

**SPEECH ACT THEORY AND COMMUNICATION:  
A UNIVEN STUDY**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

D.Litt

(English)

in the

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pretoria

October 2004

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**DEDICATION**

**for**

**Sonny, Amanda and Portia**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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

I acknowledge with extreme gratitude the professional supervision and emotional support from Professor Rosemary Gray and Mrs Petro Marx. Their attention to every detail, technical and academic, provided the necessary challenge for this work.

All my colleagues in the English Department, University of Venda have contributed in diverse ways to the completion of this research report. From their constant nagging to polite reminders, I drew a lot of inspiration. I would, however, like to thank in particular, Ms S. Ngubane, Mr V. Bvuma, Mr R. Malinda, Mr M. Shai, Dr N. Phaswana, Dr J Zesaguli and Prof L. Miti.

# **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).<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> conversation principles, context and prosodic features.

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<sup>1</sup> Statutorily known as the University of Venda in terms of the Venda (Private) Act 89 of 1996.

<sup>2</sup> 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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# CHAPTER ONE

## FORM AND FUNCTION OF UTTERANCES

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The notion that language is used to create meaning is the central premise of this study. Creating linguistic meaning or achieving communication between language participants is a dynamic process involving units, such as the form, context and function of the utterance. Dell Hymes (1967, 1972b) coined the phrase 'communicative competence' to refer to the ability of interlocutors to convey and interpret messages, and to negotiate meaning interpersonally within a given context. James Stalker (1989: 182) defines communicative competence as

that part of our language knowledge which enables us to choose the communicative system we wish to use, and, when that selected system is language, to connect the goals and contexts of the situation with the structures which we have available in our linguistic repertoire through functional choices at the pragmatic level.

John Gumperz (1982: 209) also identifies communicative competence

in interactional terms as 'the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation,' and thus involves both grammar and contextualization.

These two quotations underpin the point of discussion in this thesis, namely, that communication competence is the knowledge of both the structural and functional elements of a language. This study is an investigation into the communicative competence (Gumperz 1982; Stalker, 1989) of a particular group of English second language speakers, the Tshivendas. The argument of this research is that communicative competence involves the manipulation of the form, function and context of language. Hence the determination of Tshivenda English speakers' competence will rest upon an analysis of not only the structural form but also the function and context of their utterances. Such an approach is in accordance with functionalists' approach to language, that a syntactic analysis of an utterance's form will only determine interlocutors' mental competence (Noam Chomsky, 1965), while an analysis which examines, in addition, the function and context of the utterance will present a more comprehensive picture of interlocutors' competence.

An analysis to determine the communicative competence of individuals can be done using a variety of approaches. A Speech Act/pragmatic approach, which is the approach to be followed in this study, focuses on the relationship between the linguistic form, the communicative functions which these forms are capable of

serving, and the contexts or settings in which these linguistic forms can have those communicative functions (Charles Fillmore, 1981; Jenny Thomas, 1995).

Utterance analysis can be undertaken for any variety of purposes, to various degrees of ‘delicacy’<sup>1</sup> (Berry, 1975: 177-196; Morley, 1985: 24) using a range of methods. For instance, sociolinguists usually use conversational analysis within an ethnographical paradigm to pinpoint how linguistic forms of language functions might change according to gender, age or the roles of speaker and hearer, while psycholinguists, using a pure grammatical analysis of the surface and deep structure of discourse, may look at the sequence of acquisition of communicative competence with its corresponding physical manifestations. In accordance with Fillmore (1981), this report employs Speech Act Theory, as an utterance analysis tool, to establish the connection between grammatical forms and language functions, in specific contexts.

The sections that follow introduce, for initial operational purposes, the notion of communicative competence and its components, namely, communication, language, context and meaning (function). The rationale for isolating these units/components of analysis rests on the fact that, in order to describe and analyse communicative competence, it is necessary to deal with discrete units of some kind, with communicative activities which have recognisable boundaries (Muriel Saville-Troike, 1982: 20). The three units suggested by Hymes (1972a)

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Delicacy’, in this context, refers to analysing data according to the fineness of the distinctions in meaning which they represent.

are: *event* (language and text), *situation* (context), and *act* (meaning). This same analytical format is exploited by this thesis. In other words, communicative competence centres on the premise that communication takes place when an individual uses a certain type of language, in specific contexts, to achieve certain meaning. The remainder of this chapter provides introductory comments on communicative competence and its unit of analysis; reasons for the formulation of the hypothesis; the objective; the practical procedures for collecting and analysing the data; and concludes by outlining what is discussed in each of the remaining five chapters.

## **1.1.2 UNITS OF ANALYSIS**

### **1.1.2.1 COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language codes, but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately, in any given situation. In other words, it comprises structural, social, cultural as well as functional knowledge that is required in verbal interactions. Language in this paradigm is not viewed as the property of an individual, but as one of the many shared codes or symbolic systems that members of a society use for their daily survival. This concept of communicative competence is consonant with a semiotic approach to language, which holds that language consists of arbitrary symbols whose semantic values have been agreed upon by its users. Known as the 'functional

approach' to language, communicative competence is a reaction to the definition of language competence as more of a mental attribute (Chomsky, 1957, 1965, 1980).

#### **1.1.2.2 COMMUNICATION**

That the main objective of any language is to communicate the wishes of its users, is an obvious fact which needs hardly any elaboration. The communication process involves a complex verbal behaviour where the participants have to accommodate a variety of interconnected factors before meaning can be generated. The principal meaning-generating tool of humans is their ability to signal their linguistic system or language. This linguistic system can be exploited for communication if the speakers succeed in making hearers aware of something (thoughts, opinions, facts, emotions and so on) which they were not aware of previously. Successful communication depends not only on the receivers' reception of the message and their appreciation of the fact that it is intended for them, but also upon hearers' recognising the senders' communicative intent and making an appropriate behavioural or linguistic response to it. However, for one to assume that if one can speak, then one can communicate, is a fallacy. In this thesis, communication is viewed as behaviour dependent on multiple variables, such as the nature of the language used, the context of the utterance, as well as the function intended by the producer. Consideration of these variables is in addition to observance of general

conversation maxims which govern natural language interactions (Paul Grice, 1975).

### **1.1.2.3 LANGUAGE**

There is no shortage of attempts to articulate the unique qualities of language. (See, for example, Jakobson [1956], Noam Chomsky [1972 and 1975] and John Lyons [1977]). However, one is inclined to concur with H. Robins (1979: 9-4) who notes that language definitions ‘tend to be trivial and uninformative, unless they presuppose...some general theory of language and of linguistic analysis’. In other words, to attempt a perspective-free or bias-neutral expose of language is of limited usefulness and of doubtful relevance to most analyses, unless underpinned by some theories. This comment is well illustrated in a clinically objective semantic-syntactic explanation or meaning of the word ‘language’. Exploiting the usual semantic-syntactic procedures of establishing meaning: componential analysis, identifying different relationships among lexical items, derivational backtracking, application in contexts, and so on, all leave one with a distinct feeling of dissatisfaction and bewilderment, according to Robins (1979: 9-14).

#### **1.1.2.3.1 Socio-pragmatic versus structural-mentalist notions of language**

The notion of ‘language’ adopted in the domain of discourse, and by this study, falls into two main paradigms: socio-pragmatic versus structural-mentalist. These classifications provide divergent claims about language; about the procedures for



its acquisition and use; about the system for its study, as well as about the criteria for demonstrating competence. These two divergent approaches to language underpin the differences between communicative competence and its stress on social use of language as articulated by Hymes (1967), and the Chomskyan concept (1965) with its high regard for language as a mental ability. Language within the mentalistic domain is observable from interlocutors' mastery of the structural codes of the grammar of the language and competence is evaluated by the abstract handling of these codes. Little latitude is made for idiosyncratic cultural-oriented utterances or speech events with a strong bias for socio-cultural considerations. On the other hand, a socio-cultural view of language meaning starts from a premise that the ultimate criteria for competence is the ability to communicate in the various social situations, therefore language is a dynamic functional attribute of the users not a passive, abstract ability.

To recap the above discussion, formalists tend to regard language primarily as a mental phenomenon as opposed to language being a societal attribute of the functionalists approach. Formalists explain language properties as a mental inheritance of human beings as against the functional view that a language's features is derived from its use in the society which develop from the communities communicative needs and abilities. Above all structural-formal notion sees language as an autonomous system rather than being functionalist and tied to social considerations.

For the purpose of this study, the functional/social definition of language is adopted. More detailed explanation of what constitutes a 'language' and how competence in it is demonstrated form part of the discussion in Chapters Two and Three.

#### **1.1.2.4 CONTEXT**

The next component in meaning creation, that is context, serves as the 'binding agent' or the channel through which the language of an utterance creates the intention (function) of the utterance. The study of the context of an utterance is based on the notion that utterances perform different functions or meaning because of their background and circumstance. Austin (1962: 100) notes that words

are to some extent to be "explained" by the context in which they are designed to be or actually have been spoken in a linguistic interchange.

The context of an utterance has to be factored into communication activities as theorists recognise that speaker intent, sentence meaning and hearer interpretation are not always the same. Often we utter sentences that mean more than or are even sometimes apparently differently from what we actually say, as in innuendoes or sarcastic and ironical comments. Yet listeners understand the additional or altered meaning and communication is achieved. Communication does take place in such situations because meaning is not created solely by

linguistic codes, but also by the commonality of the context of the interlocutors. (An elaboration of 'context' appears in Chapters Two and Three).

#### **1.1.2.5 FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE**

In the simplest sense, the word 'function' may be synonymous with the word 'use' or 'meaning'. People perform activities with their language: that is, they expect to achieve an objective in speaking, writing, listening and reading. Competence in language is not simply the mastery of forms of language but the mastery of forms in order to accomplish the communicative functions of language, such as, to apologise, to greet, to disagree, to accuse, to warn and so on. Mastery of structural regularities of language remains a very passive asset if speakers do not exploit these forms for the purpose of transmitting and receiving thoughts, ideas and feelings between speaker and hearer or writer and reader. While forms are the manifestations of language, functions are the realisation of those forms. Douglas Brown (1987: 202) elucidates:

Communication may be regarded as a combination of 'acts' with a purpose and intent. Communication is not merely an event, something that happens: it is functional, purposive and designed to bring about some effect - some change, however subtle or unobservable - on the environment of hearers and speakers.

This research uses the term 'functions of language' in accordance with the theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), where functions are equated with

the intention and meaning of a speaker. (Language functions are discussed in Chapter Three).

## 1.2 FORMULATION OF THE HYPOTHESIS

Corder's seminal work on interlanguage (1967) has generated considerable investigation into the developmental stages in language competence by non-first language speakers. The status of the interlanguage of second language users, in terms of its physical structure, pragmatic data, meaning and social acceptability has metamorphosed since the concept was advanced into language studies. But whatever the status accorded this mid-stage language, most language acquisition theorists, such as Corder (1967), Heidi Dulay, Marina Burt and Stephen Krashen (1982); Brown (1987) and Selinker (1992), agree that such a language displays distinct qualities, reflective, *inter alia*, of the learners' unique linguistic background.

The function of language, be it the language of a native speaker or a second language user is, as stated earlier, to transmit speakers' wishes and intentions. Selecting a piece of language is governed by three main considerations: the function that the utterance is supposed to perform; the physical structure of the utterance (morphemes and words); and the situation in which the utterance is to be utilised. That is to say, sentences are uttered for specific purposes, for example, to command, to request information, to question and to promise. And

these verbal activities are recognised as such by the interlocutors, because of regulated procedures: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. These regulations do not detract from a language's ability to be dynamic, productive, creative and open-ended. Speakers wanting to articulate any linguistic function may be as creative as they want. For example, one could construct an infinitely long list of ways of directly and indirectly requesting a hearer to shut the door:

- I want you to close the door.
- Can you close the door?
- Are you able by any chance to close the door?
- Would you close the door?
- Won't you close the door?
- Would you mind closing the door?
- You ought to close the door.
- Did you forget the door?
- How about a little less breeze?
- Now Johnny, what do big people do when they come in?
- Do us a favour with the door, love.

Levinson (1983: 264-265)

New situations arise, new objects have to be described so language users manipulate their linguistic resources to produce new expressions and sentences. Creativity is a salient feature of human language, but, conventions and regulations should also be known and applied by the users of a language if a similar meaning is to be created by all interlocutors in a verbal activity. So,

however innovative or idiosyncratic a user may want to be, the basic objectives of communication, that is, transmitting the intention of the speaker, must not be compromised. Communication does not occur unless the same codes and signs are understood similarly by the users of a language, whether they are first or second language users. To achieve this degree of uniformity, certain formulaic rituals are carried out in the construction of the utterances. For example, to assert a fact or opinion one may use constructions which are declarative, negative or positive with a finite verb, while to request information or action, speakers may begin their utterances with an interrogative or invert the auxiliary with the subject. Users of the language usually adhere to these conventions to achieve a match between the form of their utterances and the function they hope to achieve. Where language users lack proficiency in a target language (such as is the case with the sample group of Tshivenda mother-tongue speakers in this study) some language conventions pose problems for such non-native users. These problems, in turn, may become barriers to communication.

The Tshivendas originate from Venda, an area situated in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Tshivenda is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa. The people are known as Vhavenda (singular: Muvenda) and their language as Tshivenda or Luvenda. The term 'Tshivenda' is also used to refer to their culture. Historical accounts state that the Vhavenda immigrated into the area that later became known as Vendaland from Zimbabwe (Van Warmelo, 1932; Miti, 2004).

For this study, the term 'Tshivenda' will be used for both the language and the people.

The region has a population of post-high school graduates whose English utterances are locale specific. Samples of these utterances are:

1. Stu: Please I have come for you for some assistance  
Lect: Oh?  
Stu: Yes, I need some pamphlets on Wuthering Heights
2. Lect: Is our appointment still on for Monday?  
Stu: I am seeing you.
3. Stu: What did she want? What happened when the lecturer called you.  
Stu: The lecturer said I was late but I refused/denied.
4. Lect: Would your group be able to help him (a newcomer to the class) with the work?  
Stu: I cannot do nothing for him.
5. Stu: He treats him like his own bloody child.

These non-sequential utterances merit some examination in terms of the relation between form and function of utterances, as is discussed in Speech Act Theory, (Austin, 1962). An analysis of samples 1-5 indicates that blemishes, both syntactic and semantic, may impact on the functions intended by the speakers of these utterances. In example 1, the phrase 'come for you' in the student's

utterance would normally not be the chosen expression for a speaker seeking a favour, hence the juxtaposition of the two propositions, plus the courtesy subjunct 'please' may confuse a hearer, as is testified by the lecturer's response. The student's initial statement exhibits the structural features of a 'threat'. However, the shared experience and background information surrounding the interaction negates this interpretation, permitting the lecturer's uncharacteristic response to what may be seen as a 'threat'. It is obvious that an insertion of 'to' to replace the incorrect preposition 'for' would affect the structural status of the utterance and the interpretation by the hearer. Utterance 2 has the potential for multiple interpretation. Whether the student was confirming the appointment for a later date or for the immediate present, is not clear. In this instance, the inaccurate classification and semantic inappropriateness of the verb 'to see' have resulted in the blemished utterance. The function of this utterance, if it has a future reference, would be a promise, whereas if the student intends to see the lecturer immediately after the completion of the interaction then the statement is a mere assertion. The correct interpretation would only be possible if the lecturer seeks clarification with another question like: 'When?'

The semantic flaw in sample 3 arises because of the student's belief that the verbs 'to deny' and 'to refuse' are synonymous. Although these two words do share some semantic properties (for example, from a componential analysis of meaning) their syntactic-distribution patterns indicate otherwise. In addition, the student has also ignored the transitive nature of the verb 'to refuse', hence



omitting the direct object, an indication that the verb poses some problem for the student. The verb 'to refute' would have captured the student's intention more appropriately. The one advantage with this utterance, despite these blemishes, is that the function (a representative asserting a negative state) has not been compromised, hence the opportunities for misinterpretation are minimal. In sample 4, the student's intention was that the group 'could not' assist as it already had the maximum number of members and not that they were 'unwilling' to do so. Part of the deviancy in this sample is due to the inclusion of two negative phrases next to each other. Although this type of sentence construction is colloquial, quite acceptable and unambiguous in certain linguistic circles, the context of its utterance does not permit such a clear-cut interpretation. Whether it was an emphatic negative assertion or a positive one is not clear without more interaction. Sample 5 was contributed by a student who wanted to describe the extremely humane treatment of Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Despite demonstrating some awareness of English morphological processes (which has given us adjectives, such as 'skinny', 'dirty', 'touchy') the writer is unaware that the adjective from the noun 'blood' does not retain the same non-connotative meaning, hence its inappropriateness in this context. Without the benefit of more exchange, the interpretations of this statement may vary: one may have a student offering a positive evaluation or praise of a character in a literary work or a student exasperated and critical of a character: two totally different speech acts; or worse still, seeing this as a criticism of the lecturer.

Some of these utterances, therefore, are deviant with regard to their internal arrangements (their structure) as well as their inability to convey the speaker's intention accurately (their pragmatic domain), or with regard to both aspects. It is features such as these that make a closer study of utterances by English second language Tshivenda learners both interesting and urgent.

### **1.2.1 HYPOTHESIS**

In this thesis, the proposition is that the correlation of form and function implicit in the pragmatic approach of the Speech Act Theory may not always occur in the utterances of non-native speakers of English (for example, in the utterances of Tshivenda speakers of English) because of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic blemishes but that these blemishes may not always result in a violation of the intended meaning and function of the utterance.

### **1.3 OBJECTIVE**

The aim is to investigate the communicative competence of selected Tshivenda speakers, at tertiary level, by describing the form and function of a sample of their English utterances.

## **1.4 THEORETICAL STRATEGIES**

In linguistics there are, as mentioned earlier, many approaches to the description of discourse, these being united by the shared conviction that language is more than a sentence level phenomenon. Hence it is inaccurate for a language description to limit its scope to the properties of individual sentences. Analysis of discourse can be undertaken in various paradigms - interactional, ethnographic, pragmatic, and so on. This study, as noted earlier, combines two very similar approaches, namely, a Speech Act analysis within a pragmatic framework.

### **1.4.1 SPEECH ACT ANALYSES AND PRAGMATICS**

A Speech Act analysis is based on the premise that utterances are made for specific functions and that a certain structural arrangement of constituents is necessary to articulate these functions. Just what constitutes pragmatics is an open question, but there seems to be some agreement that pragmatics is a system of rules which defines the relationship of meaning to the context in which it occurs, that is, it matches functions with particular language choices in a particular context. A pragmatic investigation is a combination of a syntactic/semantic examination and the study of meaning in relation to speech situations. Pragmatic analysis deals with utterance meaning rather than sentence

meaning. A practical example of the differences in sentence and utterance meaning will serve to make the point.

A mother who received no reaction from her TV-addicted children when she came home loaded with groceries could say:

6. Oh don't mind me. Don't go to any bother on my account. I am just the person who slaves in this house!

And the average child would accurately interpret that utterance as a chastisement and not an invitation to continue sitting in front of the TV! Hence the combined meaning of the physical lexical constituents does not equal the utterance meaning. Other types of discourse analysis would not be able to capture this specialised use of language, except a functional-biased one, that is, a pragmatic one.

Brown and Yule (1983: 1) note that

The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purpose or function which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs.

This suggests that an analysis of language output cannot be independent of its purpose and context. Central to this research, therefore, is an approach to

language that acknowledges the instrumentality as well as the autonomy of any language system or analysis (Halliday, 1978: 36). A pragmatic description of language relies on exploring the form and the function of an utterance within a given situation. The importance of context in any language setting can be demonstrated by using the same example as given above. In another situation these same words of the mother could have the function of an invitation to a hesitant visitor.

Although an utterance's formal or structural regularities may also be examined in such an exercise, a functional interpretation alerts an analyst to the way patterns of talk are put to use in certain purposes, in particular contexts. Pragmatics explains the communicative competence of the users of the language in terms of how they manoeuvre their linguistic competence and their linguistic needs in society.

#### **1.4.2 ISSUES TO BE INVESTIGATED**

The main issue to be investigated is:

- The status of Speech Act Theory and pragmatics in establishing communicative competence of second language users of English, such as the Tshivendas.

Questions to be asked include:

- What are the concepts of: semiotics, language, communication, and discourse analysis?
- How does a hearer decipher the intention or meaning of an utterance? In other words, what factors influence a hearer's interpretation of an utterance or the creation of meaning?
- What does linguistic well-formedness entail? Or, what is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one?
- Can Speech Act Theory be used as an analytical tool for non-standard, but meaningful utterances?

### **1.4.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

An empirical study was carried out to determine the English communicative competence of Tshivenda speakers by using the functional approach of Speech Act Theory to describe the form and function of these speakers' selected utterances. The process involved the collecting of sample utterances of directives and representatives from post-matriculation<sup>2</sup> learners; these sample utterances were then given to a control group (hearers) to see whether they could interpret the intentions of the speakers. The data obtained was then interpreted in accordance with Speech Act principles. A detailed account of the methodology,

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<sup>2</sup> Matriculation level in the South African education system is the 12<sup>th</sup> year of formal schooling and is also the entry level qualification for tertiary education.

including the procedure for the selection of samples and respondents; the presentation of the results; the analysing framework and the interpretation of the results form the content of Chapter Four.

## **1.5 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

Chapter One articulates the central premise of the study, namely, that language is used to create meaning, that is, how conversation participants create meaning linguistically. The premise was researched through an investigation into the English communicative competence of the Tshivenda, by describing the form and function of their utterances. Included in this Chapter are brief operational comments on the recommended units for an investigation into language users' communicative competence; the rationale for and the articulation of the hypothesis; a description of the data collection procedure and the format for the rest of the thesis.

Chapters Two and Three provide a discussion of the theoretical support for the research. Chapter Two is organised around sub-topics or units suggested for the evaluation of communicative competence, namely, event (language and text), situation (context) and act (meaning). Once these components of communicative competence have been established, the thesis continues, in Chapter Three, to give an account of the Speech Act Theory and its role in classifying the functions of language. In Chapter Three the discussion also includes the origins of the theory, the classification and the components of direct and indirect speech acts

and the principles which enable meaningful conversation to take place. Rival theories on communicative competence, classification of speech acts and the creation of meaning are all accommodated in these two chapters.

Chapter Four reports on the application of the Speech Act theory in evaluating the communicative competence of selected Tshivenda speakers of English. In the introductory sections, details of the methodology such as cross-cultural discourse analysis, the selection of samples, the background of the respondents, the compilation of the questionnaire and the interpretation criteria are provided. The chapter continues by interpreting, in accordance with Speech Act principles, the results obtained in the analysis. The chapter concludes with an identification of the factors which had influenced the interlocutors in performing their roles in the communication process.

Chapter Five concludes the study by using the results to discuss the research questions articulated in Chapter One. The discussion, in addition to commenting on the ability of the Speech Act Theory to evaluate the communicative competence of a group of English second language users, like the Tshivendas, also examines the conclusions that can be drawn about the quality of the respondents and the samples. The chapter concludes with an overview of the results in relation to the hypothesis.



Chapter Six, the final chapter, offers some recommendations deemed appropriate from the results obtained. The suggestions are geared towards the Speech Act Theory in general and also the type of empirical study undertaken in this research. A section is also devoted to possible areas of further research, all aimed at obtaining a better understanding of meaning creation.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

# **CREATION OF MEANING AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This thesis, as stated in Chapter One, is an examination of the creation of meaning as exemplified by selected utterances of a group of second language speakers of English, the Tshivendas. The quality of any linguistic meaning is dependent on the level of interlocutors' communicative competence, hence, the rationale for discussing communicative competence and its related topics in this chapter.

The concept of 'meaning' or 'to mean' can be understood in a variety of ways, even when narrowed to the area of language studies. Lyons (1977: 1-4) has identified at least ten different ways that the words 'to mean' and 'meaning' can be used. Lyons (1977: 2) has gone on to note that although these different meanings are distinguishable they are not unrelated but just how they are related is difficult and controversial. The next section examines the notion of linguistic

meaning since this research focuses on the creation of meaning during verbal interaction.

