Speech Acts and Languages for Special Purposes
A Speech Act approach to ESP

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explicit the possible extension of Speech Act theory to the analysis of sublanguages or Languages for Special Purposes (LSP), and to show in particular its relevance to the subset known as English for Special Purposes (ESP). I will primarily introduce an outline of LSP-ESP and of the Speech Act theory; then, through a survey on relevant literature, the modalities whereby Speech Acts could be made useful for English for Specific Purposes and, in so doing, I will attempt to make their applicability to ESP explicit and theory-informed, in order to reach a synthesis.

Introduction

The expression “Language for Special Purposes (LSP)” is used for a segment of natural language differing from other segments of the same language from a syntactic and/or lexical point of view. It is the particular language used in a body of texts dealing with a limited subject area (often reports or articles of a technical area of expertise or scientific matter), in which the authors of the documents share a common vocabulary and common habits of word usage.

In short, Languages for Special Purposes are functional varieties of natural languages related to a specific subject field of activity, and are spoken by a number of speakers which is smaller than the whole number of speakers of the languages they are a
variety of, in order to satisfy the communicative needs of that specific subject field.¹

Research on LSP can only be profitable where there exists an established group of users who help to identify and define the knowledge domain. In addition, the domain should be relatively well-defined and internally consistent.

Investigation into the linguistic structure of such texts as business documents, weather reports, medical records, maintenance manuals has led to specialized grammars for the sub-languages² (in this article I use the term “sub-language” as a synonym of LSP) of such professional domains.³

1. Describing LSP

When a natural language is used in a restricted setting, the resultant form may be called a Language for Special Purposes. Despite the fact that there is no generally accepted definition of this term, a number of factors are usually present when the portion of a natural language is restricted enough for specialty use:

- Limited domain of reference. The set of objects and relations to which the linguistic expressions refer is relatively small.

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² The term ‘sublanguage’ was introduced by Harris in Harris, Z., 1968, Mathematical structures of language, New York, Interscience Publishers.

³ The professional language can be defined as the entirety of the linguistic resources used in a professionally limited field of communication and enabling understanding among experts (professionals) working in this field. See Nardoni D., Cathacanu, Roma, Accademia Italiana di Scienze Biologiche e Morali, 1979; Id., Novantiqua, Ibid. 1979.
- Limited purpose and orientation. The relationships among the participants in the linguistic exchange are of a particular type and the purpose of the exchange is oriented towards certain goals.

- Limited mode of communication. Communication may be spoken or written, but there are constraints on the form of expression. Compressed (or telegraphic) language forms may reflect the time and space constraints of certain communication modes.

- Community of participants sharing specialized knowledge. The best typical examples of sub-languages are those for which there exists an identifiable community of users who share specialized knowledge and who communicate under restrictions of domain, purpose, and mode by using the sublanguage. These participants enforce the special patterns of usage and ensure the coherence and completeness of the sublanguage as a linguistic system. ⁴

Typically, an LSP makes use of only a part of the language's lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse structures. These restrictions on its grammar, once detected and encoded in the form of rules, can be exploited for research purposes, by greatly reducing the number of possibilities to be considered. Some of the typical constraints and extensions which can be found in a sublanguage grammar are given below.

The most observable feature of LSP is its specialized lexicon. Not only is the number of words (and their possible meanings) greatly restricted, but the productive word-formation rules may be of a particular kind, sometimes exclusive to the sublanguage or to a group of related sublanguages. Texts in medicine and pharmacology, for example, contain a variety of names for diseases and drugs, which are constructed using typical affixes. Corporate sublanguages make frequent use of acronyms which obey rules of noun phrase formation in the grammar. Scientific sublanguages employ symbolic expressions (e.g.,

mathematics) or abbreviations which have their own morphological characteristics.

The syntactic description of a sub-language may differ significantly from that of a unrestricted language. For example in weather forecasts there is little similarity between the syntactic structure of a telegraphic bulletin and that of general language. In less stereotyped sublanguages such as medical records, there may be both elliptical sentence forms and their full-sentence paraphrases in the sublanguage. From a semantic point of view, the restricted domain of reference of a LSP is represented by the way words are used with respect to one another.

