

## *Original Paper*

# A Linguistic Critique of Sadock's Speech Act Theory

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### ***Abstract***

*This study is a linguistic critique of Sadock's (1974) speech act theory. Considering the fact that speaker-meaning is intentional content of speech act, deep and surface structure analyses which are essentially based on language structure/grammar, are worthy of scholarly attention. In such deep and surface structure analyses, propositional contents of clauses are brought to the fore. Sadock's speech act theory is mainly a linguistic one. In his book, 'Towards a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts, Sadock contends that explicit performatives show that illocutionary forces cannot be ruled out of speech act theorizing. Arguably, Sadock's speech act theory elucidates formal properties of language. This study hinges on two theoretical frameworks: Ogden and Richards Concept of Meaning and Transformational Generative Grammar. The study concludes that although Sadock's speech act theory is a suitable framework for understanding illocutionary act/illocutionary force within clause-structure and grammar constraints of language, it does not emphasize the pragmatic underpinnings of human communication.*

### ***Keywords***

*Sadock's speech act theory, critique, pragmatics, Ogden and Richards Concept of Meaning, Transformational Generative Grammar*

### **1. Introduction**

Sadock's speech act theory is an overview of meaning-laden transformations which occur in sentences as part of the in-built features of natural language. Towards explaining the illocutionary act potential of deep and surface structure representations of sentences, Sadock examines some components of the grammar of language. These include co-referential noun phrases, rules of transformation and NP deletion. Deep and surface structure analyses accentuate the potency of language 'to mean' in different constructions including the use of direct and indirect propositions. Thus, the theory is a good framework for investigating the plurality of meaning and the generative nature of speech act verbs. Within Sadock's

theoretical framework, inference theories are crucial for working out the illocutionary forces of clauses in a sentence, paying attention to literal and non-literal meaning/force of utterances, as language structure ‘communes’ with pragmatic constraints. The functions of speech act verbs in the elucidation of deep and surface structures of sentences accentuate the nexus between linguistic stretches and the words that are patterned to generate such stretches. William P. Alston, cited in Savas L. T. (1994, p. 31) asserts that ‘word meaning is prior to sentence meaning in the order of the explanation of particular facts ... sentence meaning is prior to word meaning in the order of conceptual analysis, or explication. We explain the concept of word meaning in terms of the contribution a word makes to the meaning of sentences.’ However, it is worthy of note that the use of sentences – in the form of utterances to perform illocutionary acts – is limited as sentences do not have all possible meanings in a language.

## 2. Fundamentals of Pragmatics and Speech Act

### 2.1 Pragmatics

The literature of pragmatics acknowledges that before pragmatics evolved as a field of language study, emphasis was on mastery of rule-governed use of language (linguistic competence) rather than mastery of context-based use of language (communicative competence). The origin of the word ‘pragmatics’ is Greek as ‘*pragma*’ means ‘deed’ or ‘action’. Language scholars from classical to contemporary times, provide instructive definitions of pragmatics. Such scholars include Crystal and Varley, Yule, Levinson and Mey. Crystal and Varley (1993, p. 42) define pragmatics as ‘the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behaviour and it thus involves when we use language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other ‘social attributes.’ Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as ‘the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener or reader.’ According to Levinson (1983), pragmatics is ‘the study of those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars.’ In addition, the *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994) posits that ‘pragmatics is the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes.’ Adebija’s (1999) submission on the scope of pragmatics is incisive as it captures the definition of pragmatics:

- (i.) The message being communicated;
- (ii.) The participants involved in the message;
- (iii.) The knowledge of the world which they share;
- (iv.) The deductions to be made from the text on the basis of the context;
- (v.) The impact of the non-verbal aspect of interaction on meaning.

The elements of pragmatics are crucial concepts which define it. Austin (1962) provides insights on such concepts:

- participants (users of language in context);

- speech acts (locutionary act which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; illocutionary act which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and perlocutionary act which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);
- context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);
- non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic communication);
- inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);
- presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and
- shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

The above submissions show that pragmatics has to do with the interpretation of the different types of contexts that generate language use in both written and spoken communication.