## **2.2. MEANING**

There is an intrinsic connection between ‘meaning’ and ‘communication’, for before a series of words can be pronounced as language or communication they must embody meaning, for both the sender and the receiver. ‘It is meaning which must be present for communication to occur’, states Lamont Johnson <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/FARBER/johnson.html>>: 14 March, 2002).

The meaning of an utterance enables speakers to use language to articulate their intentions such as a request, a statement of fact, an expression of praise, an apology and so on, and enables the hearer to interpret utterances as such. An utterance therefore takes on meaning, first, when the speaker uses it to express a thought; and second, in the receptive act when hearers interpret the utterance and assign meaning to it from their own knowledge and experience. Between the speaker and the hearer, therefore, there is the negotiation of the meaning of an utterance within a communication event.

Communication is ‘meaningful language’ and an evaluation of people’s communicative competence is, in fact, an examination of their meaning-creating potential. A common definition of ‘linguistic meaning’, by both the writer and the reader will, naturally, facilitate such an examination. The discussion in this

section will, therefore, continue with a review of what ‘meaning’ is in linguistics and how it is created.

Meaning seems the most obvious feature of language and yet the most complex to study because of its subjective nature. It is obvious because it is what we use language for: to communicate with one another, to convey ‘what we mean’ effectively. But the steps in understanding the meaning of something said to us are so nebulous and so difficult to categorise that we have little conscious feel for the principles and knowledge which underlie our meaning-creating ability.

The entry point for my discussions of ‘meaning’ is the ‘word’ level. Words have meaning. This seems a simple enough or straightforward assertion and is frequently stated. However, words are not ‘objects’ that have properties of their own in the same way that concrete objects do:

Words are relational entities. Which is to say, that words are composed of parts that are not integrated by any form or structure intrinsic to the word itself. The symbols (marks/sounds) which taken together constitute a word, make the word real insofar as it exists outside the mind. All that air or paper can carry is the symbolic representation of the actual form which is understood within the mind and not the form itself (Lamont Johnson <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/FARBER/johnson.html>> : 14 March, 2002).

The meaning of a word is simply projected onto it by the custodians of the language, in their roles as speakers and hearers, writers and readers:

We cannot assume that there is any God-given meaningful connection between a word in a language and an object in the world. It cannot be the case that we know the meaning of the word *chair*, for example, because this label has some natural 'God-given' connection to the object you are sitting on .... Instead a more reasonable approach would lead us to see the word *chair* as a term which is arbitrary (that is, has no natural connection to the object), but which is conventionally used by English speakers when they wish to refer to that type of object that we sit on (Yule, 1985: 91)

This quotation from Yule (1985), a rephrasing of Plato's debate on 'the real' and 'the really real' is in line with the notion that the meaning of a word is only joined to the word in the mind of the users. Martin (1994: 20) quotes first Aristotle (*De Interpretatione* 16) as saying, 'Spoken words are the symbols of mental experiences' and then Locke (1689, bk. 2, chapter: 3) as noting that 'Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideals in the mind of him who uses them'. Meaningful communication occurs between participants, because there is, at least, some inter-subjective agreement as to what a particular word means, in a particular context.

If one adopts a broad notion of meaning, it follows that words or even sentences, considered as abstract entities do not have meaning. It is communicative acts that have meaning because meaning only becomes attached to words or sentences through the actions of a speaker or hearer.

(Johnson <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/FARBER/johnson.html>>: 14 March, 2002).

## 2.2.1 LINGUISTIC MEANING

It is customary in linguistic philosophy to recognise three areas within language studies or semiotics. Montague (1968: 68) provides a useful articulation of these divisions as

syntax, semantics and pragmatics - that may be characterised roughly as follows. Syntax is concerned solely with the relations between linguistic expressions; semantics with relations between expressions and the objects to which they refer; and pragmatics with the relations among expressions, the objects to which they refer and the users or contexts of the use of the expressions.

A discussion of meaning, therefore, within a linguistic context, usually examines meaning as communicated by the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic values of an utterance. This three-fold classification goes back ultimately to Peirce (1931), but was first clearly drawn and made more familiar by Morris (1938: 6). There are slight terminological differences in the way the distinctions are drawn among authors. Carnap (1944: 9) also distinguishes the three branches by outlining what part of an analysis is relevant to each branch:

If in an investigation, explicit reference is made to the speaker, or to put it in more general terms, to the user of the language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics....If we abstract from the user of the language and analyze [*sic*] only the expressions and their

designata, we are in the field of semantics. And if, finally, we abstract from the designata also and analyze [*sic*] only the relation between the expressions, we are in (logical) syntax.

Stalnaker (1972: 383) formulates the connection between syntax and semantics more simply but also extends the definition of pragmatics:

Syntax studies sentences, semantics studies propositions. Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed.

While these different authors have all contributed to streamlining the distinctions among the different branches of language study, Morris's (1946: 218-19) revised version 'interpretable within a behaviorally oriented semiotics' is the definition which has general acceptance:

Pragmatics is that portion of semiotics which deals with the origin, uses, and effects of signs within the behavior in which they occur; semantics deals with the signification of signs in all modes of signifying; syntactics deals with combination of signs without regard for their specific signification or their relation to the behavior in which they occur.

Fillmore (1981:143) is only in partial agreement with these accepted divisions. He believes that although there are some justifications for classifying linguistic meaning under three distinct categories, whether this classification is desirable and should be rigidly applied in linguistic analysis is debatable.

I assume three ways of looking at linguistic facts, whether the three are viewable as independent from each other or not, depends on whether we are thinking of classes of facts or explanation. In the broadest sense, I believe that syntactic, semantic and pragmatic FACTS can be distinguished from each other but I also believe that some syntactic facts require semantic and pragmatic explanations and that some semantic facts require pragmatic explanations. Put differently, interpreters sometimes use semantic and pragmatic information in making judgements about the syntactic structure of a sentence, and they sometimes use pragmatic facts in making semantic judgements.

This quotation is also an indication that the distinction between the different aspects of linguistic meaning is not as definite as one would like it to be. What seems not to be a problem is the syntactic meaning of utterances. However, distinguishing between semantic and pragmatic meaning is an ongoing debate. Bach (1997: 3) also stresses the difficulty in assigning facts exclusively to the domain of either semantics or pragmatics:

The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is easier to apply than to explain. Explaining it is complicated by the fact that many conflicting formulations have been proposed over the past sixty years. This might suggest that there is no one way of drawing the distinction and that how to draw it is merely a terminological question, a matter of arbitrary stipulation....Although it is generally clear what is at issue when people apply the distinction to specific linguistic phenomena, what is less clear, in some cases anyway, is whether a given phenomena is semantic or pragmatic, or both.

Although language theorists have continued to operate within the three-fold paradigm proposed by Morris (1946), there have been objectors, not only to the



type of meaning apportioned to each section but also to the whole philosophical basis of the notion. For example, Petrofi (1976: 111) notes:

Concerning the relation of “semantics” and “pragmatics” no such universal or general conception concerning the theory of language can be imagined where these two aspects can be handled separately. In other words the pragmatic aspect cannot be left out of consideration when setting up a theory of language, however it is impossible to handle it independently of the semantic aspect.

Mey (1993: 43) also questions the sharp demarcations particularly between semantic and pragmatic meanings. In his article “The Pragmatization of Semantics” (1999), Peregrin also criticises the sharp three-fold Carnapian distinctions from what he terms ‘internal’ and ‘external’ challenges. By internal he means developments within linguistics which extends Carnapian semantics far beyond its original boundaries to swallow up much of what originally counted as pragmatics. In his notions of external challenges, he questions Carnap’s (1944) whole concept of language as a system of communication. Some of Peregrin’s (1999) concerns had been raised earlier by Searle (1979b) when he challenges the notion that the literal meaning (semantic meaning) of an utterance can be construed as the meaning it has independent of any context whatsoever (when it has ‘zero’ context or ‘null’ context). Searle argues that for a large class of sentences there is no such thing as the zero or null context for the interpretation of sentences, for interlocutors understand an utterance only against a set of contexts in which the utterance could be appropriately uttered. Since one of

Morris's (1946) fundamental differences between semantics and pragmatics is the fact that pragmatics deals with language 'use' (which presupposes a role for context), such concerns must be unequivocally dealt with if the whole notion of a three-fold division is not to break down. Peregrin (1999) believes this has not been done, resulting in an absence of a sharp division between two aspects of linguistic meaning: semantic and pragmatic. In attempting to solve this problem recent developments in language are exploring ways in which semantics 'interfaces' with pragmatic knowledge in concrete contexts to determine utterance meaning. In the introduction to the book, *Semantics/Pragmatics Interface*, Turner (1999: 19) notes that:

[The aim of the volume is] to take some steps to reduce the heat of some of these discussions and to begin to increase the light that might profitably be shed on some of the problems of interdigitating content and context.

Although discussions on how these three branches synchronise to create meaning may well be ongoing, one cannot refute the fact that competence in a language is not a single attribute. Deviance in an utterance is also possible at different levels or branches, as is illustrated by the following sentences:

7. \*Each one of the students possess a textbook.
8. ? We really cannot afford to go to the bank.
9. 'You're a bloody jackass, Mr MP', shouted the MP for Limpopo Province.

Sentence 7 is unacceptable at the structural level because of the non-observance of the grammatical rule of concord; sentence 8 is semantically unacceptable because of the lexical ambiguity arising from the word 'bank'; while sentence 9 is pragmatically offensive as such language is frowned upon during formal proceedings (though perhaps, acceptable, between intimate friends, in a particular context). How each of these deviancies was identified and classified is the source of the debate. Although Kachru (1979 and 1982) and his cohorts of the school of New Englishes might take exception to the classification of sentence 7 as deviant, general consensus would have it otherwise. As to whether different criteria were used or needed to be used to evaluate sentences 8 and 9 underpins the controversy surrounding the distinction between semantic and pragmatic meanings. Hopper and Traugott (1993: 68-69) make a similar point:

There is a vast literature on semantics and pragmatics but as yet very little consensus on exactly where the boundaries between the two areas lie, or even whether there are indeed boundaries. Nevertheless there is a pre-theoretical sense in which it is clear that a distinction needs to be made between the sentence (semantic) meaning of *Can you pass the salt?* (= 'Are you able/willing to pass the salt?'), the expected response to which would be *Yes or No*, and the utterance (pragmatic) meaning (= 'Please pass the salt'), the expected response to which is the non-linguistic action of passing the salt.

The fact that linguistic theory accepts that linguistic competence is not monotype and utterance status is describable using different norms, is a clear indication of

a multifaceted approach to meaning, communication and language. The implication of this is the existence of three distinct linguistic branches all aimed at describing the nature of language. Although, as mentioned earlier, there are calls for linguistic theory to provide an integrated account, particularly for a semantic and pragmatic interface, one must admit that such segmentation of the branches of language predisposes it more readily to theoretical discussion. Analysts can, granted with some effort, identify and interrogate the boundaries (however nebulous) of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic meaning. That is only possible if one operates on the controversial assertions that observations that belong to syntax more or less without question, are observations about the structural organisation of sentences and the distribution properties of lexical items within grammatically defined contexts; semantics, by contrast, is concerned with linguistic forms and their value; while pragmatics combines the two properties within a context that is appropriate to the intention of the utterance.

The sections following will interrogate each of these types of linguistic meaning as outlined by Morris in his seminal text (1938) as the assumption in this investigation is that all three types of meanings need to be accounted for when examining the utterances of second language speakers of English. In other words, the sustained hypothesis in this study is that the creation or miscreation of meaning is possible on various levels or in different areas of language.

#### **2.2.1.1 SYNTACTIC MEANING**

The term 'syntax' is from the Greek *syntaxis*, a gerund meaning 'arranging' or 'setting out together'. It refers to the branch of language study dealing with the way in which words are arranged to show connections of meaning among the constituents of a sentence. Syntactic analysis of language, using its metalanguage, is usually limited to its objective description of sentences, in relation to the rules. Such an analysis enables language users to determine the status of an utterance, syntactically.

Over the years the expediency of this objective type of analysis has been questioned by the representation of language as 'social semiotics' (Halliday 1978: 1). The same concerns had triggered the insistence that proficiency in language should include communicative competence (Hymes, 1972b), a concept which directly challenged some of the ideas of Chomsky (1957, 1965). The notion of communicative competence advocates that a purely syntactic analysis of language is wholly inadequate in describing what goes on with language usage. While syntactic know-how is an indication that the speaker is familiar with the internal arrangements of the elements of a sentence, there is no indication that such competence extends to the use or application of these arrangements. Rather an inclusive picture of language competence is obtained by the exploration, as well, of the semantic and pragmatic properties of the utterance.

The following sections differentiate between ‘semantic meaning’ and ‘pragmatic meaning’ since the semantic and pragmatic properties of an utterance are, in fact, the variety of meanings possible in an utterance. Discussion of semantic and pragmatic meanings of natural language is, relatively speaking, more complicated than a syntactic one. As mentioned earlier, part of the complication is generated by the debate on the distinctions between the two types of meaning as well as on the relevance or the necessity of a semantic-pragmatic notion of meaning as sometimes a linguistic phenomenon is not straightforward semantic or pragmatic or both. Bach (1997) notes that the distinction has enabled analysts to separate strictly linguistic facts about utterances from those that involve the actions, intentions and inference of language users.

Despite these misgivings, it is an accepted notion in philosophy of language that the conventional or literal meaning of a sentence forms the focus of the study of semantics. The next section explains ‘semantic meaning’ by illustrating how distinct that area of language study is from the others.

#### **2.2.1.2 SEMANTIC MEANING**

In the tripartition of semiotics, the proper task of semantics is to study relations that exist between expressions in virtue of their linguistic meaning. Thus semantics is only concerned with literal utterances. Every semantic interpretation reduces speaker meaning to sentence meaning ... (Daniel Vandereveken, 1990: 71).

Semantics, the second category in the three-part division of language, is usually limited to the study of the meaning of linguistic expressions (as opposed to, for example, their sound, spelling and use). Generally, semantics is the study of meaning and linguistic semantics is the study of meaning as expressed by words, phrases and sentences in conjunction with their syntactic arrangement. Like many theorists, Katz (1977:14) defines semantics by contrasting it with its nearest rival, pragmatics:

[I] draw the theoretical line between semantic interpretation and pragmatic interpretation by taking the semantic component to properly represent only those aspects of meaning of the sentence that an ideal speaker-hearer of the language would know in an anonymous letter situation...where there is no clue whatever about the motive, circumstances of transmission, or any other factor relevant to understanding the sentence on the basis of its context of utterance.

Cann (1993:1) refines Katz's definition by noting that

It is however, more usual within linguistics to interpret the term (i.e. semantics) more narrowly, as concerning the study of those aspects of meaning encoded in linguistic expressions that are independent of their use on particular occasions by particular individuals within a particular speech community. In other words, semantics is the study of meaning abstracted away from those aspects that are derived from the intentions of speakers, their psychological states and the socio-cultural aspects of the context in which the utterance was made.

In her book on semantics, Kempson (1988: 139) sums up one of the main assumptions about the meaning of natural /ordinary language: that a complete account of sentence meaning is given by recursively specifying the truth conditions of the sentences in the language or, as Lewis (1972) puts it: 'semantics = truth conditions'. Kempson (*ibid.*) elaborates that, in this truth-conditional view of semantics, the central property of natural languages is that we humans use language to communicate propositions: information about the world around us. A specification of the propositional content of a sentence is a specification of the minimal set of truth conditions under which the particular proposition would be true. So on the view crudely expressed by the equation, semantics = truth conditions, it is assumed that the semantic content is exhausted by determining its propositional content. Kempson (*ibid.*) concludes this section by saying:

It is uncontroversial that the meaning of a sentence is made up of the meaning of the words which it contains and their syntactic arrangement in that sentence. Accordingly, the semantic component of a grammar is, on this view, assumed to be a formal algorithm which assigns propositional contents to a sentence on the basis of the meaning of the expressions it contains and the syntactic configuration.

Hopper and Traugott (1993: 69) write in the same vein that

Semantics is primarily concerned with meanings that are relatively stable out of context, typically arbitrary and analyzable in terms of the logical conditions under which they would be true.



Truth-conditional semantics is better understood if one realises that it was a reaction to the logical positivism of Russell's era (1905). Logical positivism is a philosophical system which maintains that the only meaningful statements are those that are analytical or can be tested empirically. Logical positivism therefore was principally concerned with the properties of language the truth or falsity of which can be established, hence the term 'truth-conditional semantics'. Truth-conditional semantics (also known as conventional or conceptual or literal meaning of utterances) therefore covers those basic, essential components of meaning which are conveyed by the literal use of a word or sentence without the benefit of context (Yule, 1996). Truth-conditional semantics is usually contrasted to the more 'flexible' meaning of utterances as used in specific speech settings, or within pragmatic domains. Van Dijk (1976: 69) captures this distinction, in this quotation:

Taking semantics, firstly in its usual linguistic sense, a semantic theory is to explicate the "meaning" of phrases sentences and texts e.g. in terms of semantic representation or in terms of semantic "interpretations" of lexico-syntactic sentence structure. Such semantics is different from a semantics trying to account for the meaning assigned to expressions in individual communication by speaker and hearer (*pragmatics*), if these assigned "meanings" do not have some equivalence relation with the "general" meanings of expressions in the language, but are based on ad hoc features of situations.

Although truth-conditional semantics has some obvious logic, it does have some application flaws. The major criticism is that such a theory must be restricted to

statements since it is these that have the property to be true or false. And since not all utterances are used to make statements, other forms, such as imperatives, interrogatives, sentences containing deictic expressions and performatives<sup>3</sup> cannot be accounted for (van Dijk, 1976: 71). Kempson (1979) also takes readers through possible answers to this problem. In the end, she admits that the best solution is to acknowledge these flaws, not to discard the theory totally, while conceptualising a more embracing one.

One such embracing theory of language meaning Kempson (1979: 46) discusses is one that extends logical positivism or truth-conditional semantics. Such a theory will be 'one in which the meaning of sentences includes reference to the beliefs of the speakers'. Once meaning is 'personalised' in the sense that the language users' beliefs or intentions (and by logical extension, the context) are factored into an analysis of meaning, we move into the area of pragmatic meaning, the topic of the next section.

### **2.2.1.3 PRAGMATIC MEANING**

Introducing the study of pragmatics in 1968, Montague (67) had this to say:

It was suggested ... that pragmatics concerns itself with what C.S. Peirce had in the last century called *indexical expressions*, that is words and sentences of which the reference cannot be determined without knowledge of the context of use....

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<sup>3</sup> Performatives are explained in Chapter Three.

This early attempt by Montague to formulate pragmatics as a distinct area in the notion of meaning is an indication of the very tentative and uninspiring beginnings of pragmatics. To define means to impose boundaries; defining 'pragmatics' therefore implies determining its frontiers with other adjoining fields of study, within and possibly outside of linguistics. Such definitions of pragmatics were originally quite elusive, with authors either confining themselves to a strictly linguistic definition or incorporating so many contextual and societal factors that the subject became vague, subjective and hence unwieldy.

Just what constitutes 'pragmatics' has been an open question for a long time, even after Morris (1938: 6) defined it as 'a branch of semiotics', or 'the study of the relation of signs and interpreters' as quoted earlier. Today, in less technical and more communicative-orientated terms, one would talk of 'message' and 'language user'. Pragmatics therefore starts out from a basic conception of language as being interactive, or in relation to its 'users'. Mey (1993: 5) underlines the idea of pragmatics being concerned with synchronic usage:

That is to say, not the science of language in its own right, or the science of language as seen and studied by the linguists, or the science of language as an expression of our desires to play schoolmarm, but the science of language as it is used by real, live people, for their own purposes and within their limitations and affordance.

Whereas the aims of syntax and semantics and their place in language are relatively clear, the task of pragmatics and its contribution to linguistic meaning

are not as clear. Pragmatics, once described by Leech (1993:1) as the 'rag-bag' of language studies is now respected as a study which enables us to understand the nature and structure of language and the way language is used in actual communication. It draws its inspiration mainly from the philosophy of language, as it is an attempt to investigate the nature of meaning creation using natural language. It is an attempt to unravel the process involved when speakers and hearers encode and decode language. It is this aim which ensures a central place in pragmatics for the theory of speech acts as well as conversation principles. The relevance or existence of the study of pragmatics can, thus, no longer be denied.

Literature on pragmatics is vast as authors attempt to articulate what it is that constitutes the study of pragmatics and what pragmatic meaning is as already intimated. Authors on pragmatics include Grice (1957), Searle (1969), Petofi (1976), van Dijk (1976), Levinson (1983), Mey (1993), Martin (1994) and Yule (1996), to name just a few. The common thread in the arguments of these theorists is that pragmatics is a study of 'natural language', in other words, language as used in real or actual life situations.

Although the contributions of these writers testify to the variety of phenomena studied under the guise of pragmatics, most of them view pragmatics as an account of the interrelations between language and the communication situation in which it is typically used. For some authors, this is too restrictive a definition,

for example, Dascal (1983) stresses that pragmatics must not only deal with communicative uses of language, which he calls socio-pragmatics, but also with its mental uses, which he refers to as psycho-pragmatics. Similarly, Tirassa (1999) argues for a theory of cognitive pragmatics that describes what goes on in the mind of interlocutors when they engage in communication. This research views pragmatics more as a philosophical explanation of communication, one kind of social behaviour.

Pragmatics, as a philosophical theory, and as a distinct type of meaning, is a relatively new discipline (compared to syntax and semantics). Brigitte Stemmer (1999) traces the origin of the word 'pragma' from which 'pragmatics' is a development:

One of the central meanings of the Greek word "pragma" ... is action, doing: the other central meaning refers to factual, real. .... A second major meaning area develops around "practical" / "pragmatics", in colloquial language often synonymous to useful, suitable, opportune. The third field is around the notion of "pragmatism" which refers mainly to philosophical ways of thinking such as those introduced by Peirce or Kant.

(<http://cogprints.soton.ac.uk/documents>, 7 March, 2002).

Running through this quotation is the notion of action or language as a 'tool' to be used in a real world, one of the reasons usually cited for the development of pragmatics. Perhaps one of the most effective incitements for the development of modern pragmatics was the growing irritation with the lack of overt interest,

among established linguists, for example, Chomsky (1957), in what really goes on in language: in what people actually 'do with words'. Among those who took this concern seriously was Austin, who, in 1962, wrote his classic work on pragmatics, *How to do things with words*. As Mey (1993: 23) says:

The title of Austin's book contains an explicit question, the answer to which is not, of course, that people should form correct sentences or compose logically valid utterances, but that they communicate with each other (and themselves) by means of language.

The past thirty years have witnessed an ever-growing interest in pragmatic meaning in language. The first tentative efforts at establishing something like a pragmatic approach to linguistic facts date back to the late sixties and early seventies (as seen in the works of Lakoff and Ross). In these works is seen the collapse of earlier theories and hypotheses, particularly the strict syntactic explanation of linguistic phenomena of the syntacticians. It was gradually becoming clear that a fuller meaning of language is only possible with the inclusion of the speaker and the occasion when the utterance was made. This paradigm shift may be said to have initiated the emergence of pragmatics. Levinson (1983: 36) describes the shift from a more technical-linguistic perspective. He notes that

...as knowledge of the syntax, phonology and semantics of various languages has increased, it has become clear that there are specific phenomena that can only naturally be described by recourse to contextual concepts.

One of the factors, therefore, which has been instrumental in the elevation of pragmatic meaning, is the renewed interest in the users of the language, as compared to language as a system, or language in the abstract. But along with (and perhaps above) this were other factors, like the internal-linguistic reasons, such as the many mysteries surrounding the very nature of natural language in communication in the 'real world'. The 'users' of language in the 'real world' are, for pragmatics, the very condition of its existence. Once the notions of 'users' and 'real world' are factored into the scenario we can refer to pragmatics as the study of 'contextualised meaning'. That is:

(A study) in which the users are the paramount features of interest, inasmuch as they are the *primi motores* of the entire linguistic enterprise, both in its theoretical and its practical (usage-bound) aspect (Mey, 1994: 30).

