

A Critical Analysis of a Compliment as a Speech Act

The act of imparting and exchanging information through speech, text, image or any other alternative medium is known as communication. Communication is often defined as the two-way process of reaching shared understanding, in which all participants are tasked with assigning and conveying 'meaning'. If communication were a car, language, in all its entirety, would be the wheel-steering it towards its intended destination of said shared understanding. A language is a system of words, sounds, gestures, and symbols- all with the purpose of facilitating conversation, a system continuously affected by the culture it functions in, and its prevalent patterns and norms of interaction. These gestures and words therefore hold no real meaning entirely on their own, and must be viewed in relation with the context of their utterance and the subsequent interpretation.

With the world more globalised than ever, and with (cultural, non-geographical) international boundaries blurring to give way to a rising population of 'global citizens', it has now become more important than ever to not only analyse the effect of cultural differences on interpersonal communication but also to stress upon the problems they pose to intercultural communicative competence. The speech act of complimenting is one such example which reveals the kind of sociolinguistic information required to understand these very problems. This essay aims to critically analyse the act of complimenting, in the English language using the Speech Act Theory- formulated by J.L. Austin and further developed by J.R. Searle, establishing and studying the relationship between a compliment and the Linguistic Politeness Theory, and determining the relativity of the Speech Act Theory in the modern, intercultural world.

For the purpose of this essay, the basis of analysis is a scene from the 2013 British movie "About Time". About Time is the story of Tim, a 21-year-old British man who discovers that he can change what happens and what has happened in his life. The scene being analysed is one where Tim is introducing his girlfriend Mary, to his mother for the first time, with the intention of proposing marriage to her soon after. The scene in question has been transcribed below:

(Line 1) Son: This is Mary ↑

(Line 2) Mum: Good::, (0.1) Lord, you're pretty.

(Line 3) Mary: Oh, no, ((Shakes head)) I:: It's just::, (0.2) I've got a lot of mascara and lipstick on.

(Line 4) Mum: Let's 've a look. Oh ↑ yes. ((Nodding)) Good.

This particular scene has been chosen for analysis for multiple specific reasons: (1) It allows us to examine the speech act of complimenting in a communicative setting that inherently requires its participants to not only appear polite but also refrain from showing heightened emotion- that of a child introducing their romantic partner to their parents for the first time (2) It allows us the freedom to analyse the act of complimenting from a linguistically cross-cultural perspective- Mary (the romantic partner) being American and Mum (the parent) being British, both native speakers of the English language albeit with pronounced differences in the usage of the language. As part of this essay, the scene will be analysed and studied in relation to the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1979), the 'Face-Saving' view (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987) and the 'Conversation maxim' view (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983) of the Linguistic Politeness Theory.

Opening the door is an action. Asking or telling someone to open the door is also an act; albeit a speech act. When uttered on their own, words objectively don't impart meaning to the ongoing process of communication. The situation in which they are uttered, the communicative setting, the speaker, and the listener, all affect and add meaning to the words being spoken or written. A speech is thereby described as an utterance of words defined by not only the speaker's intent behind them but also by the effect they have on the intended listener. Linguistic theory recognises all linguistic communication as a series of linguistic actions. The words, gestures and symbols uttered or issued are the building blocks and basic units of this process of performing a linguistic action, or speech act. The Speech Act Theory, a sub-area of study in the field of pragmatics, is concerned with this act of using words, symbols and gestures to present information and to carry out actions. Words and their utterances issued often have a specific meaning to the speaker and the listener(s) which is often different from the meaning attached to them according to the language being spoken. (Austin, 1962) Oxford philosopher of languages, J.L. Austin formulated the Speech Act Theory in 1962, and stated that a speech act constitutes three components- the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act. These categories of speech acts,

aim to identify the type of act being performed, in order for the interpretation of the act to be determined.

The locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act are three inseparable components of an utterance or speech act, and together help determine the meaning or interpretation of said utterance or speech act. For example:

'Sam and Jane are dining at an expensive restaurant, when suddenly Sam goes down on one knee and presents a ring to Jane. Not skipping a beat, Jane immediately says "I will!" excitedly. Sam begins to smile, and places hugs her.

In the above occurrence, Jane's utterance of the words 'I will' can be further divided into the three components of a speech act, in order to impart meaning to the occurrence itself.

