Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)
Vol. IV, **No.** I (Winter 2019) | **Page:** 327 – 334

Identification and Analysis of Commissive Speech Acts to Decode Indirect Messages in News Headlines

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Abstract *Headlines carry more indirect messages than the direct ones. The present article aims to explore the indirect messages in CNN headlines written about a variety of political, diplomatic and security affairs in Pakistan. It also investigates the role of the linguistic as well as the contextual elements in the identification of the indirect messages carried by the headlines in the form of speech acts. The research finds that the headlines have pragmatically encoded meanings. The headlines are not just pieces of information, but they are associated with communicating a range of messages related commitment to future actions, possible future actions, announcing future actions, expressing speaker intentions regarding future activities and pledging for future. The linguistic devices and the contexts associated with the headlines play a significant role in the identification and analysis of the indirect messages in the headlines.*

Key Words
Speech acts, Commissives, CNN headlines, Illocutionary forces, Context of headlines, Linguistic devices

Introduction

The current study is part of a larger project that attempts to find out the encoded messages in the commissive speech acts found in the news headlines of CNN (Cable News Network). Pakistan faced many problems at the local as well as global level during the years 2010 and 2011. The most famous news stories of these years covered by the news channels included death of Usama Bin Laden, rise and fall in Pakistan's diplomatic relationship with United States of America, India and Afghanistan, General Parvez Musharraf's political comeback, terrorism, security issues and sports.

The study will look into the following questions:

- What messages are communicated through CNN headlines by using commissive speech acts?
- What is the role of the linguistic and contextual elements in decoding these messages?

Literature Review

Searlean taxonomy of speech acts helps in the identification and analysis of the speech acts. According to Searle (1969, p.16), speech act is the smallest unit of the linguistic communication. According to him, speech acts comprise of all the communication taking place in a language. According to his philosophy, the words or sentences are not just the units of communication in language; instead, all of them are the speech acts produced under various contexts. Searle (1969, pp. 16-19) also classifies the illocutionary acts in the following sub units:

Representatives or Assertives

Committing the speaker to something being the case or to the truth of an expressed proposition is termed as assertiveness. The direction of fit of representatives is words to the world and the expressed psychological state is a belief. Examples of such acts include: boasting, concluding, complaining and deducing.

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p-ISSN 2520-0348 | e-ISSN 2616-793X | L-ISSN 2616-793X | DOI: 10.31703/gssr.2019(IV-I).43 | URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2019(IV-I).43

Directives

Such speech acts are attempts by the speaker or writer to make the reader or hearer do some kind of task. Their direction of fit is world to the words and the sincerity condition is want or desire. Such acts include: asking, requesting, ordering, commanding and pleading.

Commissives

Commissive acts aim to get the speaker involve in some future course of action. Their direction of fit is world to the words and the sincerity condition is intention. For example: the acts such as commitment and promise.

Expressive

These acts are representatives of psychological conditions expressed in the propositional content of a speech act. Direction of fit is not required. The examples include the acts of apology, condolence welcoming etc.

Declaratives

These acts aim to alternate a state of affairs. Successful performance of these acts guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world. The examples include the declarations, appointments and acts such as fire or hire.

Identification of Searlean Illocutionary Act

Searle (1969, pp.65-68) argued that the following felicity conditions are necessary to identify the function of a certain speech act:

Propositional Content Conditions

If a proposition carried in a sentence is being studied, the propositional content conditions apply.

Preparatory Conditions

Such conditions are related with the functionality of a speech act. These conditions are related with the intentions and knowledge of the sender as well as the receiver.

Sincerity Conditions

The psychological condition of the sender of information making an utterance is related with these conditions. These conditions aim to address not only the intentions, but also the desires and the beliefs.

Essential Conditions

They decide the type of a speech act when it is an illocution. They help to determine the kind of an illocutionary act. One of the examples is promise where the speaker fulfils promise by intending to carry out a future action and at the same time also wants the hearer to know about an action.