In pragmatics, most discussions on contextualised meaning include a differentiation between literal and intended meaning of natural language, whereby 'literal meaning' is identical to the meaning of a sentence without context (semantics) while 'intended meaning' is reserved to meaning achieved after consideration of context, conversation principles and any implications that may exist (pragmatics). Or as Gadzar (1979: 2) has put it, assuming that semantics (as already noted in reference to Lewis, [1972]) is limited to the statement of truth conditions:

Pragmatics has as its topic those aspects of meaning of utterances which cannot be accounted for by straightforward reference to the truth conditions of the sentence uttered.

Put crudely: PRAGMATICS = MEANING – TRUTH CONDITIONS.

Such a definition is likely, at first, to cause some confusion. Surely semantics is the meaning of a sentence in its entirety, so how can there be any residue to constitute the topic of pragmatics? The reaction of Levinson (1983: 12) to the above definition is that if one adopts 'simplistic' and 'narrow' theories of semantics and pragmatics then the question above might have some relevance. However, whatever kind of semantic theory is adopted, many aspects of meaning in a broad sense simply cannot be accommodated if the theory is to have internal coherence and consistency. Semantics begins to have recognisable borders because it is classified as the conventional fixed meanings of a sentence while pragmatics is credited with the more flexible context-biased meaning of an utterance in use. In other words, it is a semantic problem to specify the rules for matching up sentences of a natural language with the propositions in a conventional setting. But once the propositions are matched in relation to the features of the context there is a shift into the realm of pragmatics.

Stalnaker (1972) likewise emphasises the role that syntax, semantics and context play in establishing a pragmatic account of language use. Speech becomes a communication proposition only in the relevant context, not in isolation. Like other writers to follow, he bases the differentiation between semantics and pragmatics on the type of meaning and interaction they have with



language in the communication event. Semantics matches user intention with the appropriate natural language form whereas pragmatics continues the process a step further by extending the appropriateness of meaning to include a comprehensive context. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995) provides the following useful definition: 'Pragmatics is the study of language which focuses attention on the users and the context of the language use rather than on reference, truth and grammar'. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (1995) similarly notes: 'Pragmatics studies the use of language in context, and the context-dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation.... Its branches include the theory of how one and the same sentence can express different meanings or propositions from context to context'. Jeff Verschueren (1987) also suggests that pragmatics is best conceived of as an adaptive process, as it is a set of rules enabling users of a language to fulfil successfully the functions they want, by matching different linguistic meanings (at all levels) with the environment or context in which they operate.

Annette Herskovits (1997), writing on pragmatic context, language and meaning, reviews the various types of context which interact with a proposition for communication. She suggests that for a linguistic communication to be successful it is not enough for speakers and hearers to know the relevant coordinates of the pragmatic context, they must have an infinite sequence of 'mutual' beliefs. This is in reaction to the more restrictive approach to context articulated by Kaplan (1978). Herskovits (1997) broadens context to include

cognitive aspects, 'that portion of an individual's cognitive state which affects a cognitive process'. She discusses the difficulty in establishing a relevant pragmatic meaning as no predefined set of context parameters can contain every possible situation.

It is not only a matter of rational beliefs as to what is and what is not relevant, but also involves the particular state of the agent's associative memory at processing time...what happens to be activated and to what degree. Relevance cannot be defined "objectively" as simply a property of the relation between a proposition and a knowledge base; it depends on activation, on the "attention state" which in turn does not depend strictly on internal, logical properties of the knowledge base, (<<http://boogie.cs.unitn.it/eccs97/Discussion/Archives/0010.html>>, 7 March, 2002).

In his book, *Pragmatics*, Levinson (1983: 1-33) devotes a whole chapter to attempts at defining the concept 'pragmatic meaning'. Running through a gamut of explanations, he offers explanations such as those which regard pragmatics as a study of the functional perspective of meaning; principles of language use and the study of context meaning. He also defines pragmatics as being concerned with aspects of meaning which cannot be accounted for by the truth conditions of semantics. Levinson does not seem interested in a one line or one paragraph meaning; rather, his narration hinges on establishing the boundaries of pragmatics in explaining the array of topics that can, philosophically, be explained by a pragmatic approach to language.

Leech (1989: 5) sets up a list of eight postulates in his attempt to isolate some characteristics of pragmatics. In an extensive and systematic manner, he then takes the reader through his arguments, focusing on the theoretical differences between pragmatics and the other aspects of language, particularly semantics. He (*ibid.*) defines 'pragmatics' as 'the study of meaning in relation to speech situations'. His discussions dwell on utterance meaning rather than sentence meaning, hence of necessity he examines the distinction between semantic and pragmatic meaning. His explanations are based on the differences Lyons (1977) makes in his work on semantics between two types of meaning arising from two different uses of the verb 'to mean': '(a) *What does X mean?* (b) *What did you mean by X?*' (Lyons, 1977: 1-3). He commences his thesis with an overview of the possible contexts where the word, 'meaning', can operate in the area of language. Whereas semantic (grammatical) meaning is defined purely as 'a property of expressions in a given language' (as shown in the first question) he sees pragmatic meaning as 'relative to a speaker or user of a language' (as shown in the second question). He concludes by showing the relation between pragmatics and grammar.

Language consists of grammar and pragmatics. Grammar is an abstract formal system for producing and interpreting messages. General pragmatics is a set of strategies and principles for achieving success in communication by the use of grammar. Grammar is functionally adapted to the extent that it possesses properties which facilitate the operation of pragmatic principles (Leech, 1989: 76).

Kent Bach (1997) explains pragmatic meaning by also differentiating it from its closest rival, semantics. His reason for invoking a semantic and pragmatic distinction in meaning is to shed light on a number of other distinctions associated with pragmatic thinking. Some of these distinctions are

Type vs token; sentence vs utterance; meaning vs use; context-invariant vs context-sensitive meaning; linguistic vs speaker meaning; literal vs nonliteral use; saying vs implying; content vs force (1997: 24).

Within these pairs, the first types fall in the domain of semantics while the second are areas in pragmatics. Bach believes that these diverse forms of linguistic meaning are the fundamental differences between semantics and pragmatics. This distinct dichotomy between pragmatics and semantics is a view which is being vigorously challenged as theorists are now advocating an interface between the two branches of language studies. As mentioned earlier, investigations are underway to ascertain how semantics can interact with pragmatic knowledge in concrete contexts to determine a fully-fledged utterance meaning. These developments, it is hoped, will allow a precise analysis of the way semantics and the pragmatic subsystems of language come together in the creation of meaning, as individually the information gained from either does not suffice. Semantic representation, therefore, needs augmentation by pragmatically motivated inferences that draw on contextual and world knowledge. As Turner (1999: 14) puts it:

As human beings we have developed an ability to speak figuratively, be ironic, understate, speak loosely, create metaphors... and as linguists we have undertaken the task of explaining how all these “special effects” are produced and understood, have taken the path of context or use-bound pragmatic research and have finally got trapped with fuzzy boundaries....So many aspects of language production and comprehension have had to be taken into consideration that eventually pragmatics has ended up with no clear-cut research program [sic] apart from manifest interest in the study of context and language in use.

Despite these non-clear-cut boundaries, many researchers have reluctantly acknowledged that no serious analysis of language can be carried out without appealing to some kind of pragmatic meaning. Determining exactly which aspects within semantics and pragmatics can be interfaced is the topic of current workshops, making the whole subject dynamic. For example, the outcome of Asher’s (1999) analysis is a cognitive modelling in which discourse structure and speakers’ beliefs and goals interact in a fine-tuning of Grice’s (1975) theory of conversation. Contributors, like Carston, Kehler and Ward, Jaszczolt and Nemo to the book, *Semantics/Pragmatics Interface* (1999), have all attempted to identify specific areas in pragmatic and semantic meaning which demonstrate the lack of a need to differentiate between the two branches. These range from very narrow topics such as modal verbs, determiners, indefinite noun phrases to more substantial ones such as context, ambiguity and relevance.

Interestingly enough, the mere fact of trying to bridge the great divide is a clear indication that there is a divide and that it is possible to talk of a semantic meaning as distinct from a pragmatic meaning. One therefore has to conclude that there is some credence to the accepted notion that pragmatics is a rule system which defines the relationship of meaning to the context in which it occurs, that is, pragmatics matches functions and meaning to particular language choices, in particular contexts. This view focuses on the fact that we cannot really understand the nature of language unless we acknowledge the existence of pragmatic meaning.

The accepted style of defining pragmatic meaning by contrasting it to its closest rival, semantic meaning, has, it is believed, negatively impacted on this area of language study:

The idea that pragmatics assumes an identity mainly based on the semantic-pragmatic meaning distinction negatively affects an articulation of a formal formulation of pragmatics, explaining some of the difficulty in its emergence as a separate study of language (Levinson, 1983: 3);

or, as Horn (1988 : 114) puts it:

[Any phenomena that is] too ill-behaved and variable to be treated coherently within the syntactic component ... [not] quite arbitrary enough for the lexicon or quite phonological enough for the phonology... must be pragmatic.

Despite these misgivings, pragmatic meaning is a dynamic area of language study in its attempt to contribute to a comprehensive picture of meaningful communication. The ability of interlocutors to create and manipulate these different meanings (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic) rests on their communicative competence. The following sections, therefore, traces the origins, development and components of the term 'communicative competence'.

## **2.3 COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

The term 'communicative competence' is closely associated with the linguistic distinction between the notions of 'competence' and 'performance' and what knowledge in a language entails. Chomsky (1965: 4) defines knowledge of language 'form' as 'competence' (narrowed down to 'grammar') while knowledge of language 'function or use' is referred to as 'performance'. Competence, therefore, refers to one's underlying knowledge of a system, event or fact. It is the non-observable theoretical ability. Linguistic competence is a language user's underlying knowledge of the system of a language, such as its rules of grammar, its vocabulary and how these are acceptably combined. Performance, on the other hand, is the application of competence in actual linguistic events. This dichotomy has raised tensions as to what knowledge of a language entails: is it knowledge of the underlying mental principles (competence) or the ability to use language effectively in the creation of meaning (performance) or both?

In his writings, Chomsky (1957, 1965, and 1980) has consistently advocated that language is 'a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements' (1957: 13), while knowledge of a language is, first and foremost, an individual's innate awareness of a language system's structural codes and the acceptable ways of combining these codes. Chomsky (1980: 48) stresses this 'mentalist' nature of language when he notes that

To know a language I am assuming is to be in a certain mental state, which persists as a steady component of transitory mental states. What kind of mental state? I assume further that to be in such a mental state is to have a certain mental structure consisting of a system of rules and principles that generate and relate mental representations of various types.

Chomsky's conception of language as a mental, abstract, scientific attribute is contrasted with an 'intuitive/pre-theoretic or common sense notion of language' Botha (1987: 70). A pre-theoretic notion of language, according to Chomsky 'has a crucial socio-political dimension', a characteristic which prevents such a concept of language from being scientific and coherent. To explain this stand, that language should not be 'contaminated' with 'inessential sociopolitical elements', Chomsky (Botha, 1987: 70) invokes the ideal speaker-listener 'who (lives) in a completely homogeneous speech community, ... knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as



memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance’.

Chomsky sees this idealisation as a ‘methodological tool’, a means of disregarding ‘common-sense assumptions that stand in the way of assigning a coherent content to the notion of language’ (Botha, 1987: 71-73). What can be understood by ‘common-sense assumptions’ are the imperfections which would be ‘inflicted’ on language by humans in normal socio-political linguistic situations.

Language should be envisaged and studied in its ‘pure’ or ‘idealised form’. This same attitude is behind the distinction Chomsky makes between ‘grammatical competence’ and ‘pragmatic competence’. Grammatical competence is characterised as

...the cognitive state that encompasses all those aspects of form and meaning and their relation, including underlying structures that enter into that relation, which are properly assigned to the specific subsystem of the human mind that relates representations of form and meaning. A bit misleadingly perhaps I will continue to call this subsystem “the language faculty” (Botha, 1987: 82).

The last line of the quotation above is very significant; Chomsky equates ‘grammar’ with ‘language’. Pragmatic competence, Chomsky notes in (Botha, 1987: 82) is a ‘system of rules and principles ...to determine how the tools can

effectively be put to use' and therefore must be another dimension to language. Chomsky (*ibid.*) also regards language as a 'computational system' (grammar) which is a more sophisticated human attribute in contrast to the 'conceptual system' (pragmatics) which he considered as 'primitive'. Performance, Chomsky notes, is not an accurate reflection of competence as performance is subject to linguistically irrelevant conditions such as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention, all of which prevent performance from providing a coherent account of language and hence the necessity to create the ideal speaker and listener for such a purpose. Chomsky finds such an approach very logical as

in other scientific approaches the same assumption enters in one or another form, explicitly or tacitly, in identification of the object of inquiry...[which] permits the linguist to deal with convenient abstractions uninhibited by psychological reality (Botha, 1987: 73).

Within this conceptual framework it is not surprising that Chomsky is at pains to separate the 'knowledge' of language from its 'use'.

Alternatively one might characterize knowledge of a language - perhaps knowledge more generally - as a capacity or ability to do something, as a system of dispositions of some kind, in which case one might be led (mised, I think) to conclude that behavior provides a criterion for the possession of knowledge. In contrast, if such knowledge is characterized in terms of mental state structure, behavior simply provides evidence for possession of knowledge, as might facts of an entirely different order – electrical activity of the brain, for example (Botha, 1987: 51).

Language use is considered to be a case of rule following or rule-governed behaviour and is only one 'indication or evidence' of knowledge of language and not a 'criterion' of knowledge.

Taking linguistic behaviour to be just one of the possible sources of evidence for having knowledge of language clearly does not warrant the equation 'no behaviour = no knowledge'. This would be a valid equation only if, by contrast, behaviour was taken as a criterion for having knowledge of language (Botha, 1987: 55).

In fact the use of language or 'the ability of humans to produce speech that is appropriate to a situation though perhaps quite novel and to understand when others do so' is considered a 'mystery' by Chomsky (1975: 138) and hence outside the study of language:

There is in fact a very respectable tradition, which I have reviewed elsewhere that regards as a vulgar distortion the "instrumental view" of language as "essentially" a means of communication or a means to achieve given ends. Language, it is argued, is "essentially" a system for expression of thought.

These views, which draw a distinction between the different competences in language, which also regard the conceptual (pragmatic) system as 'primitive' and 'vulgar' provoked reactions from theorists schooled in a functional and pragmatic approach to language. In non-Chomskyan approaches to language and its study, the primary aim for the study of Language is not to gain insight into the properties

of the human mind but to see it as a functional societal tool. As Searle, in Botha, (1987: 137) notes:

The purpose of language is communication in much the same sense that the purpose of the heart is to pump blood. In both cases it is possible to study the structure independently of function but pointless and perverse to do so, since structure and function so obviously interact.

The notion of 'communicative competence' introduced by Hymes in the mid sixties (1967) and refined in his later writings (1971, 1972a&b) is a shift of emphasis from the Chomskyan conception of language as a mental attribute. He felt that

... such a view of linguistic theory was sterile, and that linguistic theory needed to be seen as part of a more general theory incorporating communication and culture (Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 70).

With the emergence, also, in the philosophy of language, of theories of speech functions (Searle, 1969: 22-23), there was a movement away from the abstract definition of language. H. Giles and E.B. Ryan (1982: 210), also dissatisfied with a situation where performance is considered a residual category, comment that the Chomskyan attitude conceives language competence as a concept where:

- independent speech variables are concocted in a social, psychological and linguistic vacuum;

- listeners feature almost as nonentities;
- aspects of context are socially and subjectively sterile; and
- dependent variables are devised without recourse to their situational, functional and behavioral implications.

In the above quotation, Giles and Ryan criticise the notion of language and language knowledge that is not interactive, or creative. This was the same concern that led the anthropologist and linguist, Hymes (1967), to take issue with the Chomskyan definition of language competence and the employment of an ideal or competent speaker-listener in the scientific study of language. For Hymes (1967), such a person or scenario was a non-existent abstraction; hence he remained unconvinced of the necessity of such a 'methodological tool' for language study. He insists that the 'real speaker-listener' exists in the aspect of language to which Chomsky gives no account: the real world of social interactions. Language, as an interactive tool, draws on a functional or a communicative aspect to language competence as well as the structural knowledge that Chomsky describes. This widening of the criteria for language competence provided the rationale for the introduction of the communicative approach to language competence. In Hymes's (1972b: 281) view, a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use.

Included in the non-Chomskyan notion of communicative competence, is a view of language as one of the many symbolic systems that members of a society use

for communication among themselves, not as an individual's mental attribute. People and the languages they use are viewed, not in isolation, but in their social contexts or settings, hence de-emphasising the restricted individual grammatical competence as an indication of a person's overall language competence.

People's language ability, according to Hymes (1967), is demonstrated by their control over the structural codes (form) in addition to control of the language in actual performance (function). Hymes (1971: 6) found the failure by Chomsky to take into consideration the functional or socio-cultural dimension of language too restrictive, as this stance only provided a partial account of the knowledge required for language use; 'The grammatical factor is one among several which affects communicative competence'. What this means is that other types of knowledge, in addition to that of knowing how to compose grammatically correct sentences, are required for communication. In other words, communicative behaviour relies on 'the rules of use, without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (Hymes, 1979: 15). For Hymes (1972), knowledge of these two aspects of language competencies – form and function – indicates an individual's level of language knowledge.

In combining these competencies, form and function, in one term, communicative competence, Hymes (1979) redefines the notion, by stressing the importance of 'use' in the classification of language competence, as he believes in the appropriateness as well as the grammatical correctness of utterances. The

introduction of the notion of ‘appropriateness’ or ‘acceptability’, into the definition of competence expands the concept to comprise the rule-systems of language use, hence according a role to socio-cultural factors in contrast to Chomsky’s degrading of ‘common-sense assumptions about language. Therefore, much of what, for Chomsky (1965), is extraneous to a consideration of language and what competence in it entails, is, for Hymes (1967), an integral part of a theory of communicative competence. Defined in such a manner, communicative competence is more comprehensive as it is an amalgamation of theories: linguistic, action and culture.

Van Dijk (1977a: 167) similarly says:

The use of language is not only some specific act, but an integral part of SOCIAL INTERACTION. Language systems are CONVENTIONAL SYSTEMS. Not only do they regulate interaction, but their categories and rules have developed under the influence of the structure of interaction in society. This FUNCTIONAL view of language, both as a system and as a historical product, in which the predominant SOCIAL role of language in interaction is stressed, is a necessary corrective to a “psychological” view of language use, where our competence in speaking is essentially an object of the philosophy of mind. To be sure, our knowledge of the language is a complex mental system. But to this mental system, like all conventional systems, on the one hand has been formed by the requirements of effective social behaviour and on the other hand is used and changes under these constraints.

This illustrates the fact that communicative competence is an integrated concept which includes aspects from a person's 'psychological view of language' and the knowledge of 'the requirements of effective social behaviour'. The psychological view, operating at a level of abstraction, accounts for the user's rule awareness and manipulation. Van Dijk (1977a) supports Hymes (1967) when he states that knowledge of structural codes is not the only requirement for the creation of linguistic and social meaning, for non-linguistic factors: historical products of cultural and social features of language users are among the list of requirements for the creation of linguistic meaning. All these considerations, therefore, need to be integrated into any notion of communicative competence.

Brown (1987: 199) reiterates the point:

Communicative competence, then, is that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts.

Hymes's works and Brown's quotation above exemplify the shift away from the study of language as a system in isolation, towards the study of language as means of communication. Such a stance portrays the intimate relationship between knowledge of language codes and the extralinguistic factors that make language competence a social asset. In agreement, Savignon (1983: 9) writes, 'communicative competence is relative not absolute, and depends on the cooperation of all the participants involved'. Language knowledge is not so much



an intrapersonal ability as Chomsky (1972) defines its limitations in his early writings, but rather an interpersonal construct that can only be examined by means of the overt performance of individuals in the process of creating meaning (Brown, 1987: 227). Richards & Rodgers (1986: 71) include in their discussion on communicative competence a summary of some of the characteristics of a communicative view of language.

1. Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
2. The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
3. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
4. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but also its categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

These features are in line with the approach to language and communicative competence adopted by this study. The following sections analyse the notion of communicative competence by scrutinizing the various abilities inherent in the notion.

### **2.3.1 COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980, 1983), as well as Chomsky view competence in a modular or compartmentalised manner, rather than as a single

global factor. Canale and Swain see the main components of communicative competence on two levels: linguistic and psycholinguistic.

### **2.3.1.1 LINGUISTIC COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

On the linguistic level communicative competence includes four inter-related areas of competence: grammatical, discourse, socio-linguistic and strategic competencies.

#### **2.3.1.1.1 Grammatical competence**

The grammatical level describes mastery of the formal constructs of the language and is closely aligned to the grammatical competence in the more restricted approach of Chomsky. This is the competence associated with expertise in the grammatical codes of a language and is concerned with the knowledge and skills required to understand and express the literal meaning of utterances. Describing language competence in this manner is to categorise the formal features, at sentence level, of interlocutors' language and how these sentences are acceptably combined.

#### **2.3.1.1.2 Discourse competence**

The second subcategory, discourse competence, is a complement of grammatical competence, though it is not concerned with the interpretation of

isolated sentences. It is the ability of language users to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole. The connections that exist between sentences may be physical and explicit (for example, pronominalisation, synonyms, ellipses, conjunctions, parallel structures) or implicit where there may not be an overt structural expression of a link between one proposition and another. Such relatedness may then be established through participants' general knowledge of the world and each other, communicative functions and attitude as well as familiarity with a particular linguistic and physical context. Canale and Swain (1983) see discourse competence therefore, as including cohesion and coherence in the structure of texts, in the organisation of different speech events and the interpretive rules for creating linguistic meaning. While grammatical mastery focuses on sentence level structural arrangement, discourse competence hinges on inter-sentential relationships. Anna Trosborg (1994: 11) also takes discourse competence to include discourse management, for example, turn-taking, use of gambits and discourse phases, such as opening and closing of conversations, aspects not introduced by earlier writers like and Hymes (1967, 1972a) and Canale (1983).

#### **2.2.1.1.3 Socio-linguistic competence**

The last two linguistic components - socio-linguistic and strategic competencies - concentrate more on the functional aspects of language interaction. Socio-linguistic competence is concerned with the socio-cultural rules as well as

contextual factors which determine the appropriateness of a given language event. The contextual factors refer to items such as, setting, speaker-hearer role relationship, channel, genre, key and so on. They highlight language appropriateness: meaning and form, and include not only rules of address and questions of politeness, but also selection and formulation of topic and the social significance of strategies like indirect speech acts, gestures and other non-verbal strategies. Only with such a comprehensive picture, communicative competence advocates believe, can participants make appropriate linguistic choices. According to Savignon (1983: 37):

This type of competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction. Only in a full context of this kind can judgements be made on the *appropriateness* of a particular utterance.

#### **2.2.1.1.4 Strategic competence**

Canale and Swain (1980: 30) describe strategic competence as

The verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to the performance variables or due to insufficient competence.

Savignon (1983) paraphrases the same notion as the strategies that one uses to amend and supplement imperfect knowledge of rules, or limiting factors in their

application, such as, fatigue, distraction and inattention. In short, it is users' ability to cope, by repairing and sustaining communication through linguistic props like paraphrasing, circumlocution, repetitions, hesitations, avoidance, guessing, as well as shifts in register and style. Strategic competence occupies, relatively speaking, a more pivotal position in discussions of communicative competence. Brown (1987: 200) believes that definitions of strategic competence that are limited to the notion of 'competence strategies' fall short of encompassing the full spectrum of the construct. He believes that all communicative proficiency arises out of a person's strategic competence, as it is the way that participants manipulate language in order to meet everyday communicative goals. Sophisticated users of the language are those who deftly manoeuvre their way through the linguistic challenges that confront them. Lyle Bachman (1990) also acknowledges the immense significance of strategic competence, and even goes on to amend the accepted categories of communicative competence, according strategic competence a separate identity within a general notion of language proficiency. Strategic competence, as suggested by Bachman (1990), is a set of general abilities that utilise all of the elements of language competence, and of psychomotor skills as well, in the process of negotiating meaning or in the determination of an individual's language.

