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SPEECH ACT THEORY AND COMMUNICATION: A UNIVEN STUDY

by

PHYLLIS KORYOO KABURISE

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Directors of Studies: Professor Rosemary A. Gray

Mrs Petro Marx

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DEDICATION

for

Sonny, Amanda and Portia

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A hypothesis will remain just that, a mere hypothesis, without structured guidance and supervision.

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SPEECH ACT THEORY AND COMMUNICATION: A UNIVEN STUDY

ABSTRACT

This thesis, **SPEECH ACT THEORY AND COMMUNICATION: A UNIVEN STUDY**, is an investigation into the communicative competence of a group of second language speakers. The study employs Speech Act Theory, a discourse evaluation method within the cross-cultural paradigm, to ascertain the structural (form) and the pragmatic (function) statuses of selected utterances of entry-level students in the University of Venda for Science and Technology (Univen).[1] Speech Act Theory is a concept premised on the notion that an utterance has a definite function, meaning or purpose, for example, to suggest, to advise, to complain; and that these functions are expressible in established structural codes. Implicit in this notion is the assertion that there is a correlation between the 'form' and the 'function' of utterances.

The corollary to this is that, where there is no correlation, miscommunication may result. The contention of this study is that such a correlation may not always exist in the utterances of second language users of English because of the idiosyncratic nature of such utterances, derived from syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors. The hypothesis continues to assert that despite the individualistic nature of these utterances, meaning can be created or miscommunication does not always result because hearers are able to accurately interpret the intention of the speakers, by exploiting notions such as implicature,[2] conversation principles, context and prosodic features.

[1] Statutorily known as the University of Venda in terms of the Venda (Private) Act 89 of 1996.
[2] Implicature is explained in Chapter Three.

This research is an attempt to identify the processes that speakers undergo to articulate their intentions and the verbal and non-verbal information that hearers require to interpret such intentions or messages. The quality of the processes of formulating intentions and interpreting them is directly dependent on the communicative ability of the interlocutors. Communicative ability is a very general term, inclusive of various abilities of the interlocutors amongst which are grammatical and pragmatic competences. Meaning is dynamic, flexible and dependent on negotiation among the interlocutors. This flexibility of meaning is even more pronounced when idiosyncratic utterances, such as those of second-language speakers, are examined.

To ascertain how meaning is created from such individualistic utterances, an analysis of selected utterances was conducted along the principles of Speech Act Theory. The results of the analysis supported the hypothesis that, although different categories of blemishes are visible in these utterances, such characteristics do not always affect the interpretation process, indicating that a variety of non-linguistic clues is also required for communication.

Conclusions reached include the fact that, even though both grammatical and pragmatic considerations are vital for the quality of the utterances, perhaps, Speech Act Theory does not make sufficient provision for blemished but meaning-bearing utterances, like those usually produced by second language users and the kind selected for this investigation. This observation also impinges on the validity of Speech Act Theory as the sole judge of communicative competence of second-language users.

Key terms: Speech Act Theory, Univen, communicative competence, pragmatics, language, text, context, meaning, utterances and conversation.

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