Searle (1969, p. 30) also used the term 'Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)' in order to make it convenient to identify the illocutionary acts. According to Searle and Vanderveken (1985, pp. 7-8), there is an indicator of such device in each and every sentence which can be called illocutionary components. The meaning cannot be easily realized without such components.

Context plays a significant role to identify a speech act. The environment in which an illocutionary act is performed is called the context an utterance, Searle and Vanderveken (1985, p.17). Same sentence can give a number of meanings if used in a variety of contexts. The sentence 'I will come back in five minutes' can not only act as a prediction but also a promise if used in different environments. In order to bring variety, the senders and receivers of messages can be different or the situations can be different. Speaker, hearer, time, place and many other aspects such as psychological states can contribute to creating and interpreting a context. Searle and Vanderveken (1985, p.28) term these features as 'world of an utterance' or the way things exist at a particular instant of time.

Role of speech acts in journalism

Speech acts and journalism are closely related. According to Iorio (2004, p.174), speech act analysis plays a significant role in English language pragmatic history. Inferences can be found by studying an utterance in the

context in which it is used along with other features. Chiluwa (2007, p.70) claimed that the intentions with which a headline writer composes headlines matters a lot in the formation of an illocutionary act. Speech acts are not being given the importance they deserve in media communication although, they play a key role in media communication (Hall, 2012). The use of speech acts in the headlines has been studies by a number of researchers such as Muhammad (2005), Chiluwa (2007), Siposova (2011) and Hall (2012). Muhammad (2005) conducted a pragmalinguistic analysis of the headlines. She not only analyzed the illocutionary acts but also analyzed a number of linguistic with a number of linguistic aspects including special use of tenses, abbreviations, deletion, modifiers, sentences and punctuation. Siposova (2011) studied the headlines and found that the illocutionary acts of commands, statements and questions exist in the headlines. She also analyzed the linguistic and rhetorical aspects such as the use of loaded words, modals, questions, slang language and registers. Hall (2012) found the speech acts such as information, deliberation and witnessing.

Keeping in view the above-mentioned researches, the current article aims to explore the role of speech acts in headlines but is only limited to commissive speech act analysis due to limitations of space and content in the target journal. Moreover, it will also analyze the felicity conditions to decode the indirect meaning that have not been analyzed in the previous researches. The analysis will also consider the role of the linguistic and contextual elements in the identification of the speech acts. Another important gap the current research aims to fulfill is the classification of commissive speech acts into a number of categories not available in the previous researches.

Methodology

In order to conduct this study, the web pages were collected from CNN website (www.editioncnn.com) by the process of crawling which includes accessing the hyperlinks. These web pages were saved as HTML files. Headlines were later on coded keeping in view the categories and dates. Unnecessary materials were deleted. Two hundred headlines related to Pakistan were selected for analysis.

Speech act was selected as a unit of analysis. For this purpose the speech act theory given by Searle (1969) was applied. Headlines were classified according to the basic types of the illocutionary acts i.e. representatives, commissives, directives, expressive and declaratives keeping in view the purpose and the direction of fit of the speech acts. Only the commissive illocutionary acts were selected for further analysis as they are the only focus of the current research. The headlines taken as speech acts were numbered as H1, H2, H3 and so on.

The commissives were in turn classified into different prototypes as according to the hypothesis of constructability multiple illocutionary forces may exist within the same kind of speech acts. Three parameters were considered for the analysis of the headlines being treated as speech acts.

Headlines were analyzed keeping in view the context of the situation, the felicity conditions and the linguistic devices used in the headlines. Here the situation refers to the circumstances during which the headlines were written. The felicity conditions given by Searle (1969) in his speech act theory were applied to the analysis of the headlines. Linguistic devices used in the headlines were also analyzed to find out their roles in the headlines as indicators of illocutionary forces.