Most sublanguages follow the syntactic patterns of standard language but may differ in the frequency of usage of various constructions. For example, many of the question forms, stylistic inversions, and exclamatives of conversational English are totally absent from technical literature\(^5\). Grammars for describing technical language may therefore ignore the corresponding production rules. On the other hand, some sublanguages may use syntactic constructions unknown in the general language, in which case the appropriate production rules must be included in the sublanguage grammar.

The way in which sentences are combined together to form coherent text can vary considerably from one sublanguage to another. Apart from differences in discourse-level semantic structures, distinct sublanguages may make different use of a linguistic means of textual cohesion. Some technical sublanguages include no occurrences of anaphoric pronouns, while others make use of special anaphoric devices. Even when a technical sublanguage uses pronominal anaphora,\(^6\) it often appears that the

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6 Hirst defines anaphora as “a device for making an abbreviated reference to some entity (or entities) in the expectation that the receiver of the discourse will be able to disabbreviate the reference and, thereby, determine the identity of the entity.” Hirst refers to the entity as an anaphor, and the entity to which it refers
sublanguage restricts it to cases where the antecedent noun phrase occurs in the preceding sentence or even in an earlier clause in the same sentence. The strategy employed for establishing co-reference in a sublanguage must therefore take into account the behaviour of each anaphoric device in that same sublanguage. From a language’s inventory of devices, each sublanguage seems to make a rather distinctive and limited selection. Stock market reports avoid repetition of the same verb in successive sentences, using synonyms instead, whereas technical manuals apparently avoid synonymy at the expense of lexical repetition.

M. Gotti, in contrast with the numerous definitions generally employed (LSP, sublanguage, ‘restricted code’, ‘special language’, ‘microlanguage’, ‘jargon’) proposes the expression ‘specialized discourse’. According to him, a specialized discourse is not a sociolinguistic variety but an actual language enclosing a mixture of combined more or less specific features coexisting in a quantitatively different degree as compared to general language.

More recently, though, research on languages used in the professions has moved from analysis in terms of syntactic or lexical choices to characters of the textual presentation and formulaic requirements of the different contexts. As a further development of this trend, Swales called for more attention to the communicative purpose of the communicative event.

2. From LSP to ESP

is its antecedent: Ex. [Mary] went to the cinema on Thursday. She didn’t like the film.

In this example, the pronoun she is the anaphor and the noun phrase Mary is the antecedent. This type of anaphora is the most common type, the so-called pronominal anaphora. See: Hirst, G., 1981, *Anaphora in Natural Language Understanding*. Springer-Verlag, Berlin.


Research on LSP is focused on scientifically analysing the ways in which experts and professionals use natural language (its lexicon, syntax, or textual patterns) in order to communicate specialised knowledge; in this context, the sub-set of English defined as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a particular case of the general category of Languages for Special Purposes,\(^\text{10}\) because of the growing use of English as the means of communication in interaction between non-native English speakers.

In an academic perspective, the expression English for Specific Purposes is contrasted with other Englishes such as English for Academic Purposes, English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language, etc., and this means that it is a type of English specially tailored to customer specifications. David Carter\(^\text{11}\) identifies three types of ESP:

- English as a restricted language
- English for Academic and Occupational Purposes (EAP)
- English with specific topics

Later on, Tony Dudley-Evans\(^\text{12}\) gives an extended definition of ESP in terms of 'absolute' and 'variable' characteristics:

\textit{Definition of ESP}

\textbf{Absolute Characteristics}


1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners;
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English;
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

The division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics, in particular, is very helpful in resolving arguments about what is and is not ESP. From the definition, we can see that ESP can be, but is not necessarily, concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. ESP can be seen simple as an ‘approach’, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an ‘attitude of mind’. This is a similar conclusion to that made by Hutchinson and Walters\(^\text{13}\) who state “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning”.