### **2.3.1.2 PSYCHOLINGUISTIC COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

On the psychological level, there are two dimensions to communicative competence: a knowledge component and a skills component.

#### **2.3.1.2.1 Knowledge**

Knowledge denotes what one knows (consciously and unconsciously) about language and about other aspects of communicative language use. Knowledge, as part of the psycholinguistic component of language, is in line with the Chomskyan notion that language is an innate ability of individuals. Grammatical mastery of language falls within the knowledge aspect and is therefore part of the non-interactive feature of language competence.

#### **2.3.1.2.2 Skills**

A combination of the two units in the psycholinguistic level, knowledge and skills, emphasises that the notion of communicative competence involves knowledge as well as skills of usage in actual communication. Skills refer to how well one can apply one's theoretical knowledge in everyday situations. It covers what is traditionally referred to as the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Clearly this aspect relates closely to the Chomskyan notion of performance. Actual performance is the realisation of an individual's language ability under

performance constraints like memory and perceptual constraints, fatigue, nervousness, distraction and other interfering factors. The communicative notion of language competence therefore identifies the skills component as an integral part of competence, not as a separate concept as is articulated by Chomsky.

### **2.3.1.3 COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN SOCIO-CULTURAL DOMAIN**

Language, as portrayed in the above discussion, is the property of a particular social entity which uses it in their daily businesses. Speakers of a language, as social beings, see language as the vehicle which allows them to co-exist by enabling them to articulate their needs and wishes. Language is seen as functional and of immediate relevance, or as Halliday (1978) terms it, language is a social-semiotic tool. In other words, language comprises of semiotic codes or signs into which any particular social group can infuse its values and use to create its own meaning. Communicative competence, defined in this context, is the ability of social beings to accurately formulate and interpret their intentions within their social reality. Structural codes or semiotic signs are needed to encode and decode the messages during a speech event however the appropriate meaning to the socio-cultural setting is paramount. Evaluation of competence rests on the meaning-creating potential of users of a language in such a way that their position and membership in a particular social group is enhanced. For instance studies suggest that different cultural groups encode their messages differently, so that whereas going straight to the point of a message and not dwelling on supposedly extraneous points might be important

to certain cultures being 'superfluous with words might be a virtue revered in other cultures. See section 3.2.1.1.8 for more discussion on the notion of 'language'.

The debate about what constitutes communicative competence in language has been ongoing since Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1967) first outlined their views. Some of the criticism against the concept is based on the tendency to treat some components, for instance, awareness of socio-linguistic norms, as of less significance than grammatical mastery. Such an attitude, a residue from the earlier approaches to language competence, may create some misconceptions. First, it gives the impression that grammatical correctness is more important than the appropriateness of utterances in actual communication. Secondly, this view overlooks the fact that successful interaction presupposes knowledge of social norms and values, roles and relationships between individuals. Inability to be socio-linguistically correct may have a profound effect on the language event, despite the participants demonstrating more than adequate grammatical competence. Language is, first and foremost, an interactive tool meant to convey interlocutors' intentions, that is to say, language is for communication. Thomas (1983), for example, notes that unsatisfactory socio-linguistic skills may result in a participant appearing impolite, unfriendly and boorish even when the utterances show no deficiency, grammatically.



Another criticism, this time against the focus on a socio-linguistic definition of language competence, is that it may devalue structural accuracy in language. Such a criticism may arise from a mistaken notion of the number of factors involved in a successful communication. Communication results when there is a balance between the knowledge and skills components of competence. This is not achieved when a gain in one area is at the expense of the other; in other words, grammatical mastery is not at the expense of socio-linguistic mastery. This criticism, though rather dated, is still a bone of contention between linguists schooled in the opposing views of language and how proficiency is demonstrated.

## **2.4 SUMMARY**

Chapter Two, the first part of the theoretical orientation, has focused on what is meant by 'meaning' by identifying the different categories of linguistic meaning, namely, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Interlocutors' creation of these different meanings during a communication event is controlled by their levels of communicative competence. In the second part of this chapter, therefore, an introduction to the concept of communicative competence and its components is provided.

## CHAPTER THREE

# EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

As articulated in the objective, this research project is an evaluation of the communicative competence of a group of second language speakers. As also mentioned in Chapter One, for practical considerations, the description and evaluation of communicative competence necessitates dealing with discrete units with some recognisable boundaries between them (Saville-Stoike, 1982:20). The three units suggested: *event* (language and text), *situation* (context), and *act* (function/meaning) inform this investigation and also serve as the analysing units for the sample utterances. However, before the data from the analysis is presented, it was thought prudent to explain these three units to ensure a common understanding between writer and readers. The next sections, therefore, will deliberate on the suggested units for an evaluation of interlocutors' communicative competence.

## **3.2 UNITS FOR DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

### **3.2.1 EVENT: LANGUAGE AND TEXT**

To be human is to be capable of reason, to exercise free will, to have the ability to solve mathematical problems, to possess a visual system that perceives depth, color [*sic*], and movement in particular ways, but above all, to be human is to have language (Falk, 1994).

To attempt to define the word 'language' in an orthodox dictionary format would be of dubious relevance; rather, of more benefit to an analysis of this nature is an examination of the salient properties of language within particular paradigms. Any structural study of language must begin with an overview of semiotics as outlined by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) and the American philosopher and mathematician, Charles Peirce (1931). Saussure (1966) is credited with broadening the theoretical base of linguistics as he was dissatisfied with his predecessors' study of language from an exclusive, historical perspective and their failure to account for the nature of language. Linguistics, he wrote

never attempted to determine the nature of the object it was studying, and without this elementary operation a science cannot develop an appropriate method (Saussure, 1966: 16).

Such an 'elementary operation' Saussure felt is imperative, as human language is an extremely complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. Even a cursory examination of the syntactic, semantic, phonological and pragmatic configurations or perspectives of language testifies to this. A single speech act, according to Culler (1976: 18) 'involves an extraordinary range of factors and could be considered from many different, even conflicting points of view'. One could study the way sounds are produced by the mouth, vocal cords and tongue; one could investigate the sound waves that are emitted and the way they affect the hearing mechanism. One could consider the signifying intention of speakers, the aspect of the world to which their utterances refer, the immediate circumstances of the communicative context which might have led them to produce a particular series of noise. One might try to analyse the conventions that enable speakers and listeners to understand one another, working out the grammatical and semantic rules which they must have assimilated if they are communicating in this way. Or again, one could trace the history of the language which makes available these particular forms.

An appreciation of these perspectives is only possible if the phenomenon to be described, language, is intimately understood. Saussure (Course, 16: Cours, 33, 1966) attempts to do this by describing language as a system of signs organised conventionally to communicate ideas:

Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas and is thus comparable to the system of writing, to the alphabet of deaf-mutes, to symbolic rituals, to forms of etiquette,

to military signals, etc. It is but the most important of these systems. We can therefore imagine a science which would study the life of signs within society....We call it semiology, from the Greek semeion ("sign"). It would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist we cannot say what it will be; but it has a right to existence; its place is assured in advance. Linguistics is only part of this general science; and the laws which semiology discovers will be applicable to linguistics, which will thus find itself attached to a well-defined domain of human phenomena.

Subsequent studies have proved how prophetic Saussure's words are. Kaja Silverman in his book, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1983: 5) points out that the semiotic field has now widened to include fields like

zoology, olfactory signs, tactile communication, communication, paralinguistics, medicine, kinesics, proxemics, musical codes, formalised language, natural languages, visual communication, system of objects, text theory....

Despite this multi-application of the semiotic idea, it is the assertion of semioticians that language constitutes the signifying system 'par excellence', '*le patron general*', and that it is only by means of the linguistic sign that other signs become meaningful:

...that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression is also the most characteristic; for in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology, although language is only one particular semiological system (Saussure, 1966: 68).

The science of signs, semiology (if one prefers the European terminology of Saussure), or semiotics (if one wants to be deferential to the American, Peirce), is a very complex, complicated, and a tentative science (Roland Barthes, 1968). Semiotics as an autonomous theory is usually traced to the writings of Charles Peirce and Saussure (1966), while further refinements are attributed to writers such as Claude Levi-Strauss (1967), Roland Barthes (1968), Emile Benveniste (1971), Umberto Eco (1976) and Jacques Derrida (1978). Semiotics involves the study of signification, or the way that codes or signs can signify within very conventionalised systems.

Language involves signs, that is, entities which represent or stand for other entities the way a red cross on public announcements means a prohibition, or raising your thumb in answer to any query is a response that everything is under control. Peirce (1931) explains that a sign is something by knowing which we know something more; while Morris (1938: 20) suggests 'something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by an interpreter'. Eco (1984:15) in a similar vein writes, '... the sign was a part, an aspect, a peripheral manifestation of something which does not appear in its entirety'.

Jonathan Culler (1976: 19) explains the Saussurean sign as

...the union of a form which signifies, which Saussure calls the signifiant or signifier, and an idea signified, the signifie or signified. Though we may speak of a "signifier" and a "signified" as if they were separate entities, they exist only as components of the sign.

The sign is the central fact of language, and therefore in trying to separate what is essential from what is secondary or incidental we must start from the nature of the sign itself.

Although writers like Culler (1976) and Eco (1984) discuss the components of the sign as if it were possible to view the sign in such a manner, it is necessary to bear in mind that such divisions or components are purely for a structural analysis, as this study is.

Peirce (1931: 135) also describes the components of the sign as follows:

A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates, I call the “interpretant” of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its “object”. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the “ground”.

Schiffrin (1994: 191) summarises Morris (1938: 82) as also saying that the sign has four parts:

A sign vehicle is that which acts as a sign; a designatum is that to which the sign refers; an interpretant is the effect in virtue of which the sign vehicle is a sign; an interpreter is the organism upon which the sign has an effect. Put another way, something is a sign of a designatum for an interpreter to the degree that the interpreter takes account of the designatum in virtue of the presence of the sign.

While the nature of the signified has given rise to discussions centring on its degree of reality, theorists tend to agree that the signified is not a 'thing' but a mental representation of the 'thing'. Saussure (1966) himself stressed its mental characteristics by calling the signified a 'concept'. The signs are not physical objects or physical movements, rather they are sequences, of either sounds or the more visual medium, writing. A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name but a link between a concept and a word or sound. The sign is involved in a two-way relationship with the signifier and the signified, to bring about linguistic signification. The theoretical development of the notion of 'signification' revolves around the relationship between abstract linguistic signifying system to concrete utterances or between signifiers and signified. Peirce (1931) describes the signifying process as follows:

The sign or signifier represents in some capacity or other the object or referent, which is itself available only as an interpretant or signified, and in so doing elicits within the mind of the individual another interpretant or signified.

In discussing the notion of signification, semioticians, for instance, Morris (1938) or Silverman (1983), usually start with labelling types of linguistic signs which have some affinities and dissimilarities. These are the icon, the index and the sign proper (sometimes also called a 'symbol'), the signal and the allegory. Unfortunately, there is no consistency in the way that authors have defined these terms. There does, however, appear to be some agreement that these kinds of



signs consist of some kind of signifying mechanism and an object or proposition to be signified or a form and an associated meaning or a relation between two 'relata' as Barthes (1968: 35) points out. Culler (1976: 96) notes that the nature of the relationship between these relata are their distinguishing marks:

An icon involves actual resemblance between the signifier and the signified: a portrait signifies the person of whom it is a portrait less by an arbitrary convention than by resemblance. In an index the relationship between signifier and signified is causal: smoke means fire because fire is generally the cause of smoke; clouds mean rain if they are the clouds which produce rain; tracks are the sign of the type of animal likely to have produced them. In the sign proper, however, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional: shaking hands conventionally signifies greetings.

Silverman (1983: 14-25) describes the Peircian signs as also consisting of icon, indices and symbols:

The iconic sign resembles its conceptual object in certain ways. It may share certain of the properties which the object possesses, or it may duplicate the principles according to which that object is organised....The only way of directly communicating an idea is by means of an icon; and every indirect method of communicating an idea must depend for its establishment upon the use of an icon. Hence every assertion must contain an icon or set of icons, or else must contain signs whose meaning is only explicable by icons....The indexical sign is a real thing or fact which is a sign of its object by virtue of being connected with it as a matter of fact and by also forcibly intruding upon the mind quite regardless of its being interpreted as a sign....A symbol is a sign which refers to the

object that it denotes by virtue of law, usually an association of general idea which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object....Not only is it general itself but the object to which it refers is of a general nature. Now that which is general has as its being in the instances which it will determine.

The stressed features of the sign vary among theorists. In Barthes (1968: 35-38), there is a very informative comparison of how some of these theorists are using these terms in their work. Peirce (1940: 104) treats symbols as a subclass of signs defining them in the conventional nature of the relation which holds between the sign and what it stands for. So does Miller (1951: 5). Morris (1946: 23-27), who follows Peirce quite closely in certain aspects, says that 'a symbol is a sign – which acts as substitute for some other sign with which it is synonymous'. Natural languages and coding systems are prominently symbolic for Peirce (1931). For Saussure (1966), however, such systems are arbitrary and unmotivated in relation to their conceptual objects. Of importance is the fact that Peirce (1931) and Saussure (1966) use the term 'symbol' in diametrically opposed ways. Whereas Peirce (1931) means by it a relationship between two dissimilar elements, Saussure employs the term to designate the union of elements which have some features in common. Peirce's divisions of signs show not only greater flexibility than Saussure's (1966), but a keener sense of the overlapping functions served by a single signifying entity. Barthes's (1968) scheme is mostly in accord with Peirce (1940) and Saussure (1966), except that he also accommodates the notion of connotation as well as the more denotational interpretation offered by the other theorists.

While an understanding of the semiotic sign is sometimes clouded by the philosophical preference of a writer, no such problem is usually encountered with the sign in the linguistic arena. Applied to linguistics, the notion of the sign does not give rise to competition from neighbouring terms, for in linguistics the plane of the signifier constitutes the 'expression' while the signified constitutes the 'content'.

Signs can become part of any general meaning-creating system, like language, only under certain conditions. Any type of natural verbal output can only be elevated to the status of language when communication can occur in that medium. To differentiate this type of language from its natural counterpart, communicative language must be part of a system of convention, part of a regulated system of signs and codes. Searle (1969: 16) proclaims, 'speaking a language is engaging in a highly complex rule-governed behaviour'.

Speech communities share a history which enables them to reach consensus about the meaning of these codes and the conventions in their usage. As Roman Jakobson (1960) notes, private property in the sphere of language does not exist. Hence all communities of competent speakers of English would recognise the following combinations of morphemes and words as English and therefore understand sentences 10-12 in the same way, be they Tshivendas or Chinese:

10. Lufuno ate the porridge quickly.
11. Soft snow was falling the whole night on the mountains.
12. The hut had a painted straw roof.

That is to say, signs can only become part of a language, or for that matter, any proposition-relaying system, if they adhere to pre-agreed upon regulations. When signs behave in this manner they serve to express or communicate ideas, otherwise they remain as indecipherable noises, arm movements or markings on a page. Verbal and physical signs need to be organised systematically or conventionally by the users of these signs as there is no opacity between them and their meaning or significance:

Such systems are usually made explicit as systems of conventional RULES determining language behaviour as it manifests itself in the use of verbal utterances in communicative situations. The rules are CONVENTIONAL in the sense of being shared by most members of a linguistic community: they KNOW these implicitly and are able to use them such that verbal utterances may count as being determined by the particular language system of the community as it is cognitively acquired by the individual language user (van Dijk, 1977: 1).

Words are purely abstract or arbitrary pieces of codes that can be recorded, either in sound or writing. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1966), Saussure stresses the 'arbitrary' nature of the language sign. The relationship between the signifier and the signified being arbitrary or unmotivated is, in the Saussurean ideology, one of the central premises of semiology (1966: 67- 68):

The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by the sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: the linguistic sign is arbitrary....The idea of “sister” is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds “s-o-r” which serves as a signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by the difference among languages and the very existence of different languages: the signified “ox” has as the signifier “b-o-f” on one side of the border and “o-k-s” on the other.

In other words, since the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, there is no reason for one concept rather than another to be attached to a given signifier. There is, therefore, no defining property which a concept must retain in order to count as the signified of that signifier. A language does not simply assign arbitrary names to a set of independently existing concepts. It sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sounds in a distinctive way, but each language also produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinct and thus ‘arbitrary’ way of organising the world into categories. Hence, what the English call ‘water’, the Fantes in Ghana call ‘nsu’, and the Tshivendas call ‘madi’ do not conjure up ideationally the phenomenon being discussed. In other words, each combination of phonemes does not conjure up, to the other group, the picture of a ‘liquid substance’.

Of course, there are some limited occasions when linguistic signs can become motivated, more apparent, less arbitrary but rather iconic and indexical. These are the cases of onomatopoeia where the sound of the signifier seems in some way mimetic or imitative as in the Tshivenda words 'kumvu' (word for heavy object dropping into water), 'phaamu' (word for violently opening a door), 'thuuu' (word for rifle sound), moo (cow). But if these words were truly iconic and hence motivated, they would be the same in all languages, hence a degree of arbitrariness still exists even in these words.

In the absence of a causal link between the signifier and the signified which would enable one to treat each sign individually, one must construct a semiological system of conventions, from which these signs can be explained. That is to say, because these signs are unmotivated, society must devise a system which can explain and make them usable.

Semiology is thus based on the assumption that insofar as human actions or production convey meaning, insofar as they function as signs, there must be an underlying system of conventions and distinctions which make this meaning possible. Where there are signs there is a system. That is what various signifying activities have in common and if one is to determine their essential nature one must treat them not in isolation but as examples of semiological systems (Culler, 1976: 91).

In general terms, a system is a 'whole' made up of smaller units which stand in particular relationship to each other and perform particular functions with the

assistance of organising principles or rules. Human beings make noises, use gestures, employ a combination of objects or actions and in order for these signs to convey meaning, there must be a discipline which can analyse these kinds of activities and make explicit the conventional systems on which they function. In linguistics, a language is described as being 'rule-governed' (Searle, 1969: 16), hence in English there are organising rules specifying, for example, that 'I saw him' is the normal order in an active declarative sentence; that sex is distinguished in third person pronouns and that the notion of case is illustrated in the object pronoun. The rules also stipulate that sounds unite to form words or parts of words, and these units, in turn, combine to form longer sequences, like complex words, phrases or sentences. In these larger groups, each of the smaller units still maintain some of their original functions as well as enter into a particular relation with the adjacent constituents.

For Saussure, as noted in Chapter One of this thesis, the relationship between linguistic signs can be described on two planes or axes – syntagmatic and paradigmatic (Saussure's own term was 'associative') – each of which generates its own values. The value of a linguistic code depends in part on those features which distinguish it from the other signs within its system, particularly those it most resembles, and in part on those features that distinguish it from the other signs adjacent to it in the utterance. The syntagmatic plane is linear and indicates the relations which a unit contracts by virtue of its combination with other units of the same level. For instance, the lexical item 'some' is syntagmatically related to

the adjective 'small' and the noun 'children' in the expression 'some small children'; also the letters 's,m,a,l,' are all involved in a syntagmatic relation in the word 'small'. Such combinations are possible and recognised by users of the language because they have been sanctioned by the underlying system. Hence one of the acceptable nominal phrase structures in English is 'article + adjective + noun' giving us a phrase like 'some interesting stories', while a pronounceable lexeme is 'voiceless alveolar fricative + voiced bilabial nasal + a mid back vowel + a double voiced alveolar liquid' giving us a word like 'small'.

A paradigmatic relationship is realised by units which can substitute meaningfully for each other in an utterance. For example, in the phrase 'the small child', 'the' is in a paradigmatic relation with other determiners like 'a, that, this', while 'small' can enter into arrangement with words like, 'big, huge, pretty, tiny', while a similar paradigmatic substitution with words like, 'boy, girl, son, daughter, infant' is permitted for 'child'.

These choices, among the other Saussurean dichotomies: langue and parole, substance and form, synchronic and diachronic, demonstrate the meaning-generating capacity of language. Choice is one of the criteria for meaning creation. If users of a language cannot choose between alternative linguistic items then no information is communicated in selecting a particular language item.



The fact that linguistic signs must be part of a conventionalised system with definite regulations in their arrangement before qualifying as a proposition-signalling apparatus, is just one of the features of language. Some of the formal (structural) as well as the functional characteristics of language, based on Lyons (1977) follow.

### **3.2.1.1 PROPERTIES OF LANGUAGE**

#### **3.2.1.1.1 Duality**

What Hockett (in Lyons, 1977: 74) calls 'duality' (or more fully 'duality of patterning') or double articulation is recognised as one of the universal features of language. To say that a language has the property of duality is to say that it has two levels of structural patterning – phonological and grammatical. And these two levels are related hierarchically, with the higher levels comprising forms which are made of the lower segments. In terms of speech production, we have the physical level at which we can produce individual sounds like [u], [t] and [b]. When we produce these sounds in particular combinations as in [tub] or [but], we have another level of meaning. So at one level we have distinct sounds and at another we have distinct grammatical meaning. This duality of levels is one of the economical features that human language possesses. For with a limited number of sounds and grammatical units, users have the opportunity for various phonological and grammatical combinations.

#### **3.2.1.1.2 Productivity**

This is the property of a language system which enables native speakers to construct and understand an infinite number of utterances, including those they have never before encountered in their linguistic experience. New situations arise and new objects have to be constantly described. It is this creativity or open-endedness of language which ensures that users of it manipulate their available linguistic resources to cope with the plurality of situations. The fact that children, at a very early age, can make and understand utterances that they have never heard before is sufficient proof that the language does not have a limited number of utterances which must be memorised or imitated in the process of acquiring proficiency. Non-human signalling, on the other hand, has been proven, experimentally, to have little flexibility in the production of new signals.

#### **3.2.1.1.3 Discreteness**

Although a language is composed of a multitude of signs, these must have a signification common and discrete to a group of users or interpreters. The term 'discreteness' applies to the signals or elements of a semiotic system if the signals used in a language are meaningfully distinct so that differences between them are absolute and do not admit gradation in terms of more or less. Such a system is not 'continuous' but discrete. This can be illustrated by the sounds [p]

and [b]. Acoustically there is not a lot of difference between the two; however, they are used in such a way that the occurrence of one rather than the other is meaningful. The fact that the pronunciation of the forms [pat] and [bat] leads to a distinction in meaning can only be due to the exclusiveness or discreteness of the two sounds, [p] and [b]. A sign which has the potential for divergent signification in similar situations poses a problem for its qualification as a member of a discrete system.

#### **3.2.1.1.4 Semantics**

A semiotic system, like language, has meaning or information imputed to the individual signs. Semantics is defined in terms of the associative ties or significations that hold between signals and their culturally-agreed upon features. Signals or codes may have some extra connotational significance to individual users, but such extraneous information will not be within the conventional system of the language and confirms the interpersonality of language codes.

#### **3.2.1.1.5 Displacement**

This feature of language makes it possible to refer to and discuss issues and objects that are remote in time and place from the utterance itself. Lyons (1977:80) points out that the idea of displacement can be traced back to the behaviourist conception of language and meaning. According to this theory, the

primary function of words and utterances is to refer to features of the immediate environment, with which they are associated as stimuli to responses, and the correlation of linguistic expressions with objects and events outside the situation-of-utterance is a matter of secondary development:

A message is displaced to the extent that the key features in its antecedents and consequences are removed from the time and place of transmission (Lyons, 1977: 80-81).

Lyons adds that whether the ability of displacement can be used to describe non-human signalling systems or indeed any human non-verbal system will depend on our definition of spatio-temporal remoteness and reference.