Results and Analysis

As discussed earlier, Searle (1969) defines commissives as the speech acts whose illocutionary point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action. In order to find out how the propositions or the headlines relate with the commissive illocutionary forces, further analysis according to the felicity conditions was carried out. Moreover, the role of the context of the headline or proposition and the linguistic devices was also taken into account. The results and the analysis are given below:

Commitment to the Future Actions

The headlines that have been selected for analysis indicate the intended action that will be carried out in future. Prototypes coming under the major category of commissives but having different themes have also been discussed.

Table 1. Illocutionary acts expressing commitment

Headlines (speech acts)	Propositional Content Condition	Preparatory Condition	Sincerity Condition	Essential Condition
Topic: US Pak relations				

H1. Minister: Pakistan won't move on Taliban stronghold until ready	The proposition is about future state of affairs.	Pakistan has an authority to carry out an action.	Pakistan is not willing to take action against Taliban.	Pakistan will not take action until the required conditions are met.
H2. Pakistan threatens action over NATO incursions	The proposition is about future state of affairs.	Pakistan has power to react.	Pakistan disagrees with NATO activity.	Pakistan is committed to react against NATO.
H3. Obama: U.S. would go after other high-profile targets in Pakistan	The proposition is about future state of affairs.	US has reasons to target high profile targets.	US has a desire to chase a target.	US is a committed to carry out an action.
H4. Obama won't release Bin Laden photos, White House says	The proposition is about future state of affairs.	Obama has authority not to release Bin Laden photos.	Obama is not willing.	US is committed to keep Bin Laden photos hidden.
Topic: Pak Afghan and Turkey relations				
H5. Report: Afghanistan, Turkey and Pakistan to hold military drills	The proposition is about future state of affairs.	The countries are prepared to hold drills.	The countries have agreed to hold drills.	All the three countries have made a commitment with one another.

Overall review of the felicity conditions reveals that the general conditions for all the headlines shown above are the same. For example, the propositional content of all the headlines is about future events. Preparatory conditions indicate that the authorities or reasons are associated with the actions to be carried out. The sincerity conditions are implying that there is a desire, willingness or unwillingness on the part of the persons or sources who want to carry out the action. Essential conditions show that there is a commitment to the future actions.

Linguistic elements play an important role in the identification of the above mentioned illocutionary acts. H1 and H4 make use of contracted modal verb "won't" that means "will not". It clearly indicates that the proposition is related with the future state of affairs. In case of H2 verb "threaten" has been used. Here the use of this performative verb indicates an act that is likely to be carried out in future if an unfavorable situation occurs. H3 uses the verbs "would go" that once again show a sense of commitment on the behalf of American President Barack Obama. H5 uses infinitive (to hold) indicating a strong possibility of an action to be taken in future.

Another important role is being played by the context in identifying the illocutionary acts. The headlines or speech acts show harmony between the context of situation and the illocutionary force. For example, H1 shows commitment shown by Pakistan on the issue of Taliban. United States urged Pakistan to take action against Taliban and Pakistan refused to do so. The headline shows commitment that the Pakistani forces will not act until and unless proper measures are taken. Similarly, in case of H2 Pakistan threatened action against the attacks by NATO forces on Pakistani territory without prior information. The next two headlines show Obama's commitment to take action against Taliban as he thought they were a threat to American security. Obama also refused to release Bin Laden Photos after his killing as he was of the opinion they a security lapse could be created after his death and the photos may incite violence among the people. All the headlines possess pragmatic functions that go in line with the prevailing situation regarding US Pakistan relations.

Possible Future Actions

The prototype indicates the actions that have a strong possibility to be carried out in future.