3. Introducing Speech Acts

John L. Austin is the creator of the Speech Act theory. In *How to do things with words*\(^{14}\) he aims at developing a theory of language, where a major role is played by the performative uses of language. Austin extends the functions of language beyond merely descriptive functions: in his view, language does not stand only for things in the world; instead, people perform something by saying. He shows that we use language to accomplish actions, and not just to make true or false statements. Austin recognizes various sorts of “speech acts”. His “performative analysis” identifies particular verbs and sentences which we use to accomplish particular acts with social and interactional consequences.

Austin divides the linguistic act into three components. First, there is the locutionary act, “the act of ‘saying’ something”. Second, there is the illocutionary act, “the performance of an act in saying something as opposed to the performance of an act of saying something”. Third, there is the perlocutionary act, for “saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, of the speaker, or of other persons”. In other words, a locutionary act has meaning; it produces an understandable statement. An illocutionary act has force; it is informed with a certain tone, attitude, feeling, motive, or intention. A perlocutionary act has consequence; it has an effect upon the addressee. By describing an imminently dangerous situation (locutionary component) in a tone that is designed to have the force of a warning (illocutionary component), the addressee may actually frighten the addressee into moving (perlocutionary component). These three components, then, are not altogether separable, for as Austin points out, “we must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued -- the total speech act -- if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative

utterances, and how each can go wrong. Perhaps indeed there is no great distinction between statements and performative utterances”. In contradistinction to structuralism, then, speech act theory privileges parole over langue, arguing that external context -- the context of situation -- is more important in the order of explanation than internal context -- the interrelationships among terms within the system of signs.

Later on, Searle formulates a general theory of meaning and use, according to which the primary units of meaning and communication in the use and comprehension of language are speech acts of the type called by Austin *illocutionary acts* such as assertions, promises and orders. Any meaningful utterance always consists of an attempt made by the speaker to perform an illocutionary act at the moment of the utterance and that attempt is part of what that speaker intends to communicate to the hearer. He changes Austin’s notion of locutionary act by those of utterance and propositional acts. In possible contexts of language use, speakers utter words: they pronounce sounds or write letters of certain types, and in doing so they make *acts of utterance*.

An example of classification operated by Searle is the following:

1. Assertives: The speaker states “The door is open” and believes that the door is open.

2. Directives: The speaker gives the command “Open the door” and wants the door to be opened.

3. Commissives: The speaker says “I will open the door” and intends to do it.

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15 Austin, L. *How to Do Things with Words*, cit. page 52.
4. Expressives: The speaker exclaims “I like your coat” and means it.

5. Declaratives: The declaration is self-realizing (i.e. the state described by the propositional content \( p \) is realized by the very act of saying it). In saying “I resign” or “You're fired!” the speaker must have the role of employee or boss, respectively.

6. Representative Declaratives: the speaker bases his declaration on the recognition of some fact, and a self-realizing declaration. Example: The umpire declaring, “You are out” or the judge “I find you guilty as charged”.

4. Speech Acts for Special Purposes

With the claim that speakers do not only state what they believe to be true when they speak, but rather perform socially relevant acts, like commands, permissions, promises, apologies, insults, or even more specific ones like hiring a person or declaring an emergency, Speech Acts theory can change the general structure of social rights and obligations, as when a shop owner states what customers have to pay for a pound of apples\(^\text{17}\).

Searle’s collaborator Daniel Vanderveken\(^\text{18}\) in his *Principles of Speech Acts Theory* asserts that “above all, the use of language is a social form of linguistic behavior. It consists, in general, of ordered sequences of utterances made by several speakers who tend by their verbal interactions to achieve common


\(^{18}\) Vanderveken, Daniel, 1994 “Principles of speech act theory”. *Cahiers d’épistémologie* 9202, Montréal, UQAM.
discursive goals such as discussing a question, deciding together how to react to a certain situation, negotiating, consulting or more simply to exchange greetings and talk for its own sake”. Now, from the point of view of discourse in professional community, or Language for Special Purposes, we can find points in common in that meanings are interpreted in their social contexts, that they both deal with social exchanges having performative forces of varying degrees; and assign great importance to fixed formulae or chunks of language.