#### **3.2.1.1.6 Interchangeability**

Lyons (1977: 81) states that

Any organism equipped for the transmission of messages in the system is also equipped to receive messages in the same system.

Reference here is to the ability of interlocutors in a verbal transaction to be both speakers and hearers of a message using essentially the same system. This may seem a trivial characteristic but in many animal signalling systems, for example, it is not uncommon for members of one sex to produce mating calls

which only members of the other sex can respond to. Closely dependent on the notion of interchangeability is the fact that speakers hear and are able to monitor their own performance. This does not refer to the physical process of monitoring an utterance's audibility but describes the ability of interlocutors to check for comprehensibility and correctness of language formation and make adjustments when called for.

#### **3.2.1.1.7 Specialisation**

This is a feature stressed in the behaviourist school of thought in language acquisition in connection with the idea of triggering, which refers to the indirect influence that one organism exerts upon the behaviour of another. A signal is considered very objective and specialised if there is no relation between the direct physical consequences of the signal and its effect upon the behaviour of the receiving organism.

#### **3.2.1.1.8 Cultural Transmission**

This quality is contrasted with genetic transmission and means that the acquisition of a particular language is context dependent; it necessitates teaching and learning, rather than being instinctive. In other words, acquisition is achieved in a culture with other speakers rather than from parental genes. Hence Tshivenda children (that is, both parents are from Venda), if taken to China at an

early age and not exposed to the Tshivenda linguistic culture, would grow up inheriting the physical features of their parents but would inevitably speak Chinese. This is exactly what Chomsky (1983) means by his theory of the innateness of language ability. Chomsky (1983) writing on language growth describes the inevitability of any language development in a person, with the development only prejudiced by the absence of a linguistic context. In other words, despite humans having an inborn disposition towards language acquisition, there must be a conducive linguistic environment before language development will take place. Language development is, therefore, context and culture dependent, an aspect which is central to this thesis, as already argued. The much told story of Genie (Curtiss, 1977), a girl who, because of no exposure to any meaningful linguistic input, was unable to communicate, emphasises this point.

#### **3.2.1.1.9 Learnability**

A language has to have this property to enable users to internalise it as their own. Users, of whatever background, have the propensity to acquire it as their first language or learn it as a subsequent language, barring any physiological or psychological handicaps. Learnability also refers to the innate qualities of the language itself. In other words, it refers to a certain type of language which is orderly, systematic and predictable enough for users to make some correct assumptions rather than each instance of its use being unique.

The discussion now examines 'text', a subdivision of the notion of 'language'. This study reserves the terms, 'text' and 'utterances' to actual instances of language use. This is in line with established practice (Hjelmslev, 1943, Mey, 1993 and Schiffrin, 1994).

### 3.2.1.2 TEXT

Linguists like Mey (1993) and Coulthard (1994) agree that single sentences and utterances are not sufficient, as a framework, for a discussion of a person's communicative status, but that a more comprehensive picture should be obtained from a bigger stretch of output or what is loosely known as 'text':

Discourse analysis has an obvious candidate for the larger unit: *discourse* or *text* for the written language approach (Anne Reboul and Jacques Moeschler, 1997: 283).

In its more primitive version, a 'text' was considered as no more than a grammar of anything that extends beyond the sentence:

For some text grammarians the text is indeed nothing but an extended sentence bound together by certain special, somewhat strange "punctuation marks", called "sentence connectives" (Mey, 1993: 183).

Indeed in an early article, Katz and Fodor (1963: 181) write that

...discourse [i.e. text] can be treated as a single sentence in isolation by regarding sentence boundaries as sentential connectives.

Text defined in this way serves to make observations about the structural organisation of sentences (syntax) as well as the distributional and meaning possibilities of lexical items within a grammatically defined context (semantics). The vast majority of languages, perhaps all, is formally divided into some kind of hierarchical and lineal structure, sections of which are distinct from each other. For instance, a morpheme has distinct qualities from a word, phrase, clause and so on. It is equally feasible to engage in a lineal description; for example, one can say, this text comprises a certain number of connectives, pronominal references and adverbial and adjectival descriptive items. Analysts in specialised related sciences may undertake to describe texts for various purposes, like establishing the occurrence of certain combination and sequence of sentence constituents, or the frequency of transformed sentences in a text or the pattern of argument development in a text. Efforts can even be made to characterise the statistical regularities in discourse. This type of work can provide details on features like the mean sentence length, a writer's preference in length of lexical items against functional items through to frequency counts of words taken from particular registers or vocabulary fields, to studies of characteristic ways of distributing background information in a text.

Texts analysed in a pragmatic domain, and in this study, are regarded as a socio-linguistic entity or event in which the identity, location and the relative



social statuses of the participants in the communication, together with a description of the social or institutional occasion within which such an utterance is possible, are identified. This study focuses on one type of pragmatic analysis, the Gricean, where the text is not viewed as a collection of sentences but as a communication event or a meaning-creating tool. Gricean pragmatics, therefore, focuses on meaning in context by examining the co-relation between the 'sign' (forms of language) and the 'use' (function and meaning). Discussions along these lines usually involve examining two central concepts of Gricean pragmatics, speaker and hearer meaning, and the co-operative principles in conversation. These discussions form part of Chapter Three, an account of the socio-linguistic concept of texts, and language in general.

A pragmatic analysis of text includes a classification of the text's composite sentence types and their role in speaker intention and hearer interpretation. This study will undertake such a classification along the principles identified in Speech Act Theory. Most languages use such classification to distinguish, at least, between declaratives ordinarily used, among other functions, to report facts, interrogatives used at least to form yes/no questions and imperatives used to make marked requests. Some languages may have other sentence forms, a special type used for expressing wishes, one for making promises and so on. Speech Act Theory, used in conjunction with Gricean pragmatics, describes text in such a manner that the interplay between the speaker, the form, the hearer,

the context and the function, in the realisation of meaning, is demonstrated. This account also forms part of Chapter Three.

In his early writings, Van Dijk (1977: 3) uses the term 'text' to denote the abstract theoretical construct which underlines the physical structure of organised bigger units of utterances. Hence, he talks of individual sentences or macro-speech acts in the formation of text. He (*ibid.*) also introduces another dimension into the structure of text, correctness, by declaring:

Those utterances which can be assigned textual structure are thus acceptable discourses of the language, i.e. are well-formed and interpretable.

Thinking of text in this fashion, that is, as a compilation of acceptable individual sentences and not as an organ of human behaviour, places restrictions on its flexibility and ultimately its usefulness as a communication tool: a trademark of text. Mey (1993; 184), suggests that

What we need to do is transcend the limited approach that sees text as a collection of language production and ascribes these productions to single individual uttering sentences, or even to pairs of individuals exchanging standardized text units such as questions and answers, orders and acknowledgement, promises and acceptance and other simple conversation repartees.

Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler in their book, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (1996: 33) also express their dissatisfaction with the earlier definitions by noting that:

... a text cannot be explained as a configuration of morphemes or sentences: we would rather say that morphemes and sentences function as operational units and patterns for signalling meanings and purposes during communication.

Having said that, they go on to define what a text is by listing the qualities that it should have. For them, a 'text' is a 'communication occurrence' which must meet, what they call, 'seven standards of textuality' (1996: 3). A review of these standards outlines quite comprehensively the features that distinguish a text from a non-text. As this study examines and evaluates texts or utterances of speakers, features considered pertinent to a text are important to this examination.

The first standard is the notion of cohesion and coherence which refers to the way the components of the surface text, that is, words and sounds, are actually connected within an ordained sequence. The joining of components, both in the linguistic and non-linguistic worlds, is governed by conventions which are understood by users of that commodity. For language, the conventions are the grammatical rules. As linguists have pointed out, the surface structure of texts cannot be indiscriminately rearranged without posing semantic and pragmatic problems for its users. Language combinations are regulated both at the vertical and horizontal axes. The horizontal (cohesion) ensures grammatical

acceptability, while the vertical (coherence) is achieved by structural devices like causality, reason, time, locality, inference, through grammatical strategies like recurrence, parallelism, tense, intonation, ellipses and so on. Such attention to detail can be accommodated in a pragmatic analysis as the structural codes are just as important in an examination of the use of language, hence, of significance to this study.

In an echo of van Dijk (1977), Beaugrande and Dressler (1996) identify acceptability as another requirement, though they do not differentiate too rigidly between acceptability and intentionality as they deem these two features as being closely related:

A language configuration must be intended to be a text and accepted as such in order for it to be utilized in a communicative interaction. This attitude involves some tolerance towards disturbances of cohesion and coherence, as long as the purposeful nature of the communication is upheld.

The emphasis here is on both the creators and receivers of a text: that they must make some effort to negotiate meaning from utterances, as actual linguistic interactions sometimes portray lapses in cohesion, during which intentionality and acceptability of utterances may be compromised. These may occur in collections of unrelated sentences, but their effect is somewhat lessened in textual outputs. Nevertheless, although hearers and readers are very accommodating, extreme idiosyncratic texts, with no apparent justification for the

exploitation of such a style, places marked strain on communication (Gumperz, 1964: 153).

It is not usual to have interlocutors engage in idle non-informative interactions or text creation. We speak because we have something informative to communicate, however banal, inaccurate, irrelevant, uninspiring or otherwise the surface structure may be judged. For example, the utterance, 'It is cold in here' uttered by a newcomer, on a cold morning, to a room full of coat-wearing people is not as banal a statement as it may initially seem. If it is a statement to be taken at its face value, then it could be either a form of a phatic communication with minimal significance, or an observation, or a command or a request for some solution to some perceived problem. Should it be a sarcastic remark, accompanied by appropriate non-verbal gestures and tone, then it could indicate that the speaker is not impressed with either the room, the coats or the wearers of the coats and so on. Hence, an obvious, predictable, un-stimulating text, in certain linguistic environments, is as informative as the next text. A totally un-informative utterance, to both producer and receiver, which is not attributable to blemished surface configurations, cannot, justifiably, be classified as a text.

The term 'situationality' is a designation for the multiplicity of environments which render a text relevant to a current or recoverable situation of occurrence. This is in line with the role pragmatics accords the context of an utterance. Beaugrand and Dressler (1996) conclude their list of features with a discussion of

'intertextuality', the 'oneness' of the ways in which the production and reception of texts is dependent upon the participants' texts or the relatedness between texts or what is technically known as 'macro-pragmatics' which van Dijk (1977: 217) explains as

...[a] global speech act performed by the utterance of a whole discourse, and executed by a sequence of possibly different speech acts.

This account of text features may seem on the surface to be more suited to large pieces of text, longer than in an average verbal exchange, the type that this study is examining. However, the pragmatic analysis of discourse which comments on the structure or form of utterances exploits, extensively, guidelines laid down by such features as those discussed by Beaugrand and Dressler (1996). Macro-pragmatics extends Speech Act Theory so that the focus is on composite utterances or a sequence of utterances that can be classified as a 'text'. In this way, a macro-speech act results from a linguistic act that is spread over several utterances.

These features demonstrate the vibrancy of texts and the complexity of meaning creation. Texts are dynamic constructions with no restrictions on the number or types of units and features that go into their creation. Texts are produced all the time. They literally never stop being produced, as long as there are text producers and occasions.

Halliday and Hasan (1989: 8) observe that a text

is language that is functional. By functional we simply mean language that is doing some job in some context as opposed to isolated words or sentences ... so (is) any instance of living language that is playing some part in a context of situation. It may be either spoken or written, or indeed in any other medium of expression.

They continue the discussion by noting that, although when we construct a text we do so using words, sentences and sounds, basically a text is a semantic unit. It is not an extended sentence. Its semantic nature means that a text has to be considered from two perspectives at once

both as a *product* and as a *process*. We need to see the text as product and the text as process and to keep both these aspects in focus. The text is a product in the sense that it is an output, something that can be recorded and studied, having a certain construction that can be represented in systematic terms. It is a process in the sense of a continuous process of semantic choice, a movement through the network of meaning potential, with each set constituting the environment for a further set (1989: 8)

A consideration of text as 'a process' captures its dynamic meaning-creating nature in such a way that it is conceivable that people use it to survive in their everyday language transactions since it is a living, context-specific, cultural artifact. Embedded in this approach is an acknowledgement of the role the environment or the context plays in text creation. However, an over-indulgence in the notion of the text as a process usually leads to the de-emphasising of the

linguistic (grammar) system that lies behind the creation of meaning within a text. Reducing the role of structural norms, of course, would not give a comprehensive picture of a text. It is, therefore, necessary to describe the text as also 'a product' of structural conventions. The tension here is to combine the two concepts of text, namely, product and process, so as to capture and balance its functional-structural features. The need to combine these two aspects of language gave rise to different approaches to discourse analysis such as the systemic linguistics of theorists like Berry (1975 and 1977) and functional grammar by Halliday (1973, 1976 and 1985). The next section examines the notion of functional grammar as outlined by Halliday (*ibid.*), as this has some relevance to this study.

The notion of functional grammar by Halliday (*ibid.*) is an acknowledgement that any grammar should be functional or should have meaning-creating potential. This idea challenges any notion that neglects to characterise function as the fundamental principle of language and language codes as having precedence over speech acts. The impression created is that development of rules of use are not incidental but that competence for use is part of the same developmental matrix as development for grammar. Halliday's framework emphasises the social functions of speech and writing. It is functional grammar as the conceptual framework on which it is based is a functional one instead of a formal one. Such a grammar is designed to account for how the language is used. Language has evolved to satisfy human needs; and the way it is organized is essentially



'natural' in the sense that everything in the language can be explained ultimately by reference to how language is used. This is because the fundamental components of meaning in language are functional components. In other words the units within a language – its clauses, its phrases, its words and so on – are all organic configurations of the functions. The relevant question at this stage is what is the role of codes in a functional grammar? The answer Halliday (1994: xxx) gives is that 'stated in other terms a grammar is an attempt to crack the code' in such a way that the functional nature of the grammar is maintained. One can only do that by the way one approaches the utterances within the speech event or the text that is being created in the interaction.

As Halliday and Hassan (1989: 8-9) rightly note, the tension is marginally resolved if one sees the text as created through an interaction between two types of information. The first type is semantic: a stable core of propositional meaning conveyed through the linguistic or grammatically recognisable units, such as clauses, and through the relations that are established among these units; the second type is contextual information. In its most basic form, contextual information includes all that surrounds a text so that a better understanding and classification of it is obtained. Mey (1993:184) stresses that he is not, here, referring to the narrow 'co-text', but rather an extension which would capture the whole of the linguistic scene to embrace the entirety of circumstances that surround the production of language.

Deborah Schiffrin (1994: 362) contributes to the discussion by making a distinction between text, 'what is said', and the environment in which 'what is said', occurs:

If we say the text provides the "what is said" part of utterances, then it is context that combines with "what is said" to create an utterance. Context is thus a world filled with people producing utterances: people who have social, cultural, and personal identities, knowledge, beliefs, goals and wants, who interact with one another in various socially and culturally defined situations.

The point being made here is that an utterance is a language output to which socio-contextual factors have been added, or as Mey (1993: 185) puts it, an utterance does not become a living discourse out of context. A socio-linguistic approach to text, and language in general, the stance in this study, is a multi-faceted approach to communicative competence. Competence is viewed not as control over a particular text variable but a more global phenomenon, covering areas like the speaker, the form, the contextual factors, the hearer, and the function. The next section examines the second variable in text creation, the 'situation' (context).

### **3.2.2 SITUATION: CONTEXT OF TEXTS**

The introduction of context into the creation of the meaning of an utterance goes back as far as 1935 when Firth called for linguists to study conversation, for there

a better understanding of language and how it works can be found. Firth's words may have mimicked the ideas of Malinowsky (1923) who found that he had to include a detailed commentary, before he could present, intelligently, a description of verbal interactions of the Kiriwinian language of the Trobriand Islands. Feeling that in such an extended context information cannot have the same status as the more restricted context, he classified this as 'context of situation'. Malinowsky's (*ibid.*) context of situation, therefore, elaborated on the narrower verbal context to include the total living environment, verbal environment included, in which an utterance occurred. Once he had embarked on the articulation of the context of the situation, Malinowsky decided that familiarity even with the cultural background was necessary for full comprehension of an utterance.

Context operates at two levels: external and internal settings for interaction. Internal is the more visible and commonly accepted notion of context, which includes the relationship between the constituents of the sentence codes as well as other content particulars. External context here is detailed as the pragmatic presuppositions or inferences about the beliefs, knowledge and experiences of the participants required to understand an utterance. A slightly different categorisation is offered by Fillmore (1981: 143-167):

I will refer to the analytical process of determining the character of such "world sets" as CONTEXTUALIZATION. In EXTERNAL CONTEXTUALIZATION our concern is with the worlds in which the text can appropriately be used; with INTERNAL

CONTEXTUALIZATION our concern is with the worlds in the imagination of the creator and interpreters of the text.

Both approaches to context are based on the notion that a structural-linguistic context provides an insufficient account of the factors involved in meaning creation, thereby justifying a consideration of extra-linguistic considerations. Grice (1957) similarly, talks of the assumptions which ensure co-operation between conversation partners. Grice's theory of conversation implicatures arises out of his identified maxims of conversation or the context specifications underlying the efficient use of language.

This brief discussion of context can be summarised as the presuppositions or variables that are linguistically relevant in the creation of discourse. The hypothesis is that most utterances can be understood in diverse ways based on the configuration of the context; and people's interpretation of an exchange is directly related to the prominence of one or more of these variables: lexical, syntactic, environmental and stylistic decisions. Context then is a frame or schema through which utterances are examined and interpreted. Schemata are considered to be conventional knowledge: those structures which exist in our memory and are activated under certain conditions in the interpretation of what we experience. At the very obvious level we have schemata for the usual verbal activities in our lives, for instance, food schemata, family schemata, office schemata and so on.

Levinson (1983) talks of meaning being assessed as 'an activity'. He uses the term to emphasise the point that, although we are dealing with a structured ordering of message elements, yet this is not a static process, but rather an active process, which develops and changes as the participants interact. For instance, the utterance: 'These are lovely cakes' has possible meanings depending on variables like the location, the role players, its phonological characteristics, the time of day, as well as the accompanying linguistic and non-linguistic marks. These conditions or variables can be referred to as an 'organising principle' in meaning interpretation, as they determine and channel inferences which either foreground or underplay aspects of the background and hence, the meaning of an utterance.

Contextual information is always information that is identified in relation to something else, the primary focus of the concerned parties' attention: in this instance, interlocutors using language. That is to say, context is a by-product of language: of users engaged in the main activity of meaning negotiation.

This means that it is impossible to talk about context in a vacuum: context cannot exist unless we are thinking of "something else" (e.g. an image, a smell, a sound, a word, an utterance, a sequence of utterances) that is located relative to it. The identity of that "something else" influences our decisions about what counts as context and about what "parts" of context we find important. Thus although it seems possible to find a single source of text (i.e. in the linguistic system) the source of contextual information is necessarily more varied: context has multiple sources that can be quite different from one another and can shift depending on our focus of attention (Schriffin, 1994: 362).

Saville-Troike (1982: 22) makes a similar point:

Interpreting the meaning of linguistic behaviour requires knowing the meaning in which it is embedded. Ultimately all aspects of culture are relevant to communication, but those that have the most direct relevance on the communication forms and processes are the social structure, the values and attitudes held about language and ways of speaking, the network of conceptual categories which result from shared experiences....Shared cultural knowledge is essential to explain the shared presuppositions and judgement of truth values which are the essential undergirdings of language structures as well as of contextually appropriate usage and interpretation.

This notion of context, a pragmatic or socio-linguistic one, is also the approach central to this study, as already discussed. Context viewed in this way extends the strictly linguistic environment of utterances so as to acknowledge that language users operate in other kinds of contexts. Linguistic or stable conventional contexts exist, for texts, based on the technical rules of grammar and usually there is very little negotiation in that instance. A tension is created when one operates within a pragmatic context which sees meaning as a dynamic setting, effecting constant change on the meaning. This thesis examines the tension and interplay of the conventional context and the pragmatic context in the interpretation of speaker meaning.

While referential meaning may be ascribed to elements in the linguistic code in a static manner, situated or pragmatic meaning must be accounted for as an

emergent and dynamic process, brought about by the interaction between the static codes and the volatile context. A context, therefore, is not restricted to just one possible world-state but includes a sequence of world-states which undergo very rapid adjustments (Saville-Troike, 1982). Van Dijk (1977: 192) talks of an infinite number of contexts with only one being appropriate or the actual context in a given linguistic situation:

The actual context is defined by the period of time, and the place where the common activities of speaker and hearer are realized, and which satisfy the properties of “here” and “now” logically, physically, and cognitively.

In his earlier writings, van Dijk (1976) describes the context as an abstract notion which must have properties adequate and sufficient for the formulation of rules and conditions necessary for the realisation of utterances. He uses the Searlean terms of ‘happy’ and ‘appropriate’ (1969) to describe the contexts in their relationship to the interpretation of an utterance. Mey (1993: 8-10), in a similar vein, states that

...a context is dynamic, that is to say, it is an environment that is in steady development, prompted by the continuous interaction of the people engaged in language use, the users of the language. Context is the quintessential pragmatic concept; it is by definition proactive, just as people are.

Mey (1993: 182-186) further indicates that the differences between a ‘grammatical’ and a ‘user-oriented’ point of view in relation to language or

utterances are in the context. On the former view, we consider linguistic elements in isolation, as syntactic structures or parts of the grammatical paradigm, such as, case, tense and so on, whereas, on the latter, we pose ourselves the question: How are these linguistic elements used in a concrete setting, that is, in a context? A similar notion is articulated by Recanti (1994), in Reoboul and Moeschler (1997) who makes a distinction between 'a formal and natural' language where the former is language which has a fixed interpretation and is independent of context, while the latter, the contextualist stance, presupposes the opposite:

Taking a contextualist stance does not imply denying that the linguistic data (lexicon, syntax, etc.) have a role in utterance interpretation. It merely means saying that these data are not sufficient and that they must be complemented by non-linguistic interpretation processes, which can be called *contextual* (Reboul and Moeschler, 1997: 289).

Schiffrin (1994) does not account for context in such a global manner, choosing instead to describe context in relation to the different approaches to text analysis that she examines, as these approaches make different assumptions about what aspects of context are relevant to the production and interpretation of utterances or text. Some of these approaches view context in a very narrow way, limiting it to the immediate surrounding verbal structures, for example, variationist (Schiffrin, 1994). Other approaches, such as interpersonal (Gumperz, 1985) or ethnographic (Saville-Troike, 1982), include the societal context of the texts. The



latter approach presupposes the existence of a particular society, with its implicit and explicit values, norms, rules and laws, and with all its particular conditions of life: economic, social, political and cultural. Context factors also include the beliefs, knowledge and experiences of the interlocutors. All these aspects of context information serve as the pragmatic presuppositions that interlocutors use to create the context for a text.

The next section is devoted to the third unit in communicative competence, act (function). Since the emphasis of this thesis is on the functional approach to language this last component of communicative competence is deliberated upon at some length.

### **3.2.3 ACT: (FUNCTION)**

A discussion of communicative competence is inadequate without an explanation of the functions of language. The description and explanation of the various functions that utterances can perform is possible with various classification systems. Speech Act Theory (SAT), the approach that this thesis will be outlining, was developed in the 1960s by a group of language philosophers, of whom the most important is J.L. Austin (1962). In his seminal work on functions of language, Austin asserts that what he has to say about language is 'neither difficult nor contentious. The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious' (1962: 1). Therefore his claim to 'fame' is that he has articulated a

notion to which specific attention had not previously been paid. Austin's fundamental insight is that an utterance can constitute an act. That is, in making an utterance one can 'do' things, as well as 'say' things. An act performed through speech is a 'speech act'.

In the approach to the analysis of speech events termed speech act theory, the message sent, the content of the communication, is a form of human action. This action is not the act of speaking, but an act we perform by speaking – a speech act (*ibid.*).

