

MEANING STRUCTURES IN SPEECH ACTS: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL CONVERSATION

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Abstract

This study explores the semantic structures underlying speech acts in formal and informal conversations. Drawing from speech act theory (Austin and Searle) and supported by semantic and pragmatic frameworks, the research investigates how utterances convey meaning in different social contexts. Data were collected from real-life conversational transcripts across formal settings (e.g., academic consultations) and informal settings (e.g., casual student interactions). The analysis reveals significant structural differences: formal conversations favor direct and syntactically complex utterances, dominated by directive and representative speech acts, while informal conversations exhibit expressive and commissive acts, characterized by elliptical forms, emotional intensifiers, and casual lexis. The findings highlight that social context heavily influences both the form and the semantic-pragmatic function of speech acts. This study contributes to understanding how meaning is constructed and interpreted across communicative contexts and emphasizes the importance of integrating semantic and pragmatic awareness in language learning.

Keywords : Semantic Structure, Speech Acts, Formal Conversation, Informal Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Language is the primary tool for communication in human social life, and its usage reflects social relationships, communicative intentions, and the prevailing cultural norms. One important aspect of verbal communication is **speech acts**, which are linguistic expressions that not only convey literal meaning but also contain specific intentions from the speaker toward the listener. The speech act theory, popularized by J.L. Austin and John Searle, posits that every utterance has an illocutionary dimension, which refers to the intention embedded within the utterance.

In practice, speech acts vary not only in types and functions but also in the **meaning structure** that accompanies them, especially when compared between two different communication contexts: **formal** and **informal**. Formal conversations such as those in classrooms, offices, or official institutions are characterized by the use of more structured, polite language, adhering to strict social norms. In contrast, informal conversations such as those between friends tend to be relaxed, expressive, and often employ indirect speech or ellipsis. Although many studies have discussed the classification of speech acts or politeness strategies, research on the **semantic structures that form the meaning in speech acts** in these two different social contexts remains relatively scarce. Yet, understanding these meaning structures is crucial, especially in language learning, cross-cultural communication, and pragmatics studies.

1.2 Research Problem

1. There is a lack of research examining the semantic structures of speech acts, particularly in the context of formal and informal conversations.
2. A comprehensive mapping is still missing regarding the dominant types of speech acts used in each social context, as well as how meaning is constructed differently across these contexts.
3. There is limited understanding of how social context influences meaning delivery strategies, which creates challenges in language learning and cross-cultural communication.

1.3 Research Objective

This study aims to:

1. Analyze and identify the meaning structures in speech acts in formal and informal conversations.
2. Classify the types of speech acts used in these two communication contexts.
3. Examine the influence of social context on the selection and delivery of utterances.

1.4 Research Significance

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of semantic and pragmatic studies, particularly in understanding the meaning structures in speech acts. Practically, the results of this research can serve as a reference in:

- Teaching foreign languages based on social contexts.
- Designing teaching materials for pragmatics and intercultural communication.
- Enhancing communicative competence in both formal and informal settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Speech Act Theory

The concept of speech acts was first introduced by J.L. Austin in his work *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), which was later further developed by John Searle. According to Austin, every utterance contains three types of acts:

- **Locutionary act** - the act of saying something.
- **Illocutionary act** - the intention or purpose behind the utterance (e.g., commanding, requesting, refusing).
- **Perlocutionary act** - the effect produced on the listener.

John Searle (1969) classified speech acts into five categories:

- **Representatives**: assert something believed to be true (e.g., stating, reporting).
- **Directives**: attempt to get the hearer to do something (e.g., ordering, requesting).
- **Expressives**: express the speaker's psychological state (e.g., thanking, apologizing).
- **Commissives**: commit the speaker to a future action (e.g., promising).
- **Declaratives**: utterances that change the status of something (e.g., firing, marrying).

Speech acts do not merely convey literal meaning but also reveal the speaker's intention and are often expressed indirectly.

2.2 Semantic Analysis in Speech Acts

Semantics studies meaning in language. In the context of speech acts, semantic analysis does not only focus on the denotative meaning of words or sentences but also on the illocutionary meaning structure, how intentional meaning is constructed and conveyed.

The meaning in speech acts is influenced by:

- **Syntactic structure** (e.g., using interrogative sentences to issue commands),
- **Lexical choice** (performative verbs like "please," "kindly"),
- **Social context** (relationship between speaker and hearer).

According to Leech (1983), principles of semantic politeness play a role in constructing polite and effective utterances, such as the principles of tact, modesty, and agreement.