## 2.2 *Speech Act*

Speech acts are language-induced actions; utterances are therefore conveyers of speech acts. Theories of speech acts reveal their nature as 'linguistic actions'. David A. Brenders (1987, p. 331) submits that 'speech act theory, as a part of the philosophy of language, has been concerned with analyzing the performance of linguistic acts (asserting, promising, questioning) as a rule-governed form of behaviour...'. The emergence of pragmatics is deeply rooted in the view that words count as actions in the discrete contexts in which they are used. Three broad categories of speech acts are acknowledged in the literature, as classified by Austin (1962): locutionary act (performing an act OF saying something); illocutionary act (performing an act IN saying something); and perlocutionary act (performing an act BY saying something). Speech act theorists such as Searle (1969) as well as Bach and Harnish (1979) provide further classifications of speech acts and indicates the verbs that are typically used with such speech act categories in the conventions/lexicon of the language. Speech acts may be direct or indirect, and can be performed with a performative or non-performative formula; that is, without the use of words. To understand the nature of speech acts in human communication, pragmatic theories or speech act theories are crucial. Pratt (1977) rightly notes that 'speech act theory provides a way of talking about utterances not only in terms of their surface grammatical properties but also in terms of the context in which they are made, the intentions, attitudes, and expectations of the participants, the relationships existing between participants ... rules and conventions that are understood to be in play when an utterance is made and received.' For more tips on speech act, see Campbell (1975), Stalnaker (1979); (1970) Strawson (1969), Leec (1983) and Thomas (1969).

### 3. Theoretical Frameworks

This study explores two theoretical frameworks: Ogden and Richards Concept of Meaning and Transformational Generative Grammar. While the former captures the semantic perspectives of speech acts and the notion of ‘sense’ in the link between deep and surface structure representations of sentential constructions, the latter encapsulates the transformational rules that enable deeper layers of meaning to operate in the grammar or structure of human language.

#### 3.1 Ogden and Richards Concept of Meaning

Leech (1981, p. 1) comments on Ogden and Richards views on the concept of meaning:

Perhaps the best known book ever written on semantics, that which C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards published in 1923, had the very title *The Meaning of Meaning*, and contained, on pp. 186-7, a list of as many as twenty-two definitions of the words, taking different non-theoretical starting points. Here ... is a selection of the meanings given:

- an intrinsic property;
- the other words annexed to a word in the dictionary;
- the connotation of a word;
- the place of anything in a system;
- the practical consequences of a thing in our future experience;
- that to which the user of a symbol actually refers;
- that to which the user of a symbol ought to be referring;
- that to which the user of a symbol believes himself to be referring;
- that to which the interpreter of a symbol
  - (a) refers
  - (b) believes himself to be referring
  - (c) believes the user to be referring.

#### 3.2 Transformational Generative Grammar

Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) is immersed in semantic representations of linguistic stretches. In this regard, deep-structure-related postulations are evolved by notable grammarians including Lakoff and Noam Chomsky. Charles Ogbulogo (2012, p. 25) presents crucial perspectives on TGG:

Noam Chomsky is the father of generative grammar. According to the theory of transformational generative grammar, knowledge of language is generated in the mind. A language user has a finite set of rules from which he can generate an infinite number of sentences. This power of generation is facilitated by the power of transformational rules which convert deep structures sentence types in other various forms via transformations. At the beginning of Chomsky’s generative grammar, there was the assertion that syntax was autonomous and independent of semantics. It was only later in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) that Chomsky pointed out that the semantic

component specifies the rules necessary for the interpretation of deep structures. This observation enhanced the semantic representation of sentences. Deep structures specify the original meanings of sentences before the application of transformations.

#### 4. Sadock's Speech Act Theory

Sadock proposes the Abstract Performative Analysis which is based on the following assumptions:

- 1). Constraints exist on the well formedness of semantic representations to the effect that in the highest semantic proposition underlying a sentence:
  - (a) The subject refers to the speaker of the sentence;
  - (b) The indirect object refers to the addressee.
  - (c) The verb is a performative verb of linguistic communication.
- 2). rule or set of rules deletes the highest semantic clause during some stage of derivation under certain circumstances. Therefore, illocutionary force is that part of the meaning of a sentence which corresponds to the highest clause in its semantic representation (p. 19).

The tree diagram below captures Sadock's perspectives mentioned above (cf. Adebija 1982, p. 20):

In the derivation of the surface structure, the highest semantic clause 'I order/request you' is deleted. Illocutionary force in the above example is conveyed by 'I request/order you' since it is the part of the meaning of the sentence that corresponds to the highest clause in its semantic representation. Sadock contends that sentential ambiguity is a product of illocutionary force, and that a single sentence can be a conjunction of two or more clauses, each with its illocutionary force. He maintains that part of what can be contained in a sentence, is illocutionary force. For example, requesting that someone tell you something entails asking it.

