

A Pragmatic Analysis of Speech Acts Strata in Nigeria Legislative Discourse

Clara U. B. Agbara

&

Koyode Omole

Abstract

Most previous analyses on speech acts are based on individual oriented utterances using the first person singular pronoun. The essence of this paper is to demonstrate the fact that speech acts are performed not only on the level of individual persona but also on various levels of collective persona. The paper shall identify and explain the different types of collective speech acts that are characteristic of institutional discourse with specific reference to Nigeria legislative discourse using Senate Hansard on Consideration of Bills.

Introduction

Pragmatic study is a fairly new area of study in linguistics with the sole aim of analyzing speaker meaning as well as how the listeners perceive speaker meaning. One important linguistic principle which has contributed to the development of pragmatics is speech act theory by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). This theory states that utterances are used to perform actions in the real world and thus bring about change if uttered under appropriate conditions.

From inception, most analyses on speech acts are based on individual oriented utterances. That is, the speaking voice or persona of the utterance is that of an individual entity using the first person singular pronouns: 'I', 'my' and 'me'. For examples, "I promise that I will come early". "I order you to leave this office immediately". This has created an erroneous impression that utterances used to bring about change of affair are uttered by only individual agent or persona. However, speech acts which are performed within institutional context are uttered by individuals speaking as the mouth piece of a group. In other words, in institutional discourse, the individual does not only speak as an individual but also speaks on behalf of a group or as a representative of a group, using first person plural pronoun: 'we', 'our' and group nominal, e.g. 'the house', 'the senate', etc.

Therefore, the essence of this paper is to demonstrate the fact that speech acts are performed not only on the level of individual persona but also on various levels of collective persona. Also, the paper shall identify and explain the different types of

collective speech acts; that is the various levels of speech acts that are attribute of institutional discourse with specific reference to Nigeria legislative discourse. The study is limited to plenary session of the senate deliberations with specific attention to Consideration of Bill (Bill debate). The data for the study is Nigeria Senate Hansard.

Since little or nothing seems to have been investigated in the area of collective speech acts that could account for pragmatic features of institutional speaker meaning, this paper may enable us have positive insights into various strata of speech act. This will help to widen the horizon of speech act studies in particular and pragmatics in general.

Pragmatic Study

Pragmatics as an independent subfield of linguistic developed in the 1970s, though its origin can be traced to Charles Morris' *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938). Morris introduced the terms "pragmatics" as a division of semiotics when he identified three distinct branches of semiotics; namely, syntactic (or syntax), semantics and pragmatics. He described pragmatics as the study of "the relation of signs to interpreters" (qtd. In Levinson I).

Pragmatic study deals with how speaker conveys peculiar meaning as distinct from sentence meaning and how listeners are able to decipher speaker meaning from sentence meaning. Put differently, pragmaticians are interested in how interlocutors are able to produce and comprehend communicative acts based on interlocutors' contextual knowledge, common ground and other sociolinguistic features. Speaker meaning and sentence meaning are two important concepts in pragmatic study. The literal meaning of a sentence is referred to as sentence meaning while the speaker's intention or peculiar information is called speaker meaning. The ability of interlocutors to understand the difference between these two forms of meaning in any communicative event is called pragmatic competence.

As a fairly new area of linguistic study, pragmatic, at the on-set, was bedeviled by varied definitions which painted a picture of pragmatics as "waste basket of linguistics" (Mey 19). Levinson (1983) in his attempt to sketch a general topography of pragmatics opines that the scope is so wide that attempt to construct an all embracing definition is almost impossible or difficult. Similarly, Mey argues that the various definitions given to pragmatics do not delimit pragmatics either clearly and neatly, or to everybody's satisfaction (7).

However, modern pragmaticians and linguists like Leech (1983), Yule (1996), Verschueren (1998), Mey (2001) and Crystal (2003) have in their various efforts narrowed the scope of pragmatic study to the study of utterance meaning as intended by the speaker, effects of non-literal and indirect communication strategies, context and appropriation of utterances, speech acts, politeness principles and situational constraints on interlocutors. Leech (1983) describes it as the study of "language as distinct from, but complementary to the systems of language whose essence is the use of language to bring out [specific] results in the hearer's consciousness" (209). Leech's definition is rather brain tasking. A more straightforward definition is given by Yule (1996), to him pragmatics is simply "the study of speaker meaning" (3). In the views of Verschueren as expressed in his book *Understanding Pragmatics* (1998), pragmatics is "the study of linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their usage, properties and processes" (1). Crystal (2003) expands Verschueren's definition, he opines that pragmatics is the study of language from the perspective of the users as it relates to "the choices they make, the

CONSTRAINTS they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in the act of communication” (364).