Although the focus of SAT has been on utterances, especially those made in conversation, the phrase 'speech act' is taken as a generic term for any sort of language use, oral or otherwise. Speech acts, whatever the medium of their articulation, fall under the broad category of intentional acts, and hence are part of the theory of action. That is because one of the theory's pertinent features is that when one acts intentionally, generally one has a fixed intention in one's mind, similar to reasons for making an utterance. As noted earlier, an 'act' can be physically, mentally or linguistically performed. Let us consider the sentences,

10. This is a book.
11. Those are the apples I was given.
12. I am holding the marked assignments.
13. We had a salary raise.

An intentional act is performed physically when we hold the book, the apples, the marked assignments and the money, mentally when we imagine these items and linguistically when we utter the words of sentences 10–13. The acts, in sentences 10–13, of giving information, performed through speech or words are termed a ‘speech acts’ or ‘speech events’. For the purpose of this thesis, the more familiar term ‘speech acts’ is used to refer to this act of speaking or sending spoken or written intentions to other members of our speech community. It must be stressed here that the ‘act’ is not the physical action of moving one’s vocal cords or hands in making an utterance or writing sentences, but the ‘act’ one achieves by uttering or writing this particular string of words. The following examples may explain the point better. If I were to say:

14. Goodness, the windows are open!
15. Am I feeling sick today?
16. Close the windows!

The speech act is not one of either uttering a statement (as in 14), an interrogative (as in 15) or an imperative (as in 16), but one of making a request for a hearer to decrease the chill factor or increase the heat in a room. Austin (1962) realises that viewing sentences as an act, is a novel way, as sentences have always been seen as describing world facts. More clarity, therefore, was needed in what ways a sentence or discourse might be said to be performing actions. Austin isolates three basic senses in which saying something equals

doing something. These amount to three kinds of acts that are simultaneously performed:

- (i) **Locutionary act:** a complex act comprising several types of actions: phonological, syntactic and semantic, hence it is the uttering of a sentence with determinate sense and reference (the actual words uttered).
- (ii) **Illocutionary act:** what is usually meant when we make an utterance is that we accomplish some specific social act, for example, the making of a statement, an offer, or a promise, by virtue of the conventional force associated with it.
- (iii) **Perlocutionary act:** the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effect being special to the circumstance of utterance (the effect of the illocution on the hearer).

Let us analyse sentence 17 below to see how Austin applies the terms:

17. What time is it?

**Locutionary act:** an interrogative statement in the simple present tense.

**Illocutionary act:** In appropriate circumstances:

Complaint because the hearer is late for an appointment.

Request to hearer to tell the time.

Suggestion for hearer to go home; etc

**Perlocutionary act:** Some kind of contrite behaviour from the hearer.

Hearer looking at her watch and telling the time.

Hearer (hopefully) leaving speaker's presence etc.

These explanations show that the locutionary act is the actual uttering of words or sounds to make either a statement or issue a command or ask a question. The explanation of the other two is offered by Levinson (1983: 237) when he sums up the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts as follows:

... the illocutionary act is directly achieved by the conventional force associated with the issuance of a certain kind of utterance in accord with a conventional procedure, and is consequently determinate (in principle at least). In contrast, a perlocutionary act is specific to the circumstance of the issuance, and is therefore not conventionally achieved just by uttering that particular utterance, and includes all those effects, intended or unintended, often indeterminate, that some particular utterance in a particular situation may cause.

The theory of Speech Act is partly taxonomic and partly explanatory as it is not only an attempt to break down scientifically and philosophically the procedures involved in making an utterance, but also an attempt to classify systematically the reasons for the linguistic acts we make. Both Austin and Searle base their theories on the hypothesis that 'speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behaviour' (Searle 1969: 11), which results in the accomplishment of some specific social act, function or intention. These linguistic

events or speech acts are classifiable, for example, as a promise, a request or giving advice.

### **3.2.3.1 CLASSIFICATION OF SPEECH ACTS**

Speech Act Theory, stripped of all its trimmings, operates on the basic belief that language is primarily for communication and for this to happen certain rituals have to be observed. The theory then goes on to claim that the functions of, the reasons for, or the intentions behind communication can be classified. Each type of function, reason or intention is then known as a 'speech act'.

Just as linguists have tried to understand how speakers are able to produce an infinite number of sentences given a finite set of rules for sentences, language practitioners have tried to understand how an infinite number of sentences might reflect a very finite set of functions. These theorists argue that since the number of things one does with words are limited, one ought to be able to assign functions to all forms of utterances. A number of theorists, including Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), have attempted to categorise speech functions. For example, Malinowski (1923) classified the functions into two broad areas - pragmatic and magical. As an anthropologist, he was interested in practical or pragmatic use of language on the one hand and, on the other, in ritual and magical uses of language that were associated with ceremonial or religious activities in the language of a culture. A quite different classification was

proposed by the Austrian psychologist Karl Buhler (1934) who categorised the functions of utterances into: expressive function (being language that is oriented towards the self, the speaker); conative function (being language that is orientated towards the hearer); and representational function (being language that is oriented towards anything other than speaker and hearer). Buhler was applying a conceptual framework inherited from Plato: the distinction of first, second and third persons. This framework was developed further by John Britton (1970) who proposed a framework of transactional, expressive and poetic language functions.

Allan (1994bc) offers four classes of language use with a hearer's evaluation as criteria: statements, invitationals, authoritatives and expressives. Vendler (1972), Bach and Harnish (1979), Edmondson (1981), Levinson (1983), and Wierzbicka (1987a) have all attempted to capture what it is that we do with language. Table 3.1 gives a summary of some of these authors' concepts of speech acts.

**Table 3.1 is a comparison of five classifications of illocutionary types**

| Austin (1962) | Searle (1969) | Vendler (1972) | Bach and Harnish (1979) | Allan (1986)   |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Expositives   | Assertives    | Expositives    | Assertives              | Statements     |
| Commissives   | Commissives   | Commissives    | Commissives             |                |
| Behabitives   | Expressives   | Behabitives    | Acknowledgement         | Expressives    |
| Exercitives   | Directives    | Interrogatives | Directives              | Invitationals  |
|               |               | Exercitives    |                         | Authoritatives |
| Verdictives   | Declaratives  | Verdictives    | Verdictives             |                |

|  |  |            |            |  |
|--|--|------------|------------|--|
|  |  | Operatives | Effectives |  |
|--|--|------------|------------|--|

Although there are subtle differences in perception in the various categories, what all the outlines have attempted to do was to come up with ways of describing uses of language or constructing some kind of conceptual framework to interpret the various ways that language functions in people's lives. This was the same task that Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) engaged in when Austin wrote his book *How to Do Things with Words*, mentioned earlier, which Searle (1969) expanded in his book, *Speech Acts*. Because this present research examines the contributions of Austin and Searle to SAT, their classifications, particularly those of Searle, are examined in some detail below.

### 3.2.3.1.1 Classification of speech acts: Austin

Austin (1962:151-164) distinguishes five general functions of language:

**Verdictives** are typified by the giving of verdicts, as the name implies, by a jury, arbitrator or umpire. But they do not have to be final as they may be an estimate, reckoning, or appraisal.

**Exercitives** are the exercising of powers, rights or influences. Examples are appointing, voting, ordering, advising and so on.

**Commissives** are typified by promising or giving an undertaking; they commit one to doing a certain action, but also include declarations, intention and so on.

**Behabitives** are a miscellaneous group that have to do with attitudes and social behaviours. Examples are apologising, congratulating, commending, cursing and so on.



**Expositives** make clear how one's utterances fit into a general argument or discussion. They include phrases like, 'I reply', 'I assume' and 'I postulate'.

Austin (1962:152) was very quick to point out that he was not very definite in these classifications:

We should be very clear from the start that there are still wide possibilities of marginal or awkward cases or overlaps. The last two classes are those which are most troublesome and it could well be they are not clear or are cross-classified, or even that some fresh classification altogether is needed. I am not putting any of this forward as in the very least definitive. Behabitives are troublesome because they seem too miscellaneous altogether: expositives because they are enormously numerous and important and seem both to be included in the other classes and at the same time to be unique in a way that I have not succeeded in making clear even to myself. It could well be said that all aspects are present in all my classes.

### **3.2.3.1.2 Performatives**

While in the process of classification, Austin (1962) had noted that some utterances that seem like statements lack what is thought to be a necessary property of statements: truth condition/value (See Chapter Two). He called these utterances 'explicit performatives'. Not only do these statements not 'describe' or 'report' anything at all, they also cannot be said to be 'true' or 'false' in the sense assumed by logical positivists. Rather, the uttering of such a statement is, or is a part of, the doing of an action. Austin (1962: 5-6) begins his thesis on performatives in this way:

(E. a) “I do”- as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony

(E. b) “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth.”

(E. c) “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” – as occurring in a will.

(E. d) “I bet you sixpence it will rain.”

In these examples it seems clear that to utter these sentences (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing (anything)... None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it... What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short, “a performative”.... The name is derived, of course, from “perform”, the usual verb with the noun “action”: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action - it is not normally thought of as just saying something.

The peculiar fact about utterances E.a - E.d, according to Austin, is that they are not used just to say things, that is, to describe states of affairs, but rather to ‘do’ things. Furthermore, you cannot assess such utterances as true or false. Austin classifies them as ‘performatives’ and distinguishes them from ‘constatives’ (declarative statements whose truth and falsity can be established). An examination of sentences 18-23 below should be useful.

18. I propose Takalani as president of the SRC.

19. I promise I will be there at 9:00.

20. I apologise for not attending the workshop over the weekend.

21. The avocados pears on the tree are ripe.

22. Lectures will commence on 14 January.

23. There are the same number of male and female students in my class.

According to Austin's classification, only examples 21-23 are constatives: These are constatives because one can actually verify the 'truthfulness' of these statements and they are in the tradition of logical positivism as noted earlier. Sentences 18-20 are different and share several qualities. The central idea here is that once you have proposed Takalani as SRC president; kept your promise and made your appointment for 9:00 and felt sorry for your non-attendance at the workshop 'the world has changed in substantial ways' (Levinson, 1983: 228). Austin explains that this is so because these sentences feature a 'particular' type of verb: a performative verb, one that realises a particular action when uttered in a specific context. Such a context can include setting, physical objects, institutional identities; it may also require a particular response (a bet requires what Austin calls an 'uptake'). Performatives therefore require not only appropriate circumstances, but the appropriate language. The performative verbs in sentences 18-20 are in the present simple tense; each has a first person subject and the adverb 'hereby' may modify any of the verbs.

Austin then goes on to say that although performatives, unlike constatives, cannot be true or false yet they can go 'wrong'. He then sets himself the arduous task of cataloguing all the requirements for their successful execution, as well as the ways in which they can go wrong, or be 'unhappy' or 'infelicitous', as he puts

it. By Austin's contention (1962: 15), utterances will act as performatives only under well defined circumstances:

- (A. 1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.
- (A. 2) The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
- (B. 1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and
- (B. 2) completely.
- (C. 1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts and feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves and further,
- (D. 2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.

Austin notes that violations of these conditions are not all of equal stature. Violations of A and B conditions give rise to 'misfires' as he puts it: the intended action simply fails to come off. Violations of C conditions, on the other hand, are 'abuses', not so easily detected at the time of uttering the statement, although ultimately the insincerity will surface.

As evidence of the existence of such conditions, consider what happens when some of them are not fulfilled. For example, consider sample sentences 24-26.

24. I sentence you to ten years' hard labour.

25. I bequeath you my shebeen.

26. I congratulate you on winning the prize.

A speaker may be said to have performed an unsuccessful speech act in sentence 24, if the context is infelicitous, that is, if the speaker does not have the authority to make such an utterance, if the physical location is inappropriate, or the hearer is a minor. Sentence 25 may also be infelicitous if I have no shebeen to bequeath, if I am not of sound mind, or if I am pointing to a car while making this statement. Likewise sentence 26 will be infelicitous if the receiver of the message has not won any prize; if I am strangling the person, with a snarl on my face, as I am uttering those words; or if I genuinely believe that I am a better candidate for the prize.

However, as the argument progresses in his book, Austin (1962) systematically dismantles his earlier assertions as indicated by his acknowledgement of the complexities of classification (as quoted earlier). The distinction between constatives and performatives is one of the distinctions that he starts questioning. First, he shifts his view that performatives are a special class of utterances with peculiar syntactic and pragmatic properties, to the view that there is a general class of performative utterances that include both 'explicit performatives' (the old familiar one) and 'implicit performatives', the latter including several other classes of utterances. Secondly, there is an abandonment of the performative/constative

dichotomy for a general theory of illocutionary acts of which the performatives and constatives are just members. At the end of his book Austin (1962: 133-147) writes:

Were these distinctions really sound? Our subsequent discussion of doing and saying certainly seems to point to the conclusion that whenever I “say” anything (except perhaps a mere exclamation like “damn” or “ouch”) I shall be performing both locutionary and illocutionary acts, and these two kinds of acts seem to be the very things which we tried to use, under the names of “doing” and “saying”, as a means of differentiating performatives from constatives. If we are in general always doing both things, how can our distinction survive?

That last question echoes the doubt that was creeping into Austin’s total commitment to the performative/constative theory and so can be seen as rhetorical. On closer interrogation, one realises that there is clearly no real incompatibility between utterances being truth bearers, and simultaneously performing an action. Consider 27 and 28 below:

27. I suggest we end the meeting at 5:00.

28. I warn you, the car will run out of petrol before the next garage.

Both these sentences are performatives as well as being assessable as true or false, an indication that performatives are also governable by truth conditions. Also questionable is the assertion that it is only with performatives that certain felicitous conditions are necessary. Austin (1962) later admits that uttering an

untrue statement can be equivalent to someone bequeathing a shebeen she does not own, or promising, congratulating or forgiving someone without the appropriate intention and feelings, as discussed in sentences 24-26.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, if one offers advice, or delivers a warning, one is obligated to have good grounds for the advice or warning, in just the same way as one should be able to back up an assertion or constative. Constatives can therefore be subjected to similar infelicities of the kind that can result in abuse of performatives.

As noted earlier, Austin also grounded his analysis of performatives in certain textual features: performative verbs, subject in first person singular and structure allowing the insertion of the adverb, 'hereby'. However, in introducing similarities between implicit (primary) and explicit performatives and in noting the possibility of performatives that can be realised without specific textual clues (the fact that the simple present tense need not always convey an action concurrent with the time of speaking) Austin (1962) demonstrates that the gap between the two types of speech act is further narrowed. Schrifin (1994: 53) takes up the issue, concluding that

We have seen thus far that the constative-performative distinction cannot be maintained because both constatives and performatives involve truth and falsity; both are felicitous or infelicitous in relation to the conditions in which they occur; both are realized in a variety of forms that can be rewritten in terms of performative formula. To put this more

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<sup>4</sup> 24. I sentence you to ten years hard labour.  
25. I bequeath you my shebeen.  
26. I congratulate you on winning the prize.

generally, we cannot find either contextual or textual conditions that support the constative-performative distinction.

Mey (1993: 167), in agreement, declares that

The reason for this attack is that even the simplest, most neutral statement still has some effect on the world in which it is enunciated.... The difference between such acts and the original, “performative” ones would then be either in the change they operate on the world, or in their respective forces... or both - but not in the performative quality of one of the members of the distinction.

Harnish (1997: 161) also comments that

The basic problem with performatives is to explain their “performative force”, the (often non-constative) force marked by the performative element of the sentence, within the framework of a compositional semantics. An account of performatives would be easy, were we to give up one or the other. If performative utterances were always just constative in their force, then the grammatical form of performative sentences could be straightforwardly declarative (or truth-valuable). On the other hand if we ignore compositionality, then their performative force could be given by special conventions of force that attach to the performative element in (just) the performative sentence.

Of the large number of philosophical works that SAT has given rise to, two developments in particular have had a profound influence on language studies. One is the attempt to link SAT with Grice’s theory of meaning and conversation principles (1957) and the other is the very influential, more rigid systemisation of



Austin's work by Searle (1969) through whose writings SAT has, perhaps, had most of its impact on language studies.

Searle, Austin's student, was unimpressed with the proposed classification on a number of points, among which were criticism of Austin for operating with overlapping criteria (for example, the speech act of 'describing' belongs at the same time to the category of 'verdictives' and in that of 'expositives') and for having incompatible elements within the categories. Searle (1969) objects to the inclusion of elements in Austin's categories that do not satisfy the definitions of the category. In addition, Searle (1975: 28) also had misgivings about Austin's practice of making speech acts dependent on verbs claiming that 'differences in illocutionary verbs are a good guide, but by no means a sure guide to differences in illocutionary acts'.

Similarly, Leech (1983) criticises Austin for committing an 'error' in supposing that 'verbs in the English language correspond one-to-one with categories of speech act'. He continues, 'Austin's classification into Verdictives, Exercitives, Comissives, Behabitives and Expositives is a prime example of what I have called the Illocutionary-Verb Fallacy' (1983: 176).

In his chapter on 'Semantic Analysis of English Performative Verbs', Vanderveken (1990: 167) also attacks the notion of performatives being based on verbs, giving the following reasons:

1. Many performative verbs do not name an illocutionary force but rather a kind of illocutionary force....
2. Some performative verbs like “state” and “assert” which name the same illocutionary force are not synonymous. Their difference of meaning derives from conversational features which are independent from logical forms....
3. Some speech act verbs which name illocutionary forces do not have a performative use....
4. Some performative verbs can have non-illocutionary meanings....

These perceived shortcomings culminate in Searle’s (1979a: 27) article, ‘A classification of illocutionary acts,’ in which he comes up with his own classification, the primary objective of which was to develop ‘a reasoned classification of illocutionary acts into certain basic categories or types’.

Searle’s ‘reasoned classification’ is based on twelve ‘dimensions’ (Mey, 1993: 154-162) along which speech acts can be different: illocutionary point, direction of fit, expressed psychological state, force, social status, interest, discourse-related functions, content, societal institutions, speech acts, performatives and style. However, in his final taxonomy, Searle only applies four dimensions when drawing up his list of speech functions: illocutionary acts, direction of fit, psychological state and content.

#### **3.2.3.1.3 Classification: Searle**

Searle's speech act categories are:

**Representatives:** These are assertions which represent the state of affairs, or as Mey (1993) claims, they represent reality. Speakers' purpose in performing representatives is to commit themselves to the belief that the propositional content of the utterance is true. In an attempt to describe the world the speaker says how something is, or tries to make 'the words match the world' to use Searle's expression (1969: 3). They are seen, for example, in assertions, statements, claims and suggestions. They can be either true or false. For example:

29. The simple present tense is used more often than the present perfect tense.
30. I live in Sibasa in the Northern Province.
31. Potatoes are very nutritional.
32. There are dark clouds in the sky; it may rain tomorrow.

These sentences are assertions of facts, claims or hypotheses to be proved true or false.

**Commissives:** These acts commit the speaker, at varying degrees, to some particular future course of action. Very similar to Austin's class of the same name, these acts place obligations on the speaker. They may be in the form of promises, offers, threats and vows. Their use may be seen in statements like:

33. Touch the dial one more time and you will regret it.
34. If it is a fine day tomorrow we will go to the beach.
35. Would you like to come to the film with me?
36. I will pass that examination, if it is the last thing I do.

**Directives:** These speech acts are intended to get the listener to carry out an action. These include commands, requests, invitations, dares, challenges and so on, as in

37. Please join us for dinner on Friday.
38. Do not barge into my room.
39. May I borrow your trailer to transport the tiles I bought from CTM?
40. I dare you to go into the field where the bull is.

**Expressives:** These are speech acts which indicate the speaker's psychological state of mind or attitude to some prior action or state of affairs. They are seen in greetings, apologies, congratulations, condolences and expressions of giving thanks. The following sentences are some examples -

41. Wow! That was a brilliant speech.
42. Oh dear, I am so sorry about the incident.
43. I am so glad to meet you. John has talked a lot about you.
44. I really appreciate the offer you made, thanks.

**Declaratives or Performatives:** These utterances are those which bring about the state of affairs that they name. They take the form of blessings, christenings, weddings, firing and so on. Declaratives are typically broadcast within a social group and rely for their success on a speaker being sanctioned by the community, institution, committee or even a single person in the group to perform such acts under stipulated specialised conditions. Provided the stipulated conditions are met the act is deemed to have been successful.

45. You are hired!
46. I pronounce this amusement park opened.
47. I declare this committee adjourned.
48. May the Lord richly bless you and your family.

On the point of performatives or declaratives, Searle (1977: 37) also notes that they 'bring about some alteration in the status or condition of the referred object or objects solely by virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed'.

Searle continues his theory by articulating felicitous conditions under which various illocutionary acts can be performed. He chooses to be guided by Rawls (1955) who had made a distinction between 'regulative rules' and 'constitutive rules' in the use of language. The first are the kind that control antecedently

existing activities, for example, traffic regulations (which road users must know before venturing onto a public road) while the second are the kind that create or constitute the activity itself, for example, the rules of a game. This prompts Searle to suggest that felicitous conditions are not merely dimensions on which utterances can go wrong but are actually jointly constitutive of the various illocutionary acts. Searle (1969: 54-71) then quite elaborately outlines the felicitous conditions for some illocutionary acts.

Searle's manner of articulating these conditions assists in drawing up a kind of grid on which to compare different speech acts. He refines his conditions even farther by classifying them in terms of their importance in distinguishing speech acts, identifying four conditions governing such acts: **propositional content, preparatory, sincerity and essential conditions.**

Table 3.2 is an example of a comparison that Searle makes between requests and warnings to illustrate his use of the terminology.

**Table 3.2: A comparison of felicity conditions on requests and warnings (Levinson, 1983: 240)**

| CONDITIONS            | REQUESTS   | WARNINGS   |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Propositional Content | Future act of H  | Future event   |
| Preparatory           | 1. S believes H can do A.<br>2. It is not obvious that H | 1. S thinks E will occur and is not in H's interest. |

|           |  |   |
|-----------|--|---|
|           | would do A without being asked.        | 2. S thinks it is not obvious to H that E will occur at the time asked. |
| Sincerity | S wants H to do A.                     | S believes E is not in H's best interest.                               |
| Essential | Counts as an attempt to get H to do A. | Counts as an understanding that E is not in H's best interest.          |

**Key: A=act; H=hearer; S=speaker; E=event.**

Levinson (1983: 240) claims that although Searle's list of speech acts is relatively more rigorously argued than Austin's, it is still considered disappointing in that it lacks a principled basis. Leech too believes that, contrary to Searle's claims, the list is neither compiled in any systematic way nor on 'felicity conditions', hence there is no reason to think that the classification is definitive or exhaustive. P.F. Strawson (1971) has a more fundamental objection to the classification. He believes that both Austin and Searle, in making the performative / constative distinction the main frame for their classifications, were overly impressed by the special utterances that affect institutional states of affairs and should not have taken them as a model of illocutionary acts in general. For Strawson, the fundamental part of human communication is not carried out in such conventional and cultural-specific occasions, such as baptising a child, or joining couples in wedlock. Rather, a fair amount of meaning is created in more indirect ways and

along the lines outlined by Grice (1957) in his theory of meaning and conversation principles.

Kent Bach and Robert Harnish (1992: 98), also unhappy with the proposed dichotomy between the two main types of speech functions, came up with the notion that performative utterances are, in fact, just indirect illocutionary acts and not a distinct class of speech functions. They declare:

In our view, the performative formula is but one of a wide variety of forms of words which have become standardized for specific indirect uses, forms which serve to streamline or compress the audience's inference process. Familiar examples include "Can you...?", "I'd like you to ..." and "It would be nice if you would..." not to mention a hedged performative like "I must ask you...", each standardly used to make a request indirectly.

This quotation introduces the related concept of indirect speech acts, the focus of the discussion below.

### **3.3 INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS**

The notion that speech functions are, sometimes, not directly communicated, is a natural progression from the above discussion and is particularly pertinent in view of the hypothesis of this study. This thesis, as noted in the earlier chapters, is an investigation into the linguistic behaviour of a group of second language speakers; it is an attempt to analyse their particular way of articulating the every-



day functions that any communicative tool has to perform. Therefore an assumption can be made at this juncture that such speakers' utterances may demonstrate, on a continuum, various levels of directness and indirectness.