In addition, Sadock (ibid) asserts that imperatives undergo the deletion of a second person subject. For example, in a sentence such as 'Go' the underlying second person subject 'you' has been deleted. Buttrressing the Performative Hypothesis, Sadock posits that it is possible that English has an underlying predicate 'TRUE' in the abstract logical form of declaratives. Thus, if a husband tells his wife 'I love you', there is an underlying 'TRUE' in the abstract logical form; that is, it be true, I love you. Sadock's argument, like those of other deep and surface structure grammarians such as Ross (1970), is mainly syntactic. They are grammarians who strongly hold the view that some property of an embedded sentence can be directly traced to some elements in the underlying matrix sentence which most sentences have deleted. An aspect of English grammar commonly used to buttress some of these claims include the fact that in some constructions, reflexive pronouns occur in grammatical sentences only if there is a co-referential antecedent in the same clause e.g. 'Mary said that Bill promoted himself'. In this sentence, 'Bill' is the co-referential antecedent of 'himself' and both are in the same clause. Another point Sadock

uses to explain the Higher Performative Analysis is that a noun phrase (NP) appears as a personal pronoun only if it is preceded by a co-referential NP in the same clause or in a higher clause. For example, in a sentence such as ‘Linguists like myself speak an even number of languages’, the NP ‘myself’ is co-referential with ‘I’, which is an entirely different NP in a deleted higher clause (‘I assert to you’).

## 5. A Critique of Sadock’s Speech Act Theory

This section of the paper critiques Sadock’s (ibid) speech act theory.

### 5.1 Illocutionary Force as Core of Speech Act Theorizing

A major strength of Sadock’s speech act theory is that it reveals illocutionary force as the core of speech act theorizing. In this regard, Sadock presents illocutionary force as a clause-structure phenomenon. Each clause in a sentence has its illocutionary force. In this sense, the theory attempts to explain the interaction between linguistic conventions and pragmatic constraints in linguistic constructions. van Dijk T. A. (1977) notes that ‘the comprehension of the illocutionary force of utterances, especially indirect speech acts, is a core mark of a language user’s pragmatic competence.’ In using illocutionary forces in different contexts of speech and contexts of situations, speakers demonstrate the fact that linguistic choices/patterning is neither incidental nor arbitrary; it is determined and motivated by speakers’ illocutionary goals.

### 5.2 Elucidates Deep and Surface Structures of Speech Acts

In providing insights on deep-surface structure phenomenon, Sadock (ibid) explores different aspects of the grammar of language which include: the deletion of highest semantic clause via derivation; the implied ‘true’ idea in declarations; the deletion of ‘you’ element in imperatives; co-referential noun phrases in the clauses of a sentence; and the deletion of ‘I’ from its intra-sentential co-referent NP. Thus, Sadock’s speech act theory explains sentence structure not just according to communicative function (imperative, question, statement), but also according to clause structure (simple sentence, complex sentence, compound sentence). Some perspectives in Ogden and Richards theorizing concerning the concept of meaning, captures how language users articulate deep and surface structure meanings of illocutionary acts as well as the semantic similarity of illocutionary verb categories therein.

### 5.3 The Concept of Meaning

In using structure-driven meaning to convey illocutionary acts, speakers rely heavily on linguistic competence. This view corroborates Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig (1999, p. 667) who posits that ‘although grammatical competence may not be a sufficient condition for pragmatic development, it may be a necessary condition.’ In a similar vein, Trosborg (1995) states that ‘lack of grammatical competence, inhibits pragmatic use of language.’ Sadock’s speech act theory reveals that speaker-meaning is a form of linguistic presupposition. In using speech act verbs to capture deep and surface structure meanings, speakers presuppose that the illocutionary acts of linguistic stretches are ‘easy to mean’ from hearer ends; expressions or structures that do not appear in surface representation of utterances are presupposed as implied elements of meaning. Such implied elements can only be invoked when speakers use certain

speech act verbs in surface structures of utterances. There are presupposed deep structure verbs in the context in which speakers use utterances. The speaker-hearer linguistic knowledge used for the interpretation of certain constructions are a form of shared knowledge or conventional implicature. The relation between an NP and the reflexive pronoun that appears after it in a sentence operates within the framework of presupposed materials/elements. For example, the decoder of an utterance does not expect a masculine NP subject to be the antecedent (cataphoric reference) of a feminine NP object. Similarly, the subject and object noun phrases must be the same in terms of singularity or plurality. For conversations to produce expected felicity results, utterances (including their constituents) should align with speaker-hearer shared knowledge of linguistic conventions of the operative language. Acheoah (2015) uses the term ‘Operative Language’ to refer to the language that is being engaged in a written or spoken communication.