As shown above, Speech Acts theory maintains that many utterances (i.e. things people say) are comparable to actions. When someone says: “I name this ship” or “I now pronounce you man and wife”, the utterance creates a new reality, both social and psychological. That is, people believe that the ship has this name and these two people are married.

Starting from the central idea in Speech Acts, that is the distinction in Locutionary, Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Acts, if we adapt it to the domain of ESP, we can find out interesting aspects in view of further researches on this correlation, which can schematically be presented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance act</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>ESP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Locutionary Act</td>
<td>the act of 'saying' a sentence with determinate sense and reference</td>
<td>issuing a document (e-mail fax, invoice etc.), declaring one’s name in a courtroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Illocutionary Act</td>
<td>making a statement, offer, promise, etc</td>
<td>all the language functions associated in job related activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Perlocutionary Act</td>
<td>what a speaker intends an utterance to achieve in an addressee</td>
<td>all the language functions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, in the drafting of an agreement made by lawyers, all the clauses that are going to be stated can be modeled
as a proposition (locutionary force) and “prefixed” by the parties’ intention of making and maintain this statement (illocutionary force).

In another typical legal situation, when in a courtroom, a judge passes a sentence like “The defendant is guilty” at least three speech acts can be performed in the sentence simultaneously:

1. Locutionary aspect: the propositional content of this sentence
2. Illocutionary aspect: the attitude of the speaker: no one thinks the judge is kidding
3. Perlocutionary aspect: the actual effect on the state of the world of this speech act: the defendant becomes a convicted criminal and will have to spend a period of time in prison.

To go back to the example above, aspects 2. and 3. are most interesting to us for drafting the contract statements. According to these two aspects, all the clauses we are going to state in a contract can be modeled as a proposition (locutionary force) and “prefixed” by our attitude of making this statement (illocutionary force).

5. Speech acts in Business communication

As it can easily be seen, not just individual speech acts but also common business communication genres can be classified according to certain speech acts. Speech acts are usually considered as instances of face-to-face, spoken communication. But a great deal of business communication is, in effect, a written extension of speech acts. In spite of the fact that speech acts are usually regarded to as single utterances that are part of a limited discourse exchange, documents commonly considered as business communication texts (e.g., complaint letters, apologies, refusals,

\[^{\text{19}}\] An illocutionary act is defined as consisting of an illocutionary force and a propositional content. Thus an illocutionary act “prefixes” a locutionary one in the sense that the latter is pervaded by the “force” of the former expressed by an attitude or intention to do what is said.
etc.) can easily be categorized as speech acts of a larger size, *i.e.*, as elaborate examples of individual speech acts. In their essence, for example, letters of offer are commissives; certificates and diplomas are declarations; informational brochures are representatives; order forms are directives; and so forth.

In any case, by adopting the distinction operated by Searle of speech act classes in the context of ESP, individual speech acts (e.g., sentences within a letter) can be classified according to the sentence types commonly found in business communication:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPEECH ACT</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>SENTENCE TYPE</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commisive</td>
<td>commits the speaker to a particular course of action</td>
<td>Praise</td>
<td><em>I agree to your terms.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Refunds</td>
<td><em>Your complaint is accepted.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Offers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Order for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>goods/services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>describes some state of affairs</td>
<td>Informative statements</td>
<td><em>The doctor is in</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leaflets</td>
<td><em>Your refund is enclosed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brochures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>attempts to get the hearer to do something</td>
<td>Sales letter</td>
<td><em>Send us your check today</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Job application letter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Request for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Request for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declarative</td>
<td>affects the legal or official status of a discourse participant</td>
<td>Certificates</td>
<td><em>I nominate John to the budget committee.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Appointments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As said, in Speech Act theory speakers do not simply say but, by saying, they perform social acts. This not only means that the language used in ESP gives speakers power to effect changes in their work environment but, also, that this power can be
misused. What a speaker has in mind may be different from what is actually understood; divergences are frequent between locution (literal meaning) and illocution (intended meaning) on the one hand and between them and perlocution (actual meaning as received by the addressee) on the other; the relations between these acts are governed both by norm and context.