The Locutionary Act: The act of saying something or the uttering of words (**the locution**) with a certain sense and reference, and a specific meaning in a traditional sense. It is merely the act of uttering certain words, linguistic sounds or marks with a certain meaning or reference (Philosophy of Language: The Central Topics, S. Nuccetelli, G. Seay, 2007). On its own, the locution neither creates any shared understanding in a conversation nor does it independently constitute a speech act. In the above example, *I will* was the utterance- the locution. It was a phrase produced by Jane to refer to Sam's act of presenting her with a ring.

The Illocutionary Act: The act of saying something or the uttering of words or linguistic sounds with a certain specific force (**the illocution**). An illocutionary act, adds meaning to the locution by way of acting as a directive for the intended listener(s)- a promise, an order, a request, an affirmation, etc. In the above example, the force that was conveyed by the utterance of the phrase *I will* was that of acceptance.

The Perlocutionary Act: The subsequent consequence or effect brought on by the utterance of words (the locution) with a certain force (the illocution), thereby completing the speech act and allowing it to be interpreted (**the perlocution**). In the above example, as a consequence of hearing the utterance, the recipient- Sam, felt happy and excited (which can be seen as he smiles and hugs Jane).

Though not always, often, a locution can result in multiple different perlocutions, i.e. different interpretations or effects on the intended listener. The occurrence of this depends entirely on the illocution of the act, i.e. the force with which the words or phrase was uttered. For the speaker to ensure that his utterance has the desired consequence, he must ensure that his utterance is of a certain type, refers to the conditions in the world required for it to hold meaning, and conveys sincerity. In the scene being analysed (transcribed above), when introduced to her son's girlfriend Mary, Tim's mother pays her a compliment (Line 3). In this case, the locution would be the utterance of the phrase "Good Lord, you're pretty", uttered to refer to Mary's beauty. The locution is understood to be complimentary as a result of the illocutionary force with which it was uttered. In response to the locutionary act, Mary perceives the illocutionary force as that of a compliment (Line 4), and reacts by deferring the compliment while being thankful for it. In the above conversation, the locutionary act of uttering a phrase with a complimentary illocutionary force results in the perlocutionary act of the listener feeling thankful, and flattered yet surprised.

Austin's theory of speech acts was further developed by J.R. Searle, who further studied illocutionary acts, and presented his taxonomy of speech acts. In 1962, Searle theorised that speakers can achieve only five levels of illocutionary acts, or illocutionary points in an utterance. With this classification of possible illocutionary points, Searle was able to better Austin's theory in that he provided a reasoned classification of illocutionary forces of utterances that depended on the speaker's intent and reason for use rather than on a language-system (D. Vanderkeven and S. Kubo, "Introduction." Essays in Speech Act Theory. J. Benjamins 2002) Searle categorised illocutionary acts into the following five illocutionary points: representatives or assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

Representatives/ Assertives: The basic use of an assertive illocutionary force is for the speaker to tell the intended listener(s) how things are. Examples: inform, predict, state

Directives: The basic use of a directive illocutionary force is for the speaker to try and get his intended listener(s) to do certain things. Example: ask, command, request

Commissives: The basic use of a commissive illocutionary force is for the speaker to commit themselves to doing things. Example: promise, pledge, vow

Expressives: The basic use of an expressive illocutionary force is for the speaker to express their feelings, opinions and attitudes. Example: congratulate, praise

Declarations: The basic use of a declaration is for the speaker to give effect to a change through his utterance. Example: appoint, judge, adjourn, christen

In the transcribed scene, the illocutionary force of the mother's utterance is complimentary in nature. When analysed using Searle's taxonomy of speech acts, we can identify the illocution to be an expressive. By description, an expressive illocutionary force can be positive or negative and is used when the speaker wants to convey emotions, attitudes or feelings. In the scene in question, the purpose of Mary's (the mother) utterance is to tell Mary (the girlfriend) that she is pretty and thereby praise her. As a result, in order to convey the intended meaning and to ensure it's intended interpretation, the illocutionary force used is an expressive, i.e. a compliment.