Table 2. Illocutionary acts expressing possibility

Headlines (Speech acts)	Propositional Content Condition	Preparatory Condition	Sincerity Condition	Essential Condition
Topic: Musharraf				
H6. Musharraf jumps back into Pakistani politics	State of affairs is current.	There is a great possibility of Musharraf's return.	Musharraf has a desire to join politics.	Musharraf will participate in politics.
H7. Pakistan's Musharraf ramps up for apparent presidential run	State of affairs is current.	There is a great possibility of Musharraf's return.	Musharraf has a desire to join politics.	Musharraf is ready to take action.
Topic: Sports				
H8. Yuvraj books Pakistan clash as holders Australia crash out to India	The proposition concerns future state of affairs.	Yuvraj is prepared.	Yuvraj is committed to face Pakistani team.	Yuvraj and Pakistan will face one another.
H9. Pakistan crush West Indies to reach World Cup semifinals	The proposition concerns future state of affairs.	Pakistan is ready for semifinals.	Pakistani team is committed to perform in semifinals.	Pakistan will play in the semi finals.
Topic: Indo Pak relations				
H10. India and Pakistan team up for tennis	The proposition concerns future state of affairs	India and Pakistan have made a decision.	Pakistan and India are willing to play together.	Both the countries will play the game together.

Unlike the headlines shown in Table 4.2.1, the speech acts presented in table 4.2.2 indicate a different situation. The general conditions for most of the speech acts are same but the propositional content in H6 and H7 relates current states of affairs. For the interpretation of the propositions contextual and linguistic information needs to be considered.

The use of linguistic devices in H6 and H7 indicates that verb phrases have been used to indicate futurity. Phrases such as "jump back" and "ramp up" have been used that convey meaning that are idiomatic rather than lexical and indicate possibility of an action going to be taken by Musharraf. H8 uses verb "books" that functions to indicate strong possibility of a future action. H9 uses infinitive "to reach" in order to indicate an action in future. H10 0nce again uses the same linguistic strategy as used previously by H6 and H7 that is the use of verb phrase "team up". It helps to show that given proposition is in future.

By the analysis of the felicity conditions and the linguistic devices it was found that the most of the headlines show possibility. If the context of the headlines is focused it supports the existence of possibility. In case of the two headlines (H6 and H7) although, the speech acts apparently seem to relate with the current states of affairs but the real situation is different. The context of the headlines is that at that time Musharraf was preparing to rejoin Pakistani politics but he was abroad on a self-imposed exile and could not actively participate in Pakistani politics so, there was a possibility of his active participation in politics. H8 and H9 are about sports. At that time cricket world cup was being played and India had defeated Australia while Pakistan had defeated West Indies so it was quite certain that the next cricket match would be played between Pakistan and India. The last headline indicates a possibility of tennis match as Aisamul Haq of Pakistan and Rohan Bhopanna of India who were tennis players had made a pair to compete in the international games.

Announce Future Actions

This prototype is related with announcing the actions that will take place in future.

Table 3. Illocutionary acts about announcement

Headlines (Speech acts)	Propositional Content Condition	Preparatory Condition	Sincerity Condition	Essential Condition
Topic: Domestic affairs				
H11. Pakistan announces test of medium-range ballistic missile	The proposition is about the future state of affairs.	Pakistan is capable to test a Ballistic Missile.	Pakistan is committed to carry out the action.	Pakistan will act according to what has been announced.

The existing headline concerns domestic affairs in Pakistan. The speech act is about present showing capability on the part of the source or agent. Sincerity and essential conditions show commitment. Announcing future actions function to inform publicly about the actions that will take place in future.

A very strong performative verb "announce" has been used in the above headline that does not leave any doubt that the current headline is an announcement of an action that will take place in future.

The felicity conditions and the use of linguistic devices are harmonious with the context as Pakistan was going to test a missile for carrying atomic weapons as it is one of the requirements for national defence. The test is usually announced before it is conducted.

Expressing Speaker's Intentions about Future Actions

This prototype is the indication of an intention on the part of the source or agent**.** These acts express the intentions with possibility of fulfilment in future.