Thus pragmatic study deals with the language options of users and the implications of such options on the listeners. In other words, it is “the way people use their language” (Mey 23). This is the core of pragmatics; it is “a shift from the paradigm of theoretical grammar (in particular, syntax), to the paradigm of the language user” (Mey 4).

Speech Act

Speech act theory is a major contributory principle to the development of pragmatics. John Austin, the father of speech act theory, argues that language users do not just utter words but they actually “perform or do things” with words. In his paper *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), he demonstrates how words are used to perform activities that bring about change in the real world. Thus, for Austin and later his student, Searle, words are not simply meaningful phonics but are tools used to bring about changes in the existing state of affairs in the real world.

Austin opines that speakers perform three distinct acts whenever an utterance is expressed. These are:

- Locution act: this is the act of making meaningful and unambiguous utterance.
- Illocutionary act: it is the activity performed with the utterance, for examples, asking a question, promising, reporting, persuading, informing, requesting, illustrating, etc.
- Perlocutionary act: this is the actual effect or the result of the utterance on the listeners; for examples, persuaded, enlightened, impressed, disappointed, informed, angry, inspired, influenced, etc.

In attempting to refine and improve Austin’s conception of speech acts theory, Searle reclassifies Austin’s illocutionary acts into:

- **Representatives:** utterances that assert about a state of affair in the world and to which the speaker is committed to the truth expressed in the proposition of the utterance; for examples, describing, explaining, reporting, illustrating, believing etc.
- **Directives:** utterances that make the listeners to perform the wishes of the speaker as stated in the proposition of the utterance (referred to in this paper as affective acts); for examples, command, request, direct, order, recommend, suggest, etc.
- **Commissives:** utterances which commit the speaker to perform the proposition expressed in the utterance: for example, vow, promise, swear, etc.
- **Expressive:** utterances which express the speaker’s psychological state towards the proposition of the utterance (referred to in this paper as effective acts); for examples, regret, happy, worry, appreciate, congratulate, etc.
- **Declaratives:** these are utterances that bring about a change of existing state of affairs in the world; for examples, declaring a meeting open/close, naming a new born child, pronouncing someone guilty or husband and wife, etc.

Searle also opines that for any speech act to be successful and non-defective, the act must be performed under some conditions/rules such as the propositional content condition, the preparatory condition, the sincerity condition and the essential (intentionally) condition (1969:57ff & 64ff). The scope of this paper is limited to the description of various levels (strata) of speech acts performed by the senators and hence the data analysis will not be classified according to the various classes of illocutionary acts discussed above.

Although, both Austin and Searle identify felicity conditions to be met for speech acts to be appropriate and successful, Searle’s conditions are more elaborate. Searle

marks out general conditions for all speech include “that the hearer must hear and understand the language, and that the speakers must not be pretending or play-acting. [and also specific conditions] for declaration and directives ... the speakers must believe that it is possible to carry out the actions, they are performing the acts in the hearer’s best interests, they are sincere about wanting to do it, and the words count as the acts” (qtd. in Cutting 15).

Searle also introduced the notion of “indirect speech act” a case of sentence form not matching sentence function. Indirect speech act is made up of “primary” and “secondary” illocutionary acts. The primary illocutionary act is the indirect act and the speaker meaning which is not performed literally. The secondary illocutionary act is the direct form which falls in line with the sentence traditional function and performed in an overt manner (Searle 178).

The Notion of collectivity

Collectivity refers to the quality of being together as a group of individuals characterized by some form of similarity. There are various types of groups such as entertainment audience, congregation of a religious worship, football fans, family members, board of directors, management team, the senate, etc. These groups can be classified into two major classes: the structured group and the unstructured groups.

Structured groups are intentionally related and they have rules and regulations as well as rights and obligations. The members of structured groups have common intentions, goals, belief and aim; and such groups usually have a representation or agent to address the public if the need arises. Examples of structured groups are family, the national assembly, members of committee, management team, members of associations, etc.