Since its formulation, the Speech Act Theory has been a large influence on almost all subsequent linguistic theories and language philosophies. Though Searle's taxonomy of speech acts has had a huge impact on multiple areas of pragmatics, it is not without its downfalls. One of the biggest criticism of both Austin and Searle has often been that their theories heavily rely on intuitions, and focus almost exclusively on sentences and their utterances in isolation from the context in use (M.I. Geis, 1995). Another often mentioned critique of the Speech Act Theory is its tendency to assign the listener a passive role. Especially in the case of Searle's illocutionary points, the illocutionary force of an utterance is almost wholly attributed to the speaker's beliefs, feelings and reason for said utterances. Interactive conditions and interactional aspects are ignored and conversation is treated as merely a chain of independent utterances with certain illocutionary forces. Also, oftentimes, undue weightage is placed on the force of the utterance in driving the conversation, rather than on the utterance itself (A. Barron, 2003). Interpersonal communication, basically communication between two or more people, is a dynamic phenomenon, forever changing. Any study of interpersonal communication cannot thereby discount the impact of one's culture, cultural norms, and subsequent linguistic systems on the process of communication. Analysing any utterance in isolation of the above simply as a system of Speech Acts would be an incomplete analysis. As a result, an analysis of the transcribed scene, based only on the Speech Act Theory would be incomplete, and would not impart the required importance to the effect of the speaker's and listener's cultural and linguistic differences. As such, it is useful at this point, to study the scene and the act of complimenting with respect to the Linguistic Politeness Theory.

One of the first and most frequently used perspectives of the politeness theory is Brown and Levinson's Face- Saving view. This view stems from the understanding that everybody has a face-negative or positive, and face wants and needs, and that every speech act or utterance is an endeavour to satisfy the said face wants and needs. The notion of face (adopted from Goffman, 1967) is a notion that functioning member of society is concerned about their face- their self-image and the image they portray to others (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987). According to this theory, any speech act that attends to a person's positive face want is considered to be an act of politeness and vice-versa. As such, speech acts including offers of friendship, showing direct interest, expressions of love or in this case compliments, are acts of politeness. From this perspective, it can be said that the compliment paid by Tim's mother to Mary in Line 3, is more than just an expressive speech act- it is an utterance made to fulfil her positive face wants and needs. More than just an act to refer to Mary's beauty, it can be understood as her attempt to be liked by Mary or to gain her approval. Though concise in its understanding, this theory fails to account for the cultural impact on communication. The Conversation View of the politeness theory formulated by Lakoff and Leech aims to address this pitfall. According to this theory, "politeness is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimising the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange" (R. Lakoff, 1990). The conversation maxim puts weight on more than just the speaker's need to save face as the driving force behind politeness. This was further developed by Geoffrey Leech, who built upon Grice's maxims and established a set of politeness principles or conversational maxims- tact, generosity, approbation, modesty,

agreement and sympathy. The single most important benefit of Leech's Conversation view is that it takes into account cultural impact and assumes that each of the above synthesised maxims, varies from culture to culture- what may be considered polite in one culture may not be so in another. The conversation in the transcribed scene, between Mary and Tim's mother (Lines 3 and 4) is a reflection of Leech's maxims, especially the modesty maxim. On meeting her for the first time, Tim's mother compliments Mary on her beauty. Though we can classify this as simply an expressive speech act or further an act of saving face or fulfilling one's positive face needs, it is important to also pay notice to Mary's reaction (the perlocutionary act). On being complimented, Mary does not instantly accept the compliment. Though she thanks Tim's mother, she deflects the compliment and attributes her beauty to makeup. At this point, it is important to note that though both are native speakers of English, and follow similar linguistic systems, Mary is American whereas Tim and his mother are British. Leech's modesty maxim states: "Minimise the expression of praise of self; maximise the expression of dispraise of self." According to the above, one must defer self praise and highlight self dispraise. Owing to differences in cultural norms, in some cultures it is customary and polite to defer compliments whereas in others it is the general practice to accept compliments, and often times return them.

It is widely accepted that communication between people is affected not only by their linguistic origin, but also by the prevalent cultural patterns and norms of interaction. In any conversation, it is not possible to actively separate language in a strictly linguistic sense from language in a broader socio-linguistic sense. In the scene being analysed as part of the essay, it can be seen that Mary, an American, does not simply accept the given compliment. She defers it and names an external source as it deserving recipient. The same way that Tim's mother considers it an act of politeness to pay Mary a compliment, Mary considers it an act of politeness to be thankful albeit indirectly, and minimise the expression of self-praise. As can be seen through the analysis of the above scene, it is often possible to analyse a single speech act in multiple different ways depending on the perspective used, however, every such analysis remains incomplete until one gives weight to the context of a speech act, the purpose of its utterance and the speaker's and listener's perspectives and beliefs. In the multicultural, global world that we live in, it is imperative to study the effect of socio-cultural norms and patterns of language usage on interpersonal communication. For a complete analysis of the problems faced by interpersonal communication and to achieve intercultural conversational competence, it is important to study the various parts of linguistic theory as an interdependent whole rather than as fragmented views and perspectives.

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