At the end of the article on classification, Searle (1969: 23) points out that there are a limited number of things that we can do with language although these frequently operate concurrently:

We tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes and we bring changes through our utterances... often we do more than one of these in the same utterance.

This comment by Searle (1969) in conjunction with the remarks of Bach and Harnish above (1992: 98) introduces one of the sub-themes inherent in Speech Act Theory, viz. the multiple functions of an utterance, an important issue in indirect speech acts. Searle's view of indirectness (like his taxonomy of speech acts) draws upon his analysis of the conditions necessary for a speech act. An indirect speech act is defined as an utterance in which one illocutionary act (a 'primary act') is performed by way of the performance of another act (a 'literal act'). That is, situations where speech act verbs are not literally employed or are employed for a variety of dissimilar acts pave the way for the indirect creation of linguistic meaning or indirect speech acts. This notion naturally challenges one of Austin's textual conditions for a performative: that explicit performatives have the literal force named by the performative verb in the matrix clause. For instance,

sentences 49-51 would be examples of explicit performatives or those conforming to Austin's classifications:

49. I suggest you take extra care with that door.

50. I bet you R100 that Univen Soccer Stars will win the match.

51. I vote for Mr Mudau.

Sentence 49 is a suggestion, 50 a bet and 51 a vote for Mr Mudau as the matrix clauses contain the verbs 'to suggest', 'to bet' and 'to vote' respectively. Austin's emphasis on the conventional nature of illocutionary acts and their literal textual clues indicate an acceptance of this correlation.

However, a cursory examination of usual linguistic interactions will demonstrate that most speech acts are of the indirect type. For example, the imperative is very rarely used to issue requests in English; instead we tend to employ sentence codes that only indirectly perform the speech act of requesting. For example, one can construct an indefinite list of ways of indirectly ordering a hearer to lower the volume on a piece of musical equipment:

52. I can't hear myself think in here.

53. The baby is sleeping.

54. My papers start tomorrow.

55. I do not like Back Street Boys.

56. What will our neighbours think?

- 57. Are you hard of hearing?
- 58. I really hate having to leave my room.
- 59. What is going on?
- 60. Are we having a party tonight?
- 61. Wow, you really like your music loud!

Given that none of the above statements (52-61) would literally be classified as a request, (they are assertions and questions) they present a challenge to Austin's (1962) 'form and function' theory of speech acts. On the face of it, what people do with their utterances seems quite unrestricted by the literal surface form (sentence type). That is to say, speaker meaning may be underdetermined by the physical structure of the utterance; words and expressions have non-natural or non-literal meaning and a fair amount of speaker intention is implied, rather than being categorically stated.

The concept of indirect speech is premised by the notion of 'literal force', that is, illocutionary acts are built into sentence forms and performative verbs. Austin asserts that the three major sentence types in English, namely the imperative, the interrogative and the declarative, have the forces or functions associated with them, that is, ordering, requesting and stating respectively; and, secondly that there are specialised categories of speech act verbs to go with these functions. There is, however, some asymmetry in the relationship between speech act verbs and speech acts. This is so because, first, not all speech acts are

represented by specific speech act verbs, but may be represented by several with the exception of the strictly institutionalised speech acts. Thus a speech act, like ordering, may be expressed in various ways: by a direct 'ordering' verb (sentence 62), by an ordinary verb in the imperative (63) or even by circumlocution or implication (64):

62. I order you to turn the TV off!

63. Turn the TV off!

64. I have just put the baby to sleep.

Let us continue the discussion of indirectness in speech acts by analysing the exchange in 65, below.

65. Speaker A: My answer to question C looks odd.

Speaker B: This is an examination room!

In this exchange, Speaker B has correctly interpreted A's utterance as a request for academic assistance indirectly stated as an assertion and has responded in a similar vein by expressing a negative intention using a positive utterance. This example suggests that performing a speech act is a matter of having a certain communicative intention in uttering certain words. Such an act succeeds, that is, the intention with which it is performed is fulfilled, if the hearer recognises that intention. The immediate question is how did Speaker B deduce the speech act

behind Speaker A's statement? Or how do we know that the second utterance is in fact a rejection of the request while seeming to be completely unrelated to it and not containing any overt or hidden expression of negation, or even a mention of the appeal? Or, as Searle (1979b: 82) puts it:

The problem seems to me somewhat like those problems in the epistemological analysis of perception in which one seeks to explain how a perceiver recognizes an object on the basis of imperfect sensory input.

Mey (1993: 143-145) recaps Searle's two ways of solving the problem. The first is the philosophical-semantic one based on strict reasoning and certain basic principles and the second on pragmatic sense. Using philosophical-semantic reasoning, Searle views indirect speech acts as a combination of two acts, a primary illocutionary act (in example 65, one of rejecting an appeal) and a secondary one (in this case making a statement). Searle explains the process by building a ten-step pyramid of reasoning; and through a process of elimination he demonstrates how an appropriate interpretation is arrived at. Similarly Keith Allen (1998) has drawn up schema which outline the steps in inferring the illocutionary point or speech functions of utterances.

The second solution, or the approach drawing on pragmatic sense, which is in line with the stance of this study, is based on the notions that sentence meaning and speaker / utterance meaning may differ and that speech acts can be performed literally or non-literally. When an illocutionary act is performed

indirectly, it is performed by way of performing some other one directly. In the case of non-literal utterances the illocutionary act performed is not the one dictated by the words. For example, a mother comes home to see, yet again, the neighbour's son sitting in her lounge and she says to the boy:

66. It's a real pleasure to see so much of you.

The content of the utterance has not determined the intention of the mother. This type of language usage prompted Searle (1979b: 77) to distinguish speaker meaning from sentence meaning:

Strictly speaking whenever we talk about the metaphorical meaning of a word, expression, or sentence, we are talking about what a speaker might utter it to mean, in a way that departs from what the word, expressions or sentence actually means....To have a brief way of distinguishing what a speaker means by uttering words, sentences and expressions, on the one hand, and what the words, sentences, and expressions mean, on the other hand, I shall call the former *speaker's utterance meaning* and the latter, *word, or sentence meaning*.

The position Searle takes here is that utterance codes may have meanings which differ from that of the speaker's meaning in indirect speech acts. If a speaker utters an indirect speech act, then it may have the ironic, sarcastic or metaphoric usage which the speaker intends it to have. Therefore sentences are said to have both a semantic representation (literal sentence meaning) and communicative function (utterance meaning).

### 3.3.1 SENTENCE MEANING AND UTTERANCE MEANING

Grice (1971: 54) makes a similar point by also identifying meaning within semantic and pragmatic domains. He refers to semantic meaning (sentence meaning) as 'basic' and 'conventional' while pragmatic meaning (utterance meaning) is 'non-conventional' and 'implied' or in his terminology, 'meaning<sub>nn</sub>'.

In a series of influential and controversial papers Grice (1957, 1968 and 1969) has argued that the meaning of a word is twofold: token and non-natural (meaning<sub>nn</sub>). The former refers to what speakers mean by that word in individual instances of uttering it (it is also the 'universal type' meaning for such a word) while the non-natural meaning opposes the formalist orthodoxy in semantic theory, according to which the universal conventional meaning of a word predetermines what a word would mean in any instance of its use. The conventional theory discourages inquiry into what a particular speaker might mean by a word in a particular utterance; to understand the utterance one needs to know what the word 'means'. But Grice (1957: 381) holds that what a word 'means' is derived from what speakers mean by uttering it and further adds that 'what a particular speaker or writer means by a sign on a particular occasion... may well diverge from the standard meaning of the sign'.

The critical insight of Grice's meaning<sub>nn</sub> ...is that what the speaker intends to communicate need not be related to conventional meaning at all...speaker meaning need

not be code-related, i.e. it may be inferred through processes quite different from the encoding and decoding processes assumed by the code model of communication.

In other words, an utterance need not encode one's intentions, as understanding an utterance is not merely a matter of decoding it. This has led to acceptance that 'sentence meaning' may differ from 'speaker meaning'. That is, a contrast may exist between the strict semantic content of some utterances and what is communicated beyond that. This notion is also referred to as the differences between the 'sense' and the 'force' where the former is seen as the sentence meaning and the latter the utterance or speaker meaning.

Ruth Kempson (1975), for example, sees this distinction as the relationship between properties of grammar (sentence meaning) and principles of conversation (speaker meaning), where the latter implies a more social, contextual view and the former has a more abstract cognitive slant. This distinction is part of the rationale for this thesis, since the assumption supporting this analysis is that an utterance can be analysed on its grammatical status but more importantly on the utterance's value as a communication tool. One of the premises in this research is that a language is primary for the exchange of ideas and that any evaluation of it should stress its ability to perform that role. Naturally the study does not downplay the more abstract cognitive aspect of language, hence the analysis pays attention also to the codes used to exchange the ideas. I tend therefore not to fully agree with Sperber (1995) when he suggests that:



Only linguists are interested in sentence meaning for its own sake. For the rest of us sentence meaning is something we are generally unaware of. It is something we use unconsciously, as a means towards our true end, which is to understand people, and to make ourselves understood. Speaker's meaning - the stuff we care about - always goes beyond sentence meaning: it is less ambiguous (although it may have ambiguities of its own); it is more precise in some ways, and often less precise in other ways; it has rich implicit content. Sentence meaning is but a sketch. We arrive at speaker's meaning by filling in this sketch (<<http://www.dan.sperber.com/communi.html>>, 7 March, 2002.)

There is, however, some credibility in the above quotation - that, in itself, a decontextualised sentence has no meaning. Someone has to give it a meaning, because meaning is entirely subject dependent. Sounds and marks are not intelligent beings that have some meanings of their own apart from that which is projected onto them by someone. Therefore, meaning is not a quality which inheres in a sentence in the same way that actual properties inhere in real things. Meaning or intention is a quality of speech acts or of the receptive acts. Every time a person speaks or hears an utterance, he or she gives the utterance meaning within certain fixed parameters.

I believe a word of caution is called for here. Although it is possible for the meaning assigned to words and sentences to be different from each other, it is reasonable to expect that the meaning of sentences should be related to the meanings of the words constituting the sentence. It is implausible for there to be a language where the relation between the meaning of the sentence and its component units is entirely random. While sentences do contain idiomatic

phrases and sentences where lexical items and sentence meaning are not transparently related (for example, 'to put the cart before the horse' meaning 'to pre-empt an issue') this is not the general rule.

However, in articulating the dichotomy that may exist between sentence and utterance meaning, Grice's framework does allow speaker meaning to be relatively free of conventional meaning; in fact the critical insight of Grice's 'meaning nn' (see earlier quotation in section 3.3.1) is that speaker intention or the illocutionary point of an utterance need not be related to conventional meaning at all. Speaker meaning need not be code-related but may be inferred through processes quite different from the encoding and decoding process. Grice claims that these processes rely, among others, on factors like the interlocutors' a) inferential ability; b) their ability to interpret indirect acts from their knowledge of speech acts; c) their familiarity with general principles of conversation and d) their mutually shared factual information ('encyclopedic knowledge').

Competent sophisticated speakers of a language are aware of these factors and interact with hearers accordingly, knowing that hearers - like other competent social beings and language users - will deduce utterance meaning by recognising the implications of what is said or not said. Each of these factors forms the core of a pragmatic examination and analysis of discourse and the communicative competence of language users, hence the justification for examining these factors in this study. In addition, the analysis of the samples of the Univen

students collected for this study demonstrates that the explanation of some of their utterances depends on a single one or a combination of the above factors. The last two sections of this chapter, therefore, will examine the two remaining factors in meaning creation namely, interlocutors' capacity to make implications and inferences and finally, interlocutors' ability to adhere to established conversation procedures.

### **3.3.2 INFERENCE AND IMPLICATURE**

As noted above, what we mean is hardly exhausted by what we explicitly say. Normally we do not have much difficulty in grasping what a speaker is trying to communicate implicitly. What prevents confusion and miscommunication? How do interlocutors go beyond what is explicitly said to what a speaker implies or intends in an utterance? Vanderverken (1990: 72) asks similar questions:

- 1) How does the speaker succeed in getting the hearer to understand that what he means is not identical with what the sentence he uses means in the context of the utterance?
- 2) Once the speaker has understood that how does he succeed in identifying the primary non-literal speech act and the conversational implicatures of the utterance?

The notion that there is divergence between sentence and speaker meanings or that there is under-determination in our linguistic behaviour serves as the impetus for Grice to come up with the notions of entailment, presuppositions,

implicature and inference. His argument is, if speakers use words in non-literal or indirect ways, or if they do not structure their utterances to reflect the full propositions or intentions, how then is consensus reached between speaker and hearer? How would a hearer understand that the sentence:

67. Thanks a lot, you are a fine friend!

said to a hearer who has just made an indiscrete comment about the speaker is not meant as a compliment? Grice (1975) believes that a speaker who performs an indirect speech act, such as the one above, gets the hearer to understand by relying among other factors on the hearer's capacity to make inferences and implications.

Originating from the Latin word 'plicare' (to fold), the word 'implications' mean that which is 'folded in' and has to be 'unfolded' in order for an utterance to be understood. An utterance can imply a proposition that is not part of the utterance and that does not follow as a necessary consequence of the utterance. An implicature is an inference, or additional message that the hearer is able to work out from what is said by appealing to various cognitive structures. Levinson (1983: 115), for example, says that implicatures are like deductive devices. Bach and Harnish (1979: 92) claim that implicatures 'might be called inference to a plausible explanation'. Speakers convey meaning by implicature while hearers 'infer' meaning from the implicature. Simply put, to imply is to hint, suggest or

convey some meaning indirectly by means of language. An implicature is generated intentionally by the speaker and may or may not be understood by the hearer. To infer is to deduce something from evidence (this evidence may be linguistic, paralinguistic, metalinguistic or non-linguistic). An inference is, therefore generated by a hearer. Sperber (1995) notes:

“Inference” is just the psychologists’ term for what we ordinarily call “reasoning”. Like reasoning, it consists in starting from some initial assumptions and in arriving through a series of steps at some conclusion (<<http://www.dan.sperber.com/communi.html>>, 7 March, 2002.)

Implication is therefore the basis for the distinction between implicit and explicit meaning. To imply is the act of communicating more than is said. Very often what we choose not to say, or leave out - especially when that information is expected by our hearer - conveys meaning.

68. Speaker A: I hear you were at the new Chinese restaurant in the Vanda plaza. How was it?

Speaker B: The Chinese lanterns are extraordinary.

In sentence 68 the real information is what was left out in speaker B’s response. The main occupation of any restaurant is in connection with food, hence any enquiry about the status of any restaurant is usually about the food. Thus, choosing to be silent on that aspect of the status of a restaurant speaks volumes.

Grice (1971: 54) distinguishes between two types of implicature: conventional and conversational. They have in common the fact that they both convey an additional level of meaning beyond the semantic value of the utterance. Conventional implications refer to propositions which, taken by themselves, 'implicate' (Grice 1971: 54) certain states of the world that cannot be attributed to our use of language but rather are manifested by such use. Conventional implications are always conveyed regardless of the context. Levinson (1983: 127) states:

Conventional implicatures are non-truth-conditional inferences that are not derived from superordinate pragmatic principles like the maxims but are simply attached by convention to particular lexical items.

He then goes on to enumerate conventional implicatures' distinguishing features: non-cancellable, non-detachable and non-calculable, using pragmatic principles. For example:

69. Phew, that librarian is a cow!

has a conventional implication that the librarian is a female, on the well-built side, unhelpful, somewhat intimidating and hence it is an uncomplimentary comment. This meaning is quite usual with the younger generation. One can therefore say the word 'cow' has this permanent (conventional?) additional meaning, in certain

contexts. Kempson (1979) and Mey (1993), for example, wonder whether conventional implicatures have anything to do with pragmatics and whether they do not fall under the general semantic expansion of lexical meanings, which is not a radical notion. Part of the reason for the insignificance of conventional implicature in pragmatics is the limited number of items that have been identified as having this feature.

The above explanation contrasts with conversational implicature which rests on the assumption that all participants in a communicative event follow some laid down conversation principles or maxims (see section 3.3.4). To know what people mean you have to interpret what they say. But interpreting is a not a straight forward endeavour, misunderstandings occur frequently. As Leech (1983: 30) remarks, 'Interpreting an utterance is ultimately a matter of guesswork, or (to use a more dignified term) hypothesis formation'. In the case of conversational implicature, what is implied varies according to the context of the utterance. One important feature of a conversational implicature is that the implied information should be recoverable by reasoning process.

The presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument the implicature (if present at all) will not count as a conversational implicature; it will be a conventional implicature (Grice 1981: 187).

Other features include the fact that implicatures are dependent on the recognition of cooperative conditions of conversation; they are not part of the general meaning of the lexical items and the current meaning is not the sole possible interpretation of the implicature. Thus, the meaning of the implicature will depend on assumptions of the world which the hearer and speaker share. The extract below, taken from a linguistics course entitled, 'Conversation Implicature', in the University of Western Australia outlines the logic governing conversational implicature:

The speaker (S) intends A but says B.

S is aware that B is violating the cooperative principles (CP).

S is aware that hearer (H) is also aware that S has deliberately violated CP in uttering B.

S counts on H recognising that S intends H to recognise that CP has been deliberately violated.

S counts on H being able then, to use shared/general, contextual knowledge to work out A from B. (<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/linWWW/lin101-102/NOTES-101/implicature.html>), 7 March, 2002).

Grice's (1971a) position is that to determine what is being said one has to be specific to assist interlocutors select one possible meaning based on the consideration of all factors. The question one may ask after this is: how does a hearer move from a literal interpretation into the realm of implication? Or, what is the exact nature of the inference process by which conversational implicatures are worked out? The answer offered by Grice is that interpretation of speaker intent or meaning is created during a communicative event by an assumption that



the participants are, unless alerted to the contrary, observing general rules or principles of conversation behaviour.

### **3.3.4 CONVERSATION PRINCIPLES**

Grice asserts that a speaker and hearer respect certain rules which ensure communication takes place even if the intention of a speaker may not have been captured by the physical codes. Linguistic interaction is a co-operative and social enterprise, hence users of the language observe these rules in the process of socialisation. There are many unstated and complex rules of interaction that citizens of the same speech community share and it is assumed that they bring these postulates to any communication encounter. Within a certain context the following exchange between speakers A and B would serve as a normal comprehensible communication:

70. Speaker A: I really dislike the first day of the term.

Speaker B: Mrs Brink has a baby.

Speaker A: I am going to set my alarm.

The exchange above may leave one totally perplexed unless one operates on Grice's theory that most participants in a conversation 'have a common purpose or at least a mutually accepted direction' (1989: 26). With that at the back of one's mind, an assumption can be made that the parties in the above interaction are obeying certain conversation maxims, unless alerted otherwise. That is the

justification for speaker A correctly interpreting speaker B's utterance as a relevant contribution to the communication. Owing to their shared background, speaker B knows that the presence of Mrs Brink, in the institution, causes some unpleasantness, particularly at the beginnings of terms; and secondly, that speaker A knows that one of the practices in their institution is that when people have babies they absent themselves. Speaker A's second utterance testifies that the correct deductions have been made, as setting an alarm is the usual indication of not wanting to miss or be late for an awaited event, most likely a pleasant one. So a seemingly uncooperative/irrelevant response by speaker B sets into motion a chain of assumptions and inferences which leaves speaker A more informed than when the exchange commenced. These assumptions Grice (*ibid.*) calls 'cooperative principles' which he then sub-divides into four conversational maxims:

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). Be orderly.

In formulating the cooperative principles, Grice (1989: 29) believes that conversation is a form of rational purposive behaviour, the goal of which is 'a maximally effective exchange of information', hence these maxims are not

arbitrary but a reasoned or rational way of explaining language users' ability. A theory of this nature can be divided into two parts: a theory of competence and a theory of performance (see Chapter Two). In this view, conversation maxims can be seen as constituents of a person's communicative competence or as an account of human capacity to communicate, an echo of the theme of this study. Steven Burnaby (1997: 128), for example, refers to these maxims as part of our normative competence in linguistic behaviour.

The concretisation of these maxims is based on Grice's view that the conversational principle determines the way all indirect information can be conveyed in utterances. The propositional content of an utterance (what the speaker says) is determined by semantics (truth conditions); and the cooperative principles come into play solely to determine the additional information (implicatures) which a hearer might deduce from an utterance over and above such truth conditional content. The normal sequence therefore is that interlocutors initially attempt to create meaning using the conversation maxims. When this does not create relevance in the exchange, they move on to the next level, the inferred level. In other words, the main rationale for the outlining of these conversation guidelines is to explain the processes that interlocutors undergo to provide information which is beyond the semantic content of an utterance. The idea that there can be under-representation of the semantic value of utterances and hence the necessity for conversation interpretation is, therefore, the bases for implications and the conversation maxims.

It can therefore be said that Grice (1989) conceives the role of the maxims as yardsticks to determine whether a conversational intervention is suitable or unsuitable in an endeavour that has as its goal, the exchange of information. A suitable move is one that furthers the common goal of an exchange while an unsuitable one does not. Grice (*ibid*) argues that the participants in a conversation agree on a purpose or direction. This purpose may change throughout the conversation yet at each moment there is some mutually recognised direction for the conversation. In Grice's (*ibid.*) model each participant cooperates in an attempt to achieve that purpose and both speaker and hearer typically assume that utterances are governed by these four maxims. When these maxims are not observed, participants are forced to find alternative ways of arriving at the meaning of an utterance – the alternate meaning arrived at is known as the implied meaning.

Despite the general plausibility of these maxims, there are numerous occasions when non-observance of them is noticeable in normal exchanges. 'There are many liars and there are many conversation which change their subject abruptly as someone makes a statement quite irrelevant to what was said before' (Kempson 1979: 143). These rules may then be intentionally or unintentionally broken. Grice has identified five main ways that conversation participants may fail to observe these maxims: flouting, violating, infringing, opting out, and suspending. In her book, *Meaning in Interaction: an introduction to pragmatics* (1995), Jenny Thomas has quite comprehensively articulated how non-observance occurs in each of these instances. When this happens, the hearer

must assume that the speaker's words imply something other than their literal meaning. For instance, Grice (1989) cites tautologies as an example of a Quantity maxim violation.

71. Boys will be boys.

If based on literal interpretation, a statement like sentence 71 above has not communicated any information, hence competent users of the language will automatically switch their interpretation into implication mode which will then provide users with more information than the codes mean on a literal level.

Although the articulation of the maxims is seen as one of the major breakthroughs in explanation of communication, it has also generated a fair amount of debate. One usual question is whether all the maxims are necessary and whether it is not possible to have one superordinate maxim. Green (1989: 89), for example, mentions her doubts about having two parts to the maxim of quality. She believes that the first part ('Do not say what you believe to be false') logically entails the second part ('Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence'). She also feels that the parts of the maxim of quantity ('Make your contribution as informative as is required' and 'Do not make your contribution more informative than is required') could be succinctly captured by the third maxim ('Be relevant'). Stephen Neale (1989) wonders why there are no rankings on the individual maxims to assist in cases where it is impossible to observe all of them (or all of

them to the same degree). Even though Grice (1975: 27) does acknowledge that observing 'some of these maxims is a matter of less urgency than the observance of others', he is unable to provide 'weightings' which could assist participants to determine the status of their interactions. Other questions raised are: What does it mean that a 'contribution should be as informative as is required'? When precisely does a contribution cease to be relevant? What is the status of the maxims? Are they rules, conventions or, as Sperber and Wilson (1986) claim, just 'empirical generalisations' (hence obvious)?

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) alternatively explain exchange of information or meaning creation by the relevance theory and not a general cooperation principle. Relevance theory is an approach to human communication based on two assumptions, one about cognition and the other about communication. The first assumption is that human cognition is driven by a search for relevance. The second assumption is that human communication crucially involves the expression and recognition of intentions. The theory postulates that utterances raise precise and predictable expectations of relevance which act as a guide towards the speaker's intention. In this approach, hearers are entitled to assume that of all the linguistically possible explanations of an utterance, the one the speaker intended to convey is the one that best satisfies these expectations of relevance. The comprehension process may be seen as involving the mutual adjustment of contextual assumptions and implications in order to acquire equilibrium in communication relevance.