Unstructured groups are not intentionally related; they come together accidentally. In such groups or gatherings, there are no rules and regulations binding the members together; neither do the members have rights or obligations. The group is bound together by physical boundary and may not have common intentions, aim and believe. Examples of unstructured groups are football fans, the crowd at the bus terminal, bus passengers, audience at cinemas, etc. These characteristics make it unnecessary for a member of the group to speak on behalf of the group. As a result, collective speeches act are usually not performed by such group though the group can be addressed as collective listeners. According to Meijer, “speech acts being an act are performed by agents and if the notion of a collective agent makes sense it will refer to members of a group that are intentionally related” (94).

Institutional discourse is experienced only within structured group like the Nigeria Senate. The members (senators) share collective intentions, beliefs, goals and aims. Hence, sometimes, the utterances of a member of the senate have a collective intention. Utterance that have collective intentions are often characterized by first person plural pronouns like “we”, “our”, and “us”, and sometimes group nominal like “the senate”, “the house”, are used in place of pronouns.

Levels of speech acts in Nigeria legislative Discourse

The Nigeria legislative discourse, which is a subset of institutional discourse, is characterized by levels of speech acts. In this paper levels of speech act refer to the various speaking voices or persons who expressed an utterance thereby performing a speech act. Nigeria legislative discourse, with specific reference to the senate, is

characterized by more than one level of speech act; namely, individual speech acts and collective speech acts. Individual speech act is performed when a senator speaks as a single entity with individual intentions, beliefs and goals. This level of speech acts is characterized by the use of first person singular pronouns like “I”, “my” etc. Collective speech act, on the other hand, is performed when a senator speaks on behalf of a group of persons with collective intentions, beliefs and goals. At this level, the speaker employs first person plural pronouns like “we”, “our” or group nominal like “the House”, “the Senate”, “Nigeria”. Collective speech acts in the Nigeria senate can be classified into two subclasses, namely:

- I. The senators as a group of individuals different from other Nigerians: the speech acts are performed on behalf of other senators.
- II. The senators representing the citizens of Nigeria as a group: the speech acts are performed on behalf of Nigerians.

Data for this Study

The data used for this study are the Bill Debate on Constitution (Second Amendment) Bill, 2009 as recorded in the Senate Hansard. The Hansard is a verbatim documentation of the proceedings of the Senate plenary sessions. The debate on this Bill had started on 25th June, 2009 but was not completed; it was reopened on 30th June, 2009. The Bill seeks to amend part of 1999 Constitution with regards to perceived anomalies in electoral laws and regulations with the aim of creating enabling environment for sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

The bill, which is an Executive Bill (sponsored by the presidency), indentified major issues for reform which include the introduction of independent candidacy; that is an individual who does not belong to any political party should be allowed to contest for an elective positions as independent candidate. Also, the Bill seeks to prohibit the habit of cross-carpeting by political office holder to other party after being elected on a particular party platform. Furthermore, it seeks to provide the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) with financial independence by funding INEC from the first line charge of the Consolidated Revenue Fund. That is INEC should be granted financial autonomy by removing its budget from Consolidated Revenue of the Federal account before sharing the revenue to the three tiers of government. Also for amendment are the issues of funding of political parties and banning the admission of white paper of panels of inquiry on individuals contesting for an election.

Data Analysis

There are two major levels of speech acts in the Nigeria legislative discourse. This section of the paper identifies and discusses the various speech acts strata.

1 Individual Speech Act

As earlier stated, individual speech act refers to when a senator speaks as a single entity characterized by individual intention, beliefs and goals. Below are samples:

1. Therefore, I do not support prohibition of cross-carpeting. (2nd speaker)
2. Of course, I believe that government has no business funding political parties particularly the ones that cannot give a reasonable participant at the National Assembly. (4th speaker)
3. Inasmuch as I endorse most of the recommendations that are being discussed, I have one worry and that worry has to do with the supremacy of the party... (9th speaker)

4. In terms of cross-carpeting, I do believe that it is the right of every person to cross-carpet and here behind me is one of the beneficiaries of cross-carpeting to our great party. (23rd speaker)

5. I support that the President appoints the INEC chairman and the members. I do not think that appointment is the problem. (27th speaker)

6. Mr. President, I have enjoyed listening to so many of my Colleagues who talked on this issue of Constitutional amendment in respect to that area that have been presented to us by the Executive. (30th Speaker)

7. I also agree that the political parties should be allowed to evolve, but I do not agree that when political parties evolve as political associations they would be scrapped because of their inability to win election. (32nd Speaker)

8. However, I will like us to think about some salient issues on this Administrative Reports. (35th Speaker)

9. All these things must stop. (39th Speaker)

The above data demonstrate the fact that senators often perform individual speech acts characterized by the use of first person singular pronouns. Different types of illocutionary acts are performed as shown in the various samples. In samples 2 and 4, the speakers perform representative acts by asserting to states of affair in the world to which the speakers are committed to the truth. The 4th speaker asserts to the fact that Government funding of political parties especially the party that has no elected member in Nation assembly is unnecessary. The 23rd speaker (sample 4), on the other hand, asserts to the need for the freedom of permitting any person who wishes to cross-carpet to do so.

