hereby”

## Example 2

I hereby apologize.

I hereby declare the meeting open.

- Examples of performative verbs in English:

to say

to protest

to object

to apologize

to deny

to promise

to withdraw

to declare

to plead

to vote

to thank, etc.

# Speech act theory

- Constatives can be true or false; performatives can't be true or false. But performatives can go wrong;
- Conditions for performative sentences, which make them successful ("**felicitous**" **conditions**):
- **Condition 1:**
  - ❖ There must be a conventional procedure following a conventional effect;
  - ❖ The circumstances and the persons must be appropriate.
- **Condition 2:**
- The procedure must be executed:
  - ❖ Correctly;
  - ❖ Completely.

# Speech act theory

- **Condition 3:**

- Often

- ❖ The person must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure;
- ❖ If consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must do so.

Favorite examples: marriages



# Speech act theory

## ■ Types of speech acts:

- ❖ Verdictives (e.g. estimating, assessing, describing);
- ❖ Exercitives (ordering, appointing, advising);
- ❖ Commissives (promising, betting);
- ❖ Behabitives (apologizing, congratulating, thanking);
- ❖ Expositives (arguing, insisting).

# Speech act theory

- Performatives: explicit and implicit;
- Performatives and constatives are just two subclasses of **illocutionary acts**;
- Illocutionary acts consist of other classes of speech acts.

# Speech act theory

Each speech act consists of 3 components:

- **Locutionary act** (the actual words which the speaker is saying);
- **Illocutionary act** (the intention of the speaker);
- **Perlocutionary act** (the effect of the utterance on the hearer).

## Example 3

(From "Sense and Sensibility")

Wait, he is kneeling down.

# Speech act theory

- Compare Austin's classification with other classification of speech acts

## Conclusions for DA:

- speech act theory is concerned with what people do with language or it is concerned with **the function of language**.;
- a piece of discourse (what is said) is chunked/segmented into units that have communicative functions,;
- these function are identified and labelled;
- different speech acts initiate and respond to other acts. Acts to a certain degree specify what kind of response is expected;
- they create options for a next utterance each time they are performed;
- An utterance can perform more than one speech act at a time ;
- there is more than one option of responses for a next utterance;
- Deborah Schiffrin: 'this flexibility has an important analytical consequence: it means that a single sequence of utterances may actually be the outcome of a fairly wide range of different underlying functional relations.'

# Pragmatics

- Based primarily on the ideas of Paul Grice:
- People interact having minimal assumptions (***implicatures***) about one another;
- Two types of implicatures: **conventional and conversational**;
- Conventional implicatures do not require any particular context in order to be understood (or inferred);
- Conversational implicatures are context – dependant. What is implied varies according to the context of an utterance.

# Pragmatics

- To explain HOW we interpret implicatures Grice introduced the Cooperative Principal:
- **Make your contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.**

# Pragmatics

- There are four conversational maxims which help us to realize the implicit meaning of an utterance:
- **Maxim of Quantity:**  
Make your contributions as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than required.
- **Maxim of Quality:**  
Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say something if you lack adequate evidence.

# Pragmatics

- **Maxim of Relation:**

Be relative.

- **Maxim of Manner:**

Be perspicuous (or express your ideas clearly)

Avoid obscurity of expressions (= do not use expressions which are not clear or easy to understand);

Avoid ambiguity (= presence of more than one meaning);

Be brief (avoid unnecessary usage of too many words);

Be orderly.



# Pragmatics

- The contribution of Gricean pragmatics to DA is a set of principles that constrains speakers' sequential choices in a text and allows hearers to recognize speaker's intentions.