Speech Acts in Written Advertisements: Identification, Classification and Analysis
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Abstract

The Speech Act Theory was first introduced by philosophers and then approached by pragmatists and discourse analysts. While philosophers and pragmatists deal with speech acts in fabricated texts, discourse analysts focus on their occurring in real discourses. Another important distinction between these two lines of research is that philosophy and pragmatics study speech acts in isolation, while discourse analysis points to their linear and hierarchical organisation, trying to identify recurring patterns in various genres. The present paper approaches speech acts from an interdisciplinary perspective. Using a series of illocutionary force indicating devices, the paper identifies, classifies and analyses the types of speech acts used in written advertisements. The findings point out the advertisers’ preference of using some speech acts over others with the aim of obtaining the intended effect on the target audience. This quantitative analysis is performed on a corpus of eighty-four written advertisements selected from various newspapers and magazines, and the results can be viewed as genre-defining.

1. Introduction

The Standard Speech Act Theory appears as a reaction to a philosophical doctrine of the 1930s, called logical positivism. According to logical positivism, a sentence can be either true or false to the reality for which it stands otherwise it is “strictly speaking meaningless” (Levinson, 1994:227). This would mean that most ethical, aesthetic, literary discourses and everyday utterances are meaningless. At the very beginning, Wittgenstein (1921/1961) is one of the fervent proponents of this doctrine, but he soon changes his stand and underlines that “meaning is use”
(Wittgenstein, 1958: 43) and that utterances are explicable in relation to the role they play in different activities or language-games.

In the same period, Austin begins his lectures on speech acts (lectures published posthumously in the book *How To Do Things With Words*). Austin adopts a similar stand to that of the later Wittgenstein and points out that “the total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (Austin, 1962:147). He defines speech acts as expressions of psychological states (e.g. embarrassment, gratitude, irritation, regrets, etc.) or of involvement in social interaction (e.g. ordering, requesting, promising, warning, etc.). Austin (1962:108) also emphasises that, in uttering a sentence, three kinds of acts are simultaneously performed:

a. *a locutionary act*, which presupposes the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference (i.e. the study of meaning);

b. *an illocutionary act*, which presupposes the making of a request, statement, promise, offer, asking a question, issuing an order, etc. in uttering a sentence, on account of the conventional force/intention associated with it or with its explicit paraphrase (i.e. the direct achievements by the conventional force associated with the issuance of an utterance);

c. *a perlocutionary act*, which presupposes the bringing about of effects on the addressee(s) by uttering the sentence, these effects depending on the circumstances of the utterances (i.e. all the intended and unintended effects/consequences caused by a particular utterance in a particular situation).

Another philosopher, Searle (1994), sheds more light on the issue of speech acts, which he defines as “the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication” (1994:16). He supports this claim by stating that “speaking a language is performing speech acts” (1994:16). The production of speech acts is governed by “certain rules for the use of linguistic elements” (1994:16). He calls these rules *constitutive rules* and distinguishes them from *regulative rules*:

“[…] regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behaviour; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate inter-personal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behavior. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games. The activities of playing football or chess are constituted by acting in accordance with (at least a large sub-set of) the appropriate rules. Regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules. Constitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules.” (Searle, 1994:33-34)

What Searle tries to outline is that speaking a language is like playing a game, because both of them are rule-governed forms of behaviour:

“Speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior. To learn and master a language is (inter alia) to learn and to have mastered these rules” (Searle, 1994:12)

From this perspective, Searle (1994:42-50; 62-71) points out that the constitutive rules describe the *sentence/utterance meaning* and help the hearer decode the *speaker meaning*, on the one hand and on the other they govern the use of Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID). By Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID), he understands the linguistic devices used to determine the illocutionary force of an utterance, for example word order, stress, intonation contour, punctuation, verbs, especially per formative verbs, adverbs, etc. Where the context and the utterance clearly indicate that the speaker commits to do what s/he says, it is not necessary to explicitly use an IFID in performing an act.