Sample 1, second part of sample 3, and then sample 5 are used to perform Effective acts. Each of the speakers expresses psychological states: the 9th speaker is worried about lack of supremacy of political parties due to the fact that some highly placed individual always have their personal interest prevailing over that of the party to which they belong; the 2nd speaker also expresses inner feeling - he supports the idea of freedom of cross-carpeting. Similarly, the 27th speaker approves (support) the fact that the President should be allowed to appoint INEC chairman and members.

Samples 8 and 9 are used to perform Affective acts: 35th speaker makes a suggestion to the house while 39th speaker makes a subtle command that all electoral irregularities which makes election incredible “must stop” so as to move the country forward.

Individual speech acts are also used to perform perlocutionary acts as demonstrated in samples 3, 6 and 7. Each of the speakers’ locution in these samples is as a result or effect of illocutionary acts performed by other participants: the 9th speaker approves the recommendations suggested by other participants, 30th speaker expresses his/her satisfaction “enjoy” on the illocutionary acts of other senators, and the 32nd speaker also expresses agreement that political parties be allowed to developed, but should not be disbanded due to inability to win elections.

11 Collective Speech Acts

Collective speech acts, as earlier discussed, refer to when a senator speaks on behalf of a group which he/she is a member; such acts are performed using first person plural pronouns or group nominal. Collective speech acts are characterized by collective intensions, beliefs and goals. The collective speech acts in our data can be classified into:

- (a) The senators as a structured group and
- (b) The senators (as Nigerians) representing the entire citizenry of Nigeria as a group.

Although these two sub classes of collective speech acts are characterized by the use of first person plural pronouns 'we', the locutionary acts are performed by individuals speaking as an agent or part of the collective. Below are illustrations:

The senators as a structured group

10. Much as we agree for INEC... (2nd speaker)
11. Some of the highlights of the Bill as espoused in the lead debate ... are agreeable to most of us in spite of some fundamental differences that we may have the details. (3rd speaker)
12. What the Bill has done is to guarantee the financial aspect of the independence that is all right; and we all like that much. (5th speaker)
13. As we discuss the electoral punishment, we have not taken care of events leading to election itself... (9th Speaker)
14. The deviation is that we should not politicize the appointment of the Board members. (12th Speaker)
15. We ought to also look at the provision of re-call. (18th speaker)
16. So as we take this, we need to seriously look at the issue of having the Accountant General of the Federation and Accountant General for the Federal Government. (21st Speaker)
17. We are assuming that since the Cold War is over there will no longer be external influence during election. We do not know what the future holds.(23rd speaker)
18. We have really lost the vibrancy and the robustness of the debate of this Bill because we are dealing with too many items at a time. (26th speaker)

In the illustrations above, the speakers (individual senators) performed collective speech acts characterizes by collective intentions, beliefs and goals by employing first person plural pronouns and sometimes, group nominal. Although the various senators who utter these locutions are individual entities, the locutions are performed as collective acts, on behalf of the senators as a structured group. Collective locutionary acts are used to perform collective representative acts, collective affective acts and collective perlocutionary acts. Collective representative acts are performed in samples 13, 17 and 18. The 9th speaker asserts a state of affair that the senate as a group has discussed the punishment for electoral offence without discussing pre-electoral activities; the 23rd speaker asserts to the fact that the senate as a group is presuming that there will be no external influence in Nigeria election because the Cold word seems to be over; and the 26th speaker asserts to a state of affair that the senators have missed the essence of the amendment of the Bill due to the fact that too many issues are being discussed at a time.

Collective affective acts are performed in samples 14, 15 and 16: the 12th speaker on behalf of the senators suggests that the Senate as a group should not politicize the appointment of INEC Board members; similarly, the 18th speaker on behalf of the senators suggests that the Senate should collectively re-examine the idea of re-calling delinquent members by the senatorial district; also the 21st speaker on behalf of the senators suggests that the Senate as a group should resolutely analyze the need for two separate National Account Generals. The locutions in these three samples are uttered on behalf of the Senate to perform collective actions; hence they are collective affective acts.