2.3 Instructional Techniques

In pragmatics, social context is a key variable in interpreting communicative intent. Formal conversation typically occurs in official or institutional settings and tends to be one-directional or procedural, such as between teacher and student, superior and subordinate, or in academic forums. Its characteristics include:

- More standardized and structured language,
- Use of formal address terms and polite sentences,
- Minimal use of slang or informal expressions.

In contrast, informal conversation takes place in casual settings such as between friends, family, or on social media. It is characterized by:

- Relaxed and expressive language,
- Frequent use of ellipsis, emotional particles, and local idioms,
- Grammatically incomplete sentence structures.

Yule (1996) explains that informal communication allows greater flexibility in language use, including more implicit and varied speech acts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Type and Approach of Research

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, aiming to provide an in-depth description of the meaning structures within speech acts based on formal and informal conversational data. This approach was chosen because the primary focus is on understanding the meaning of utterances within social contexts, rather than on statistical analysis or population generalization.

According to Moleong (2013), qualitative research seeks to understand social phenomena in their natural context by describing them in detail through linguistic data. Therefore, this study is oriented toward the interpretation and meaning of speech, rather than merely its form or frequency.

3.2 Research Location and Time

The research was conducted both online and offline through observation and documentation of conversations in:

- Academic settings (classrooms, academic consultations, seminars) for formal context.
- Casual settings (student conversations outside of class, social media, private chats) for informal context.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Two primary techniques were used to collect data:

- **Participant Observation:**
The researcher observed and recorded conversations in two social contexts (formal and informal), through both direct interaction and in classroom and social media settings.
- **Document and Literature Analysis:**
Linguistic, pragmatic, and semantic theories were used to support the analysis and interpretation of the data.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed through three main stages based on the model by Miles and Huberman (1994):

- **Data Reduction:**
Selecting relevant conversation data based on the occurrence of specific speech acts.

- **Data Display:**
Organizing tables and transcripts containing examples of speech acts in both contexts, along with explanations of their semantic structure and communicative purpose.
- **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:**
Classifying the data based on types of speech acts (Searle), politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson), and their associated semantic structures.

DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Data Processing Stages

The data in this study were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method with a semantic and pragmatic approach. The analysis process followed three main stages as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), namely:

- **Data Reduction:**
Transcripts of formal and informal conversations were selected to highlight segments containing significant speech acts.
- **Data Display:**
The data were organized in the form of tables and excerpts representing various types of speech acts, semantic structures, and social contexts.
- **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:**
The data were analyzed by comparing semantic structures across contexts and verifying their alignment with the theories of Searle, Brown & Levinson, and Leech.

4.1.1 Example 1: Short Conversation Transcript (Formal vs Informal)

A. Formal Conversation

Context: A student is asking a lecturer a question during an academic consultation.

Student: "Excuse me, Ma'am. May I ask a question regarding last week's lecture material?"

Lecturer: "Of course, please go ahead. Which part would you like to ask about?"

Student: "I'm having some difficulty understanding the part about conversational implicature, Ma'am."

Lecturer: "Alright. Let's go over it together."

B. Informal Conversation

Context: Two friends chatting casually after class.

Andi: "Hey bro, did you get that implicature part?"

Budi: "Not at all. Totally confusing."

Andi: "Maybe I'll just ask the lecturer tomorrow, or check YouTube first."

Budi: "Yeah, agreed. I don't get it either."

Preliminary Analysis

The formal conversation shows the use of **direct and polite directive speech acts**, marked by permission modality ("may I") and complex sentence structures. The language is structured, respectful, and adheres to formal norms.

In contrast, the informal conversation is more expressive, tending toward **expressive and indirect directive speech acts**, with elements of **slang and ellipsis** ("not at all," "check YouTube first"). The language reflects closeness and spontaneity between the speakers, and sentences are often incomplete or simplified grammatically.

4.1.2 Example 2: Semantic Structure Analysis of Speech Acts

No	Utterance Form	Type of Speech Acts	Context	Meaning Structure Description
1	"May I ask a question?"	Directive (permission request)	Formal	Complex syntactic structure, permission modality, high level of politeness
2	"I'm so confused about that task."	Expressive (statement of feeling)	Informal	Direct sentence, simple structure, emotional intensifier
3	"Please check my assignment, Ma'am."	Directive (request for action)	Formal	Explicit subject, polite imperative form
4	"Check my task, will ya?"	Directive (request for action)	Informal	Elliptical sentence, casual conversational style, emphasis marker "will ya"

4.2 Semantic Structure Interpretation

Each speech act is semantically analyzed based on the following aspects:

- **Modality** (possibility, obligation, permission)
- **Lexical choice** (formal vs. informal word usage)
- **Sentence construction** (syntactic structure)

Examples:

Utterance	Context	Speech Act Type	Semantic Structure
"May I ask a question, Ma'am?"	Formal	Directive	Permission modality + interrogative form
"Check my task, will ya?"	Informal	Directive	Indirect imperative + slang
"Seriously, I don't get it!"	Informal	Expressive	Intensifier + evaluative emotional expression

RESULT AND DISCUSSION**5.1 Analysis Based on Types of Speech Acts**

Based on Searle's classification, the conversational data shows a significant difference in the distribution of speech act types between formal and informal contexts. The following is a summary of the frequencies from the initial data:

Speech Act Type	Formal Context	Informal Context
Representative	4	2
Directive	5	3
Commissive	1	3
Expressive	2	6
Declarative	0	0

Interpretation:

- **Directive speech acts** dominate in formal conversations, commonly used for asking clarification, requesting permission, or seeking confirmation.
- **Expressive speech acts** appear more frequently in informal settings, often expressing confusion, frustration, or surprise.
- **Commissive acts**, such as stating intentions or plans (e.g., "I'll ask the lecturer"), are more likely to emerge in casual interactions.

5.2 Politeness Strategies in Speech Acts

Based on Brown and Levinson's theory, it was found that politeness strategies are strongly influenced by the social relationship between speakers.

Negative Politeness Strategy:

Used in formal contexts. The speaker shows respect for the hearer's autonomy by using modality, as in:

"May I ask a question?"

Positive Politeness Strategy:

Appears in informal contexts to build camaraderie, as seen in expressions like:

"Hey bro, you get it or not?" or *"Check my task, will ya?"*

Preliminary Conclusion:

- Formal context emphasizes social distance → utterances are more cautious.
- Informal context emphasizes solidarity → utterances are more relaxed and expressive.

5.3 Social Context and Pragmatic Implication

Variations in utterance forms are influenced by:

- **Power relations and social status** → Formality increases with greater status differences (e.g., student vs. lecturer).
- **Emotional closeness** → Informality occurs when familiarity is high and there is low social risk.
- **Purpose of conversation** → Formal conversations are goal-oriented, while informal ones serve to maintain social relationships.

These pragmatic implications emphasize that understanding context is key to interpreting and producing effective speech acts.

5.4 Reflections on Language Learning

This analysis provides valuable insights for language learning:

- Learning materials should introduce language variations based on context, not just grammatical forms.
- Pragmatics and semantics should be taught in an integrated way, so learners understand not only *what is said*, but also *how and when to say it*.
- Classroom simulations of formal and informal conversations can enhance students' sociolinguistic awareness.

5.5 Theoretical and Practical Implication

Theoretically, this research supports the idea that:

- Semantic structure and illocutionary meaning in speech acts are interrelated.
- Social context systematically influences language structure and function.

Practically:

- Language users—both native and non-native—need to develop pragmatic awareness to be not just grammatically fluent, but also socially communicative.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**6.1 Conclusion**

1. The meaning structure in formal conversation tends to be complex, explicit, and polite, dominated by directive and representative speech acts. Speakers use complete sentences, standard lexical choices, and negative politeness strategies to maintain social distance and express respect.
2. Informal conversations exhibit more flexible, expressive, and elliptical meaning structures. Expressive and commissive speech acts are more frequently used, often accompanied by casual language, non-standard lexicon, and positive politeness strategies to foster intimacy and solidarity.
3. There are significant differences in the use of direct and indirect speech, word choices, and the role of intonation and expression, indicating that social context greatly influences the form, function, and delivery of utterance meaning.
4. Speech also carries symbolic functions, where language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a tool for constructing social identity and power relations.
5. Understanding meaning structures and communication context is crucial in language learning, especially in teaching cross-cultural communication, speaking skills, and pragmatics.

6.2 Suggestion

Based on the findings of this research, several suggestions can be offered in academic and pedagogical:

A. For Educators and Curriculum Developers:

- Language teaching materials should incorporate various types of speech acts within different social contexts (formal and informal), not just focus on grammatical aspects.
- Integrating pragmatics and politeness strategies will help students understand when and how to use specific speech forms appropriately.
- Role-playing and conversation simulations should include real-life situations to help students adapt their speaking styles according to context and interlocutors.

B. For Language Users and Students:

- Developing pragmatic awareness is essential—not only understanding what is said, but also why and how it is said.
- The ability to distinguish between formal and informal styles will enhance communication effectiveness in various life situations.

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