In their philosophical approach to speech acts, Austin and Searle study them in isolated sentences or fabricated utterances issued in a given context. More insight is brought into this issue by discourse analysis which studies speech acts, not in isolation, as it happens in philosophy or pragmatics, but in sequences occurring in natural discourses. Discourse analysis stresses that speech acts are “actions by nature” (Superceanu, 2000:76) and consequently should be studied with the theory of actions (van Dijk, 1992:167-183), which distinguishes between actions and acts. *Acts* are defined as intention-successful doings and *actions* as acts which require further consequences in order to be purpose-successful (van Dijk, 1992:176-177). From this perspective, “the intention has the action itself as its scope” (van Dijk, 1992:174) and the purpose is defined as “a mental event in which an agent represents the GOALS of the action” (ibidem, 1992:174). Any statement of purpose can answer a Why-question
about the action.

One of van Dijk’s (1992: 232) major contributions to the study of the connexity of speech acts in discourse is that he differentiates between micro-speech acts, i.e. the structure of individual speech acts, and the linear structure of speech act sequences, and macro-speech acts / global speech acts, i.e. the global, overall structure of communicative interaction. More exactly, van Dijk defines a macro-speech act as “the global speech act performed by the utterance of a whole discourse, and executed by a sequence of possibly different speech acts” (1992: 215). In other words, the speech acts of a discourse are organized linearly in sequences and hierarchically in global speech acts. Such an approach is very useful for the study of the conventional types of discourse, for example the advertisements or narratives, which are rather associated with global speech acts than with micro-speech acts (van Dijk, 1992: 233, Simon, 2008).

2. Speech acts in written advertisements

2.1 Establishing the corpus

The corpus, on which this analysis is carried out, consists of eighty-four written advertisements chosen from ten magazines and nine newspapers. The advertisements promote various products, services and general interest issues. The advertised products are alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, beauty accessories, cars, cigarettes, clothes, computers, cosmetics, decorations, food and sweets, gas fires, home appliances, household necessities, medicines, post boxes, and real estate. The advertised services refer to amusement activities, bathroom specialists, broadband and telephone services, contests, insurance services, pet adoption, travel offers, and various services offered by banks. The advertised issues are milk consumption and non-smoking campaigns.

2.2 Classification and identification of speech acts

The analysis of the eighty-four written advertisements reveals that some types of speech acts are present in the advertisements making up our corpus. These speech acts are described taking into account both the point of view expressed by some scholars and our own observations:

- assertions, which are positive statements or claims about the world, product/ service/ issue, addresser, addressee or other facts, usually made without evidence, etc;
- information, which refers to facts or knowledge about the product/ service/ issue, addresser, addressee, etc;
- claims, which are assertions of truth or statements of facts concerning the advertised product/ service/ issue, addresser, addressee and supported by following evidence;
- suggestions, which are statements/ arguments presented in an indirect mode;
- advice, which is an opinion expressed by the addressee with respect to how the addressee should behave or what s/he should do;
- arguments, which are statements put forth as proof or evidence for claims;
- evaluations, which are final appraisals of the value of something/someone made only if there is an evaluative premise;
- denials, which are objections to previous utterances;
- accusations, which are charges, usually negative, against similar products/ services/ issues;
- surprise, which is marked by the use of expressions uttered when something unexpected or unusual happens;
- thanking, which resorts to expressions of gratitude;
- warnings, which are statements about what might happen in the future, usually with unpleasant connotations;
- directions, which are requests for an action or information;
- persuasion, which refers to the act of persuading, of convincing by emphasising the credibility and attractiveness of the addresser/ endorser, of the advertised product/ service/ issue, by appealing to the addressee’s feelings, emotions, needs, wishes, desires, to the friendly relationship established between addressee and addresser,
and, finally, by using plenty of directions. All these means of persuasion may be repeated several times in the same advertisement, thus increasing the persuading degree of the advertisement in question.

- offers, which refer to the addressee’s commitment and capability to stand to the information presented in the advertisement. Firm offers are expressed by using the modal auxiliary can to show capability to fulfil a need, by using figures to refer to price, guarantee, etc., in a word by giving very specific details about the advertised product/service/issue, details that can be easily checked out by the addressee.