Table 4. Illocutionary acts about intentions

Headlines (Speech acts)	Propositional Content Condition	Preparatory Condition	Sincerity Condition	Essential Condition
Topic: Militancy				
H12. The Taliban in Pakistan: We've got a bigger problem now	The proposition concerns current state of affairs.	US is facing a threat for which action needs to be taken.	The writer feels that the interests of US are in danger.	An action will be taken against an existing threat.

The headline shows present state of affairs with a preparatory condition that a state of affairs already exists where an action needs to be taken. Sincerity conditions show intention whereas the essential condition is commitment.

Unlike the previously mentioned headlines it is a bit difficult to mark the illocutionary force without taking into account the context of situation that has been mentioned below. A major part of the headline needs to be considered for this purpose that is "we've got a bigger problem now". It indicates that there exists a problem that needs to be solved.

The context of situation indicates that the statement is about the presence of Taliban in Pakistan. United States always considered them a threat to the security. Obama issued this statement to highlight that the future action against Taliban was necessary to be taken and will be taken.

Pledging for Future

'Pledge' is a strong performative verb. Here it indicates a future action that has already been decided to be taken.

Table 5. Illocutionary acts about pledging

Headlines (Speech acts)		Propositional Content Condition	Preparatory Condition	Sincerity Condition	Essential Condition
Topic: Indo Pak relations					
H13. an pledge hotline	India, Pakist counterterrorism	The proposition is about future state of affairs.	India and Pakistan face same problem.	India and Pakistan are committed to take an action.	India and Pakistan will take action against terrorism.

The above-mentioned speech act is about the future state of affairs with the preparatory condition that a problem exists and the sincerity condition of promise. Essential condition is a commitment.

The presence of a strong performative verb "pledge" leaves no room for doubt. The current headline is a pledge for a future action.

The context indicates that Pakistan and India made a promise to have negotiations on the issues of terrorism as it was being faced not only by Pakistan but also by India. Pakistan accused India of terrorist attacks and India accused Pakistan of inciting terrorism in India. Both the countries wanted to exchange information regarding terrorism and negotiate the matter so that a permanent solution could be found.

Conclusions

The analysis indicates that the headlines contain indirect messages apart from the general information being communicated on a series of topics such as US Pakistan relations, political situation in Pakistan and Indo Pak relations including sports activities. After the analysis of the commissive speech acts, it is quite clear that there is a range of illocutionary functions performed by the headlines, for example, commitment to future actions, possible future actions, announcing future actions, expressing speaker intentions related with the future activities and pledging for future. The headlines indicate the commitment of Pakistani as well as US authorities to do certain actions in future and also indicate that these authorities have the power to carry out the described actions such as targeting Taliban or releasing Bin Laden Photos. Similarly, the headlines are also the indicators of possibilities such as Musharraf's possible comeback to politics or holding sports events. The headlines also act as announcements to the commitments made by certain authorities such as Pakistan to hold ballistic missile test. Moreover, the headlines also indicate the intentions of the people who express certain statements. For example, if US calls Taliban a threat, it indicates the possibility of future actions against the Taliban intended by US authorities. The headlines also indicate pledges which also point towards the commitments for future.

Second question was about the role of the linguistic devices and context. Linguistic devices not only serve as indicators of illocutionary forces but also determine their strength and weakness. In case of possible future actions, the illocutionary force is not as strong as the commitment to future actions still, there exists a strong possibility of an action to be taken in future. In case of commitment, strong performative verbs were used whereas in order to show possibility verb phrases have been used. Announcing future actions is another strong illocutionary force as compared with the previous one as a strong verb has been used. It can be also concluded that although the performative verb is a strong indicator of illocutionary force as compared with the phrases still, the linguistic devices are dependent on the context in order to convey complete meaning.

Context also plays a significant role in the identification of the indirect messages. Findings show that the felicity conditions alone cannot serve as indicators to determine the illocutionary force. Context plays an equally important role in the identification of illocutionary force. The findings show that headlines' functions are harmonious with the context in which they exist. For example in case of the commitment to future actions the headlines express the actions going to be carried out in the future according to the situation.

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