This difference is shown by analysing a typical ESP document, such as a business letter:

M. PINELLI LTD
16 GARIBALDI STREET TURIN ITALY

Green Tools plc Your ref: MD/CT
16 East Street Our ref: LD/MN
Bishops Stortford
Herts, England 9 August 1986

RE: Invoice No. YD/63309

Dear Sirs

Thank you for your letter of 14 September and the enclosed cheque for $722.20.

We have checked the invoice carefully but cannot agree with your calculation. We feel that you may have overlooked the carriage charge ($20) for item six, which is entered separately on the invoice.

We hope that you will now feel able to agree with our calculations. We enclose a debit note for $20 and would be grateful if you could let us have a cheque for this amount at your earliest convenience.

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Within the text, the distribution of the various acts for every utterance could be schematically represented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance</th>
<th>Locutionary Act</th>
<th>Illocutionary Act</th>
<th>Perlocutionary Act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Filing information</td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>point generally taken as such</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>greeting</td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>point generally taken as such</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank-you clause</td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>point generally taken as such</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We have checked</em></td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>anticipatorily commissive (implicitly rejects a counterargument)</td>
<td>may or may not accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>cannot agree</em></td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>both expressive and declarative</td>
<td>may or may not accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We feel that you may have overlooked</em></td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>may or may not agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We hope that you will now feel able to agree</em></td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>both expressive and directive</td>
<td>may or may not accept/agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We enclose a debit note</em></td>
<td>commissive</td>
<td>both commissive and subtly directive</td>
<td>the directive part may or may not be accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>[we] would be</em></td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>both expressive and directive</td>
<td>the directive part</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What can be seen is that there are almost no discrepancies at such levels like filing, greeting and thank-clauses, or closing remarks. The divergences take place in the more argumentative (or polemical as Mounir says) statements in the body of the letter; and this is most natural, since ESP exchanges involve a great deal of social negotiation. Of course, different message types can be defined on this basis, such as “order”, “invoice”, etc. These communication patterns differ in the actions that they refer to and the arguments that these actions take. It must be clearly noted that the illocutionary logic of such patterns provides as well an explanation for the lexical choices; for example, the ability to use correct verbs/verbal phrases to introduce business conditions is of crucial importance for drafters of international correspondence written in English. As a matter of fact, since the illocutionary effects depend exclusively on the meaning of the illocution and are always the same, they are fixed in the business communication standard, while the perlocutionary effects are defined by the user and determine how the message is processed after the first illocutionary interpretation.

6. A Note to End On

What has been attempted in this paper is to show the relevance of Speech Acts to ESP, in that both are concerned with communication, are highly conventionalised, and involve a never-ending process of social negotiation. If to speak is to do something – i.e. to perform what Austin called an 'illocutionary act' - in performing such an act, a speaker takes on a certain role and
assigns a corresponding role to the hearer: and it is in professional environments that this is mostly true. By giving an order, the speaker expresses his desire that the hearer follows a certain course of conduct and presents himself as having the necessary authority to oblige the hearer to follow the course of conduct in question simply because it is the speaker’s will. The social role taken on by the speaker who gives an order is embodied in the organizational notion of ‘superior rank’. Austin stressed such institutional embodiments of illocutionary roles in order to show that language itself is a vast institution incorporating an array of conventional roles corresponding to the range of socially recognized illocutionary acts.

Thus, the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts can prove of great relevance to ESP since it gives awareness of the power of words, and helps understand the appropriateness of structures to contexts to perform certain professional or job-related speech acts.

Selected Bibliography


Vanderveken, Daniel, 1994 “Principles of speech act theory”. *Cahiers d’épistémologie* 9202, Montréal, UQAM.