#### *5.4 Less Emphasis on Pragmatic Meaning*

Less emphasis on pragmatic meaning implies that speaker-meaning is being de-emphasized. Deep and surface structure will not suffice for a grasp of the scope of meaning. Meaning, whether semantic or pragmatic, is not exhaustive. Sadock’s speech act theory does not uphold the goals of pragmatics, which is the use and interpretation of language contextually. The theory is a grammaticalization process that does not operate at all syntactic levels. For example, in a sentence such as ‘I order you’, the performer of the illocutionary act has to be correctly ascertained; in conjoined clauses, some semantic implications are projected beyond what obtains when there are no embedded clauses. consider:

- (i) I order you.
- (ii) I said that Mary said, ‘I order you.’
- (iii) I said, ‘It was not me who ordered, ‘Go out,’ but Billy.’
- (iv) They order you.

In (i) the subject is clearly the speaker but in (ii), (iii) and (iv) this is not so, because the performative verb in (i) has been shifted from the matrix position to the embedded clause position as a direct speech. This gives us the meaning forms below for (ii) and (iii):

- (iia) I said so. (where ‘so’ represents that Mary said, ‘I order you.’)
- (iib) I said that Mary said so. (where ‘so’ represents ‘I order you.’)
- (iiia) I said so. (where ‘so’ represents ‘It was not me who ordered, ‘Go out,’ but Billy.’)
- (iiib) I said it was not me but Billy who said so. (where ‘so’ represents ‘Go out.’)

But (iv) is not a sentence indicating that the subject is the performer of the speech act (ordering). At a higher clause level (iv) appears thus:

I said they order you. (where ‘I said’ is deleted).

Arguably, in certain constructions, the clauses in which an NP is used determine whether or not acts are performed by the NP. Nevertheless, Sadock’s Theory could be problematic as an NP may not be the source of a sentential proposition whether it is overt (surface structure) or covert (deep structure).

Therefore, (i) has to do with ‘Doing x’; (ii) and (iii) have to do with ‘Talking about doing x’, (iv) is ‘Talking about doing x’ although it is neither a quotation nor an embedded clause.

There are some limitations concerning deep structure theorizing. For example, deep structures may not be applicable in some utterances/sentences. In addition, the fact that speech act categories do not reliably align with speech act verbs in the formal properties of language creates problem in terms of ascertaining deep structure representations for speaker-meaning. In this sense, illocutionary forces become more context-sensitive rather than relying on the lexicon or grammar of a language. Lorena Pérez Hernández (2011, p. 118) asserts that ‘the nature of the relationship between speech act verbs and speech act categories has fuelled a wealth of debate from the 1970s to our days. Searle (1979, p. ix) has traditionally voiced the line of thought that takes this relationship to be rather loose: illocutionary acts are, so to speak, natural conceptual kinds, and we should no more suppose that our ordinary language verbs carve the conceptual field of illocutions at its semantic joints than we would suppose that our ordinary language expressions for naming and describing plants and animals correspond exactly to the natural biological kind.’

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study evaluates strong and weak points of Sadock’s (ibid) speech act theory. Being mainly a linguistic theory, Sadock’s speech act theory does not emphasize the latent communication ability of participants of discourse. Arguably, such ability transcends being able to construct grammatical sentences with deep and surface structure semantics. The study of illocutionary act potential of utterances is essentially about the communicative competence of discourse participants who use utterances to perform actions in discrete contexts: asking, declaring, commanding, informing, asserting, apologizing, promising, acknowledging, suggesting, etc. Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ibid, p. 2) rightly notes that ‘the study of illocutionary acts should be acknowledged as an indispensable component of the study of meaning.’ While linguistic competence concerns proficiency in the structure/grammar of language, communicative competence concerns principles that underpin language use. Acheoah (2015) examines a wide range of extralinguistic variables that accentuate speaker-meaning. These include setting, emergent context, pragmadesiant, contextual implicature, shared knowledge of emergent context, shared macro-knowledge, semiotic particulars, sociolinguistic variables and behavioural implicature.

Canale and Swain (1980, p. 5) reports that ‘it is common to find the term ‘communicative competence’ used to refer exclusively to knowledge or capacity relating to the rules of language use and the term ‘grammatical (or linguistic) competence’ used to refer to the reciprocal rules of grammar.’ Sadock’s speech act theory can be more pragmatic if situational variables of language use are incorporated into it. Levinson (1983) submits that that ‘the interest in pragmatics developed in part as a reaction or antidote to Chomsky’s treatment of language as an abstract device, or mental ability ... (an abstraction that Chomsky drew in part from the post-Bloomfieldian structuralism that predominated immediately before transformational generative grammar). Generative semanticists looking for the means to undermine