Collective perlocutionary acts are performed in samples 10, 11 and the second parts of the locution in sample 12. The various speakers express the effects (outcome) of the illocutionary acts performed by other speakers on the senate as a group. These are the senate as a group approves the aspects dealing with INEC as a first line charge, agrees to

some of the key points in the bill, and the Senate is happy with the idea of the financial independence advocated for in the bill.

The Senators representing Nigerians as a structured group

19. The values in our homes, educational institutions, and political parties have deteriorated... So foremost we must rebrand ourselves, change our attitude to life, our life styles and that is imperative. (7th Speaker)

20. Really, before we can start amending the constitution, we have to make up our minds if we are really interested in doing the right thing ... we have to be determined. (11th Speaker)

21. Hence, we still have 50 parties that have not achieved much. Maybe we have not more than four parties that are really strong in this country. (13th Speaker)

22. What it means is that we as a people have been impatient with our Constitution. We have not given our Constitutions long enough time for them to mature ... (19th Speaker)

23. In this country, we are in the learning process, but we should be able to take from the democracy of countries that are practicing true democracy with lots of experience in it. (29th Speaker).

24. In conclusion ... we Nigerians must be ready to change our attitude so that the reforms can be meaningful. (39th Speaker)

These locutions, although uttered by individual senators, were performed on behalf of Nigerians. The locutions are, therefore, collective acts used to perform different collective illocutionary acts. Collective representations acts are performed in samples 19, 21 and 22. The speakers assert to various states of affair concerning Nigerians: the 7th speaker describes the state of deterioration existing in Nigerian homes, educational institutions and political parties; the 13th speaker explains the fact that 50 Nigeria political parties are existing in name while in reality there are only four strong parties; and in sample 22, the speaker describes the constant changes in Nigeria constitution as a sign of Nigerians impatience and refusal to allow the constitution to mature.

Senators as representatives of Nigerians also performed collections affective acts in samples 20, 23 and 24, the second part of the locution in sample 19. The speakers identified various actions to be carried out by Nigerians as a group: Nigerians have to be determined to do the right thing; Nigerians have to gain knowledge of true democracy from other countries where democracy is being practiced correctly; and in samples 24 and part of sample 19, the speakers suggested the need for Nigerians to rebrand or amend negative attitude so that the various reforms can be actually effective as recommended.

Findings and Conclusion

The data for this paper show that Nigeria Legislative Discourse, as a sub-set of institutional discourse, is characterized by individual and collective speech acts. Collective speech acts is made up of two sub-sets – the senators as representatives of the senatorial districts forming a structured group distinct from the senators as representatives of Nigerians forming another structured group. Thus, there are three levels of speech acts performance in the Bill debate that constitute the data for this study.

It was discovered that both individual locutionary acts and collective locutionary acts are used to perform illocutionary representative acts, affective acts and perlocutionary acts. Only individual locutionary acts are used to perform effective acts. A senator speaking as an agent of the collective or representative of a structured group,

hardly performs effective acts because as mortals, the senators as agents of the collective cannot decipher the inner feelings of the members of the group being represented. Similarly, collective perlocutionary acts are not often performed by the senators on behalf of the group. Rather, it is performed through the summation of every member of the group by 'joint' collectively interruption like murmurings, laughing or rowdy reactions.

Works Cited

- Austin, J.L. *How to do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Cutting, Joan. *Pragmatics and Discourse: A Resource Book for Student*. 2nded. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Crystal, David. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 5thed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- Grundy, Peter. *Doing Pragmatics*. London: Arnold Publishers, 2000.
- Leech, Geoffrey. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman, 1983.
- Levinson, Stephen C. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: C.U.P., 1983.
- Meijer, Anthony. *Collective Speech Acts: Intentional Acts and Institutional Facts*. Ed. Savas L. Tsphatzids. Springer Online. 12th August, 2012.
- Mey, Jacob L. *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil, 2001.
- Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969
- and Daniel Vandervekan. 'Speech Acts and Illocutionary Logic'. 18 November, 2012. http://www.uqtr.cal~vanderk/05_searl_vandervekan.pdf.
- Verscheuren, J. *Understanding Pragmatics*. London: Arnold, 1998.
- Yule, George. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.