- promises, which are commitments of the addresser that something will happen in the future. Firm promises are expressed by recourse to the modal auxiliary will (Bach & Harnish, 1979: 47-48; Cook, 1996: 5; Dirven & Verspoor, 2004: 15; Harris, 1999; Kinneavy, 1971: 211-306; O’Shaugnessy, 2003: 145; Searle, 1976: 1-24; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985: 37ff.; van der Sandt, 2003: 61; Vanderveken, 1990:11; Walton, 2007: 89).

2.3 Speech act analysis in written advertisements

Taking into account van Dijk’s approach to discoursal speech acts presented above, we shall describe both the linear and the global organisation of the speech acts encountered in our corpus. The results of the analysis of the linear and global organisation of speech acts in the eighty-four written advertisements are presented in the tables below:

| Table 1. Micro-speech acts in written advertisements |
|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Micro-speech acts in written advertisements | Number of advertisements in which a particular speech act appears | Total number of written advertisements |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Assertion                                       | 45                                              | 84                                 |
| Information                                     | 70                                              |                                    |
| Claim                                           | 12                                              |                                    |
| Suggestion                                      | 1                                               |                                    |
| Advice                                          | 2                                               |                                    |
| Argument                                        | 11                                              |                                    |
| Evaluation                                      | 6                                               |                                    |
| Denial                                          | 4                                               |                                    |
| Accusation                                      | 4                                               |                                    |
| Directions                                      | 52                                              |                                    |
| Persuasion                                      | 18                                              |                                    |
| Offer                                           | 17                                              |                                    |
| Promise                                         | 18                                              |                                    |
| Surprise                                        | 11                                              |                                    |
| Thanking                                        | 1                                               |                                    |
| Warning                                         | 1                                               |                                    |

| Table 2. Macro-speech acts in written advertisements |
|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Macro-speech acts in written advertisements | Number of advertisements in which a particular speech act appears | Total number of written advertisements |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Information                                     | 19                                              | 84                                 |
| Persuasion                                      | 45                                              |                                    |
| Offer                                           | 10                                              |                                    |
| Promise                                         | 10                                              |                                    |

2.4 Data interpretation

The conclusion drawn from the above presented data is that although the advertisers use many types of micro-speech acts in order to attain their goal, the macro-speech acts performed by the analysed written advertisements are those of persuasion, information, offer and promise. In terms of their frequency, the mostly used micro-speech acts
are information, direction and assertion, while the mostly encountered macro-speech acts are persuasion and information. This means that linearly, written advertisements point to the factual characteristics of the product / service / issue, they urge the addressee to act in a certain way, and make positive statements about a product / service / issue without bringing any evidence. Globally, written advertisements mainly try either to persuade or simply to inform the audience about a product / service / issue. The result of our analysis supports Cook’s (1996:5) claim that most advertisements have the function of persuading the addressees to buy a product or, we would like to add, to inform the addressee about the main benefits a certain product / service / issue brings. But, besides these persuasive and informative functions, which may be primary or secondary, the advertisements may also accuse, warn (Cook, 1996:5), assert, suggest, advise, claim, offer, promise, evaluate, deny, thank, express surprise, bring arguments and give directions (as our analysis of micro- and macro-speech acts has proved).

3. Conclusion

In the first part of the present paper, the philosophical origins of the Speech Act Theory have been presented. Then it has been outlined the way in which speech acts were later approached by discourse analysts in order to study the pragmatic structure of discourses. In the second part of this paper, the types of speech acts encountered in the written advertisements making up our corpus have been described in terms of their characteristics, taking into account our own observations, some pragmatic and rhetorical studies. The results of our analysis have shown the advertisers’ preference for some micro- and macro-speech acts over the others. Thus, the advertisements usually make recourse to the micro-speech acts of information, direction and assertion, and to the macro-speech acts of persuasion and information. To put it differently, written advertisements have the primary function of persuading or informing the addressee, and the secondary function of informing, giving directions and making positive statements about the offer, without bringing the necessary evidence to support them.

Sources of advertisements

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"marie claire", May 2002.
"People", 13 May 2002.
"Woman & Home", May 2003.
"Elle", June 2005.
"Good Housekeeping", September 2006.
"Psychologies", September 2006.
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"Business", 11 October 2002.
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