Chomsky's position came out with philosophical thoughts devoted to the importance of the users of language to an understanding of its nature (works by Austin, Stranson, Grice and Searle in particular). To this day, most of the important concepts in pragmatics are drawn directly from philosophy of language.' In being more pragmatic, Sadock's speech act theory will bring pragmatic meaning/speaker meaning to the fore. Fraser cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 59) submits that 'pragmatic meaning concerns the speaker's communicative intention, the direct (not implied) message the speaker intends to convey in uttering the sentence.' The fact that sentence meaning and speaker-meaning do not always align, implies that the propositional content of an utterance remain an entity to be worked out with different and appropriate inference strategies on implicature-laden utterances. Laurence (2006) opines that 'implicature is a component of speaker meaning that constitutes an aspect of what is meant in a speaker's utterance without being part of what is said.' In using speaker-meaning, the addressee is considered because effective communication is a speaker-hearer phenomenon. Bruno G. Bara (2010) asserts that 'Communication is essentially a cooperative activity between two or more people in which the meanings of each transaction are constructed by all those actors together engaged in the shared task of reciprocally attending to the other communicants' words.' Communication cannot be actualized without the cooperation of the participants. Commenting on speaker-meaning, James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (2007) submit that 'SPEAKER MEANING is what a speaker means (i.e. what he intends to convey) when he uses a piece of language. SENTENCE MEANING (or WORD MEANING) is what a sentence (or word) means, i.e. what it counts as the equivalent of in the language concerned.' Kreidler's postulations on language user's knowledge of the structure and lexicon of their language explains why they have the ability to process deep and surface structures of speech act verbs:

Speakers of a language generally agree as to when two sentences have essentially the same meaning and when they do not ...

- 1). Speakers generally agree when two words have essentially the same meaning – in a given context ...
- 2). Speakers recognize when the meaning of one sentence contradicts another sentence ...
- 3). Speakers generally agree when two words have opposite meanings in a given context ...
- 4). Synonyms and antonyms have to have some common elements of meaning in order to be, respectively, the same or different. Words can have some element of meaning without being synonymous or antonymous ...
- 5). Some sentences have double meanings; they can be interpreted in two ways. Speakers are aware of this fact because they appreciate jokes which depend on two-way interpretation ...

- 6). Speakers know how knowledge is used when people interact. If one person asks a question or makes a remark, there are various possible answers to the question or replies one might make to the remarks ...
- 7). Speakers are aware that two statements may be related in such a way that if one is true, the other must also be true.
- 8). Speakers know that the message conveyed in one sentence may presuppose other pieces

Sadock's theory is immersed in the semantics of speech act verbs. Thus, the theory is more linguistic than extra-linguistic. However, the fact that the literature of pragmatics acknowledges that speech acts are semantic universals, implies that a theory of speech act cannot be completely extra-linguistic or context-based. In using non-contextual insights to explain speech acts.

Mustafa Shazali Mustafa (2010, p. 42) submits that 'sentence analysis alone (semantic theory) which dominated school classes since 1950 needs other linguistic aspects like pragmatics, to complement the issue of meaning. Meaning is the recondite issue which needs pragmatic inferences like implicature to be appropriately understood.' Sadock deploys different grammar components including movement rules, in which case, structure is presented as a phenomenon that relates with semantic components of language use in direct and indirect propositions. Interestingly, Levinson (ibid) asserts that 'since the notion of indirect illocutionary force may be re-analyzed in conversation analytic terms, it follows that there are strong relations between discourse structure and sentence structure in this area too. Many of the semantic processes called 'movement rules' seem to have the function of indicating how information in the clause relates to what has been talked about before – and this is in line with conversational organization in pragmatics called 'turn-taking and repair'.' Indirect speech acts are processed via a more sophisticated inference (pragmatic inference) that puts into consideration, speaker-hearer shared knowledge and the different contexts that underpin an utterance. In any particular context, the relationship between the formal property of an utterance and its functional use is referred to as 'indirect speech act'. Sadock's theory of speech act captures the psychological context of speaking; for instance, the link between promising and desiring to fulfill the promise is arguably part of a rational speaker's discourse behaviour. It can be said therefore, that 'expressing the desire' operates in a form of deep structure representation of the speech act of promising. This is to say that illocutionary forces are psychologically produced. Sadock's theory is illuminating as far as the view that 'illocutionary forces are core of speech act' is concerned. A truly linguistic theory, Sadock's speech act theory explains some general properties of grammar. Conclusively, Sadock's speech act theory is a springboard for understanding structure-driven perspectives on speech acts. But the theory is bereft of context-based perspectives of the use and interpretation of language, which is the core of pragmatics.

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