Although these principles may indeed seem obvious and appeal to everybody's common sense, exchange of information is complex and credit should be given to Grice for 'streamlining' what actually occurs in a conversation event.

### **3.3.5 SUMMARY**

Chapter Three, the second part of the literature review, has discussed the three components of communicative competence, namely, event (language and text), situation (context) and act (function). Since the main focus of this research is how interlocutors express language functions, the classification of language functions, according to SAT, has been extensively dealt with. The chapter has explored in depth the functional approach to language by outlining the various functions of language which can be performed either directly or indirectly. Also examined is the process interlocutors undergo to create the various language functions during conversation events. This provides the theoretical background for the analysis carried out in this study and reported upon in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

Running through the previous chapters is a view which represents language as a social semiotic which enables users to function verbally in their daily situations. Inherent in this view is the conviction that language is a tool to be 'used' to serve specific purposes; it is not an abstract competence. This statement has notable implications for users of a second language, such as those who participated in the present study. Part of the argument so far is that language codes can have 'negotiated' meaning or purpose at various levels: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. As noted earlier, 'private property in the sphere of language does not exist; any process presupposes a system' (Roman Jakobson, 1960: 377). Such a 'system' should be able to withstand the rigors and scrutiny of utterance analysis.

This chapter elaborates on the method of investigation used in this study and presents the results of the analysis carried out. This empirical study mainly utilises Speech Act Theory (as discussed in the previous chapters), an approach within cross-cultural discourse analysis which is in turn one of the methods within the qualitative research paradigm. Some statistical information is also included to



provide pictorial details of the results as this graphical representation is appropriate to this type of study. Although the statistical information means that this report also exhibits some characteristics of a quantitative research approach, this report cannot be fully classified as quantitative as very basic statistical information is provided, mainly, in the form of graphs and percentages, justifying the retention and location of this research in the qualitative tradition. A description of qualitative research in general, and cross-cultural discourse analysis in particular, as well as the rationale for such an approach are also provided in this chapter. The study's population and sampling techniques are also discussed, followed by the methods for data collection and analysis and the reasons for adopting such methods.

## **4.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

The qualitative research paradigm has roots in cultural anthropology as it is a research tradition in social science that fundamentally depends on watching people in their own environment, and for the purpose of this study, in their linguistic environment. The focus here is on the participants' perceptions and experiences and the way they make sense of their lives. Qualitative research is broadly defined as any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical or other means of quantification (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). According to Bulmer (1993) and Denzin and Lincoln (1998), a qualitative research can be multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to the subject matter. This means that qualitative methods study

phenomena in their natural (rather than experimental) settings where the participants are behaving in their normal manner.

Qualitative research starts by acknowledging that there is a range of ways of creating meaning from, or interpreting the different phenomena of the world. The qualitative paradigm focuses on discovering the different types of meaning, for example, linguistic meaning, as created by those who are being researched. The researcher enters the participants' world and attempts to follow their thought processes so that the data that finally emerges is described primarily in the participants' language and from their viewpoint.

This is the stance of this research as it is an attempt to investigate how Tshivenda speakers of English communicate some of their everyday functions in the English language through analysing selected Tshivenda speakers' utterances. As noted above, this category of utterance analysis in language studies, or to give it the more technical term, discourse analysis, falls under qualitative research, as such analysis investigates these speakers' expressions in their natural contexts. The next section reviews discourse analysis as a research tool in cross-cultural language studies.

#### **4.2.1 CROSS-CULTURAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

An area concerned with the linguistic manifestation of social differences is the study of interethnic communication. Work done by researchers such as Gumpres

(1982), Verschueren (1985) and Tannen (1989) has shown that the most subtle linguistic cues, ranging from the selection of lexical items, construction of utterances, placement of tonal stress to the arrangement of an argument can systematically differ among the speakers of the same language depending on the degree of exposure. Such idiosyncratic utterances, according to Brown and Levinson (1978: 33), may unintentionally signal emotions such as exasperation, incompetence, aggression, poor social skills or an array of other negative sentiments on the part of the speaker. Studies in cross-cultural politeness strategies demonstrate that the most subtle differences in the prosodic or pragmatic features of an utterance are enough to isolate a native speaker from a non-native speaker and to cause a breakdown in communication.

### **4.3 METHODOLOGY**

As constantly detailed in this report, Speech Act Theory (SAT) has been used as an analytical tool to evaluate the communicative competence, by analysing English utterances of selected Tshivenda speakers. Although SAT began in philosophy and was not initially proposed by Austin (1962) as a framework in which to analyse discourse, the issues with which SAT is concerned (language context and functions) can lead to such an analysis. This is because SAT defines underlying conditions that must hold for an utterance to be used to realise a particular function or speech act. These conditions often require considerations of what is said, its form, its meaning and its presentation, and the context in which it is said. SAT as an analysing tool entails establishing whether speaker

intention or meaning or use has been interpreted correctly by the hearer. This is what this study has aimed to do. The point of diversion for this study is that the utterances to be analysed have been provided by English second-language speakers (Tshivenda) and hence contain idiosyncratic expressions. The challenge here is to establish whether such marked features in the expressions have any effect on the function or the hearers' interpretation process.

As has already been noted, communicative competence can be analysed in accordance with various discourse analysis paradigms. The evaluation tool for this study is SAT. Of course this choice is open to questions. Some may feel that functional grammar as articulated by Halliday (1994) may be a better tool because of the theory's claim to foreground all analysis of language in a functional-meaning paradigm (See section 3.2.1.2). Alternatively, evaluation is also possible along the components of communicative competence as advocated by Hymes (1967) (section 2.3.1). Others may also recommend a more ethnographic method for such an analysis. Such analysing tools are all most commendable, as they all articulate functional/ social/ meaning orientation to language, however, this investigation is in line with Speech Act Theory because it best suited the stated objectives of this research project.

One justification for the choice is that this project is interested in the role that structural codes perform in the creation of meaning, within certain contexts. The aim was to see how speakers articulate their intentions and how hearers arrive at

the meaning they assign to utterances. The approach does not negate the role of cultural norms in establishing functions of language but SAT starts from the premise that interlocutors must create meaning during a linguistic interaction and when this does not occur, then reasons must be found for this. If anything, it is this insistence on language being a functional tool, or a tool for social use, that reasons are sought when an utterance does not do this.

Minimum interaction with the theory of semiotics stresses the fact that a language is comprised of signs which may be arbitrarily assigned values, but once these values have been assigned by the custodians of the language, for the continual functioning of these codes/signs as medium of interaction, the values should be maintained. That justifies why SAT begins by grounding its units of analysis in speaker intention and action and in our knowledge of constitutive rules but its application to discourse leads to a structural approach in which units are arranged along functional lines. These functional lines are also communicative actions which have identifiable boundaries and it is these boundaries which objectively allow evaluation of communicative competence.

An utterance cannot have a single meaning unless a comprehensive context is established. For SAT and the other mentioned discourse analyzing tools, the cultural norms and considerations are the context for texts or utterances. Much has been written about the pivotal role of social norms and cultural considerations in establishing meaning, indeed a whole school of thought and

linguistic movement is centred on this view; the view that consideration of cultural norms in English has given rise to New Englishes. It is hard to perceive that the authors within this movement would disagree that language is a structured tool designed to function within certain specified parameters. This is the same central premise of SAT.

#### **4.3.1 SAMPLE COLLECTION**

A corpus of representatives and directives (Searle, 1969) was collected. Representatives and directives were chosen for investigation as these particular speech functions are among the earliest to be acquired by second language speakers (Clark & Clark, 1977). For this analysis, eighteen spoken utterances were compiled from the corpus collected from first year University of Venda students, who were enrolled in the English Language Practicals Course (ELP). ELP is a compulsory bridging course for all students enrolled at the University. These were utterances heard from one class of 200 students and they were selected by purposive sampling. The main criteria were that first, the utterances were marked in some aspect, phonologically, semantically or pragmatically; secondly, utterances were from Tshivenda speakers of English; and thirdly, these were students in their first year of study in the University of Venda. The intentions of these utterances were established by the speakers themselves.

### 4.3.2 PARTICIPANTS

The samples were collected from the first year students in 1997. The second group of participants, the hearers or respondents, was drawn from first year English major students in Univen in 2002. The rationale for using this type of respondent was first, that there is a marked difference in the levels of proficiency between students enrolled in the ELP course and those who go on to major in English and secondly, the demographics of the students have changed in the last five years with a high percentage of first years who have had more exposure to English coming in.

### 4.3.3 QUESTIONNAIRE

A questionnaire was compiled from eighteen samples collected from students' utterances. The procedure followed was that once an utterance was heard it was recorded; the student was then invited to a brief discussion during which the speaker's intention as well as any context details given by the speaker were recorded. These utterances were then used to design the questionnaire. The questionnaire items comprise either single utterances or short dialogues. In the column before each utterance, brief context details are provided. Respondents were then asked to indicate the speech act/s of the utterance. Respondents had a range of choices: **statements, suggestions, complaints, commands, invitations, requests** and a last column which is labelled, '**not sure**'. These particular speech acts were selected after a series of pilot studies established them as the common interpretation of the samples selected for the research.

The final pilot study conducted saw the number of items reduced from 25 to 18, more contextual details added and the inclusion of the column 'not sure' on the questionnaire. A copy of the questionnaire is included in the appendix.

#### **4.3.4 DATA ANALYSIS**

The analysis is an attempt to establish the connection between language functions as outlined by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), and the structure of the utterance in an attempt to obtain a picture of the interlocutors' communicative competence. As stated in Chapters One, Two and Three, evaluation of communicative competence using SAT must involve an examination of the language, context and function of utterances. This was done with the samples analysed.

One interesting aspect of the utterances selected for the analysis is the fact that they are not the usual expressions and the challenge is to determine whether these non-ordinary features would influence their functions, and hence hearers' interpretation of them. That is to say, the aim of the analysis is to determine the role that the physical configurations of constituents of an utterance played in the establishing the function of the utterances and the creation of linguistic meaning. This was done by trying to establish a match between speaker intention and hearer interpretation. Communication is said to have taken place when there is a match between speaker intention and hearer interpretation notwithstanding any grammatical blemishes and/or any deviations from standard South African



English(es). Thus the focus in all instances is on mutual understanding within the specific ESL context.

#### **4.3.4.1 EVALUATION CRITERIA**

As noted in the literature review on the topic of semiotics, section 3.2.), a language is a system of regulated signs which would have minimum use if certain agreed upon rules are not adhered to. As Searle (1969: 16) puts it, 'speaking a language is engaging in a highly rule-governed behaviour'. Similarly Jakobson (1960) notes that private property in the sphere of language does not exist. Language, as discussed earlier, is only one type of semiological system (Saussure 1966: 68) but before it can become part of any meaning-creating system it must adhere to pre-agreed upon regulations. When signs/ language behave in this manner they communicate propositions and are usable, otherwise they remain as mere noises, markings on a page or body movements. Culler (1976: 91) asserts that 'where there are signs there is a system', and where there is a system, there are observable, objective, describable features or regulations that allow this system to have existence.

Speech communities, and in this case the competent speakers of a language, linguistically and pragmatically, share a history and have reached a consensus about the system and the conventions for the usage of the parts or codes that make up the whole. It is necessary at this point to stress the fact that 'competent speakers' are not specific to any geographical location, rather this term refers to

any speaker of English be it first or second language speakers, along the lines outlined by Hymes (1967). Even advocates of New Englishes (Kachru, 1982) have not negated the fact that one cannot label a string of words as 'language' if there are no rules or system guiding users to the value of these codes. It is these conventions, linguistic and pragmatic, which enable linguistics, researchers, evaluators and others to label one string of words as 'meaningful' and the other 'meaningless'.

Of course, one of the assertions of this investigation has always been that communicative competence should not be considered a single attribute but should be judged globally on a variety of norms. Competence, using the communicative or pragmatic context, is mastery of all the communication components namely, grammatical, discourse, socio-linguistic, strategic as well as psycholinguistic components like knowledge and skills (see section 2.3.1). In other words competence is interlocutors control or mastery of the mentalist structural constituents of the language as well as ability to create meaning within the appropriate social-cultural context. These, therefore were the criteria used in evaluating these utterances.

#### **4.4 PRESENTATION OF RESULTS: PART ONE**

The first part of the results is presented in the form of tables while the second part discusses the results in a narration format. Table 4.1 below provides a summary of the utterances and their intentions as stated by the speakers.

**TABLE 4.1: CONTEXT, UTTERANCE AND SPEAKER INTENTION**

| CONTEXT   | UTTERANCE   | SPEAKER INTENTION |
|---|---|-------------------|
| 1. A student who needed a pen to fill in a form said this to his lecturer:                  | 1. I am asking for a pen to fill out this form.   | 1. Request        |
| 2. A student whose path was blocked by another student said:                                | 2. Sorry, I can pass <b>(with a rising intonation on the word 'pass')</b> .   | 2. Request        |
| 3. A student absent from class when an assignment was given said:                           | 3. She gave what.   | 3. Request        |
| 4. Marked assignments were given back in class. One student followed the lecturer and said: | 4. My marks are somehow.  | 4. Complaint      |
| 5. A student who failed to hand in an assignment on the due date said:                      | 5. I am asking to be apologised due to my failure to submit my assignment.  | 5. Request        |
| 6. A lecturer not sure whether a student had attended her lecture asked:                    | 6. Lecturer: Were you in class today?<br>Student: Of course. <b>(Please describe the second utterance)</b> .  | 6. Complaint      |
| 7. Student A had just had an accident. This was the dialogue between her and a friend:      | 7. A: I had an accident last week.<br>B: Sorry. Are you all right?<br>A: I am fine but it is so boring.<br><b>(Please describe the third utterance)</b> . | 7. Complaint      |
| 8. A student accused of being late by the lecturer reported this to her friend by saying:   | 8. Student: The lecturer said I was late but I denied.  | 8. Complaint      |
| 9. Handouts were given in class. A student who did not receive one said:                    | 9. I am in need of a pamphlet.  | 9. Request        |
| 10. Speaker A wanted to know speaker B's reactions to a film.                               | 10. A: Did you enjoy the film?<br>B: Too much! <b>(Please describe the second utterance)</b>  | 10. Statement     |
| 11. A student when asked whether there were other students in the class                     | 11. I was left lonely in the class.   | 11. Statement     |

|   |  |               |
|---|--|---------------|
| with him said   |  |               |
| 12. A student in the Department of Agriculture describing a plough he was using said:   | 12. The broken plough, it is fixed.  | 12. Statement |
| 13. A student describing the size of her discussion group said:   | 13. The students in our discussion group are many.   | 13. Statement |
| 14. A lecturer concerned about a student, Kate, said:   | 14. Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate.<br>Student: No, she is not around.<br><b>(Please describe the first utterance.)</b> | 14. Statement |
| 15. A student whose friend had missed some lectures, when asked to explain the previous lecture to the non-attending friend said: | 15. He is a popular somebody.  | 15. Statement |
| 16. A student asked (in October) whether she would be going home for the weekend said:  | 16. I won't go there no more.  | 16. Statement |
| 17. Student A's bag strap came undone and student B said:   | 17. Leave me do it for you.  | 17. Statement |
| 18. A student anxiously waiting for her supplementary results said:   | 18. I feel hopeless for this week.   | 18. Statement |

Table 4.1 indicates that the utterances have various what could structurally be perceived as 'blemishes'. Whether these utterances failed to articulate the speakers' intentions is the main concern of this study. What these utterances demonstrate is that though there are structural idiosyncrasies within a functional-meaning perceptive, they cannot be faulted. For example, in sample 1<sup>5</sup> the speaker has ignored the stative/dynamic distinction in verbs resulting in the use of the stative verb 'to ask' being used in the progressive aspect. Phonological

under-differentiation of the interrogative and the declarative forms of sentences may have accounted for the respondents' inability to interpret sample 2<sup>6</sup>. Pragmatic shortcomings may be blamed for the inappropriate response in sample 6<sup>7</sup> while idiosyncratic semantic broadening may have resulted in utterances 4 and 15<sup>8</sup>. Having said that one realises that in samples, 1, 4, 5, (60%), communication did take place, despite their identified structural shortcomings. This is a clear indication of the tension between a structural and a pragmatic evaluation of utterances or the differences in the concepts of Hymes and Chomsky. Further discussions are included in the second part of the interpretation.

**TABLE 4.2: RESPONDENTS' INTERPRETATION**

| UTTERANCE | statement | suggestion | Complaint | command   | invitation | request   | not sure  |
|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1         | 7         | 2          | 1         | 1         | -          | <u>83</u> | 6         |
| 2         | 13        | 15         | 11        | <u>41</u> | -          | 8         | 10        |
| 3         | 17        | 2          | 18        | 5         | -          | 8         | <u>50</u> |
| 4         | 6         | 5          | <u>74</u> | 3         | 1          | -         | 11        |
| 5         | 8         | 14         | -         | 2         | 3          | <u>61</u> | 7         |
| 6         | 37        | 8          | 2         | 4         | 5          | 3         | <u>42</u> |
| 7         | <u>38</u> | 2          | 33        | 1         | 3          | -         | 21        |
| 8         | <u>50</u> | 5          | 23        | 8         | -          | 2         | 13        |
| 9         | 17        | 5          | 6         | <u>45</u> | 2          | 12        | 7         |
| 10        | <u>44</u> | 8          | 1         | 7         | 11         | 3         | 23        |
| 11        | <u>42</u> | 2          | <u>42</u> | 1         | -          | 2         | 13        |
| 12        | <u>65</u> | 13         | 2         | 4         | 3          | 1         | 13        |

<sup>5</sup> Sample 1: I am asking for a pen to fill out this form.

<sup>6</sup> Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With a rising intonation on the word 'pass').

<sup>7</sup> Sample 6: Lecturer: Were you in class today? Student: Of course. (Please describe the second utterance)

<sup>8</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

Sample 15: He is a popular somebody.

|    |  |                  |    |                  |                  |   |    |    |
|----|--|------------------|----|------------------|------------------|---|----|----|
| 13 |  | <b><u>35</u></b> | 9  | <b><u>35</u></b> | 7                | - | 3  | 9  |
| 14 |  | <b><u>34</u></b> | 18 | 1                | 12               | 2 | 12 | 23 |
| 15 |  | <b><u>42</u></b> | 14 | 5                | 4                | 7 | 5  | 30 |
| 16 |  | <b><u>25</u></b> | 12 | 22               | 16               | 6 | 2  | 18 |
| 17 |  | 5                | 29 | 3                | <b><u>33</u></b> | 6 | 9  | 14 |
| 18 |  | <b><u>31</u></b> | 9  | 30               | 2                | 4 | -  | 25 |

**NOTE: Numbers in bold and underlined represent the highest response rate, therefore, the recorded interpretation of the utterance.**

These percentages are indicative of the difficulty in assigning functions to speech acts, with or without the context being specified. Assigning functions is quite central to the type of analysis undertaken in this study, because of the structural evaluation of utterances implicit in SAT. A similar approach may not be so necessary in a functional or socio-cultural evaluation. This fact reiterates my earlier points that socio-cultural factors exert different considerations on the encoding and decoding of utterances.

Although the discussions have not examined interpretations which represent less than 10% of the respondents, there is still a variety of interpretations for each utterance. For each utterance, there is a possibility of six interpretations, as shown in the tables; and eight utterances (44%) have all six speech acts as possible interpretations while the rest, 56%, have five speech acts as possible interpretations. Only four utterances, (22%), have an interpretation of 50% of the respondents and above. In five utterances – 7, 11, 13, 16 and 18 – the difference between the highest response and the next is less than six respondents. This shows that in 28% of the utterances the respondents experienced difficulties in

choosing between two speech functions. For all the utterances, some respondents, in some cases as many as 50% (utterance 3), were not sure which speech act the utterance was. This is an indication of the difficulty in assigning a function to a written utterance.

**TABLE 4.3: A COMPARISON OF SPEAKER INTENTION AND HEARER /RESPONDENT INTERPRETATION**

| UTTERANCE | SPEAKER INTENTION | HEARER INTERPRETATION   | % OF CORRECT INTERPRETATION |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1         | Request           | Request                 | 83                          |
| 2         | Request           | Command                 | 41                          |
| 3         | Request           | Not Sure                | 50                          |
| 4         | Complaint         | Complaint               | 74                          |
| 5         | Request           | Request                 | 61                          |
| 6         | Complaint         | Not Sure                | 42                          |
| 7         | Complaint         | Statement               | 38                          |
| 8         | Complaint         | Statement               | 50                          |
| 9         | Request           | Command                 | 45                          |
| 10        | Statement         | Statement               | 44                          |
| 11        | Statement         | Complaint and Statement | 42                          |
| 12        | Statement         | Statement               | 65                          |
| 13        | Statement         | Statement and Complaint | 35                          |
| 14        | Statement         | Statement               | 34                          |
| 15        | Statement         | Statement               | 42                          |
| 16        | Statement         | Statement               | 25                          |
| 17        | Statement         | Statement               | 33                          |
| 18        | Statement         | Statement               | 31                          |

As mentioned earlier, communication is said to have been achieved if there is a match between speaker intention and hearer interpretation, therefore in ten

utterances (56%) communication was achieved. There were two utterances, 11 and 13,<sup>9</sup> where two interpretations were given. Although one of each interpretation matches the speaker's intention, there is still room for misunderstanding. It cannot, therefore, be said that communication has taken place in these two utterances. This means that, in total, eight utterances were misunderstood by the respondents in terms of not being able to determine the function of them. These results also show that statements are more readily understood than other forms of speaker intention. Speakers uttered nine statements and hearers correctly interpreted six of them; in other words 67% of the statements were understood as such by the respondents. There were four complaints and only one, 25%, was correctly interpreted. Speakers made five requests and two, 40%, were identified as such. This shows that the speech act of complaining is either not convincingly articulated by speakers, or hearers are not familiar with the conditions governing this particular speech act.

#### **4.4.1 COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF RESPONDENTS**

As indicated earlier, in 56% of the utterances communication was achieved despite the various linguistic and pragmatic flaws identified. This is a clear indication of the multiple competences inherent in communicative competence. The analysis shows that although 14 utterances (78%) had some grammatical variances only 5 (28%) were misunderstood by the hearers. These figures demonstrate the distinction that can be made between linguistic and pragmatic

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<sup>9</sup> Sample 11: I was left lonely in the class.



competence (see section 2.2.1.3) and sentence meaning and utterance meaning (see section 3.3.1). Such results are also an indication that a communication event relies quite heavily on pragmatic considerations, perhaps more so in an interaction among second language users in an informal context. Of course, one can also argue that since most of these utterances were made in informal situations it may explain speakers' deliberate choice of these grammatical constructions and is not a true reflection of their competence. This fact, true as it may be, does not invalidate the point being made, namely that such idiosyncratic or context-specific utterances are capable of being understood in certain contexts because of the multiple competence needed in utterance interpretation and in the evaluation of interlocutors' communicative competence.

The recognition of these multiple competences is in line with the distinction between pragmatic, socio-cultural meaning and the meaning conveyed by structural codes of a language. As already discussed, the two approaches see competence and the creation of meaning quite differently. While the latter identifies competence very closely with mastery of the mentalist properties of language, the former sees competence more in terms of usage of the language. Socio-cultural mastery of a language ensures that interlocutors communicate meaningfully in given contexts with the use of structural codes which are appropriate to the occasion.

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Sample 13: The students in our discussion group are many.

This is the central point of Hymes' (1967) notion of communicative competence, one of the central points of this investigation.

Therefore, communicatively these respondents can be evaluated as being pragmatically competent as they seem to have drawn upon competences such as discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence to construct and interpret these utterances.

## **4.5 PRESENTATION OF RESULTS: PART TWO**

The presentation of results in part two examines the response rate and the design of the utterances in more detail. This enables comments to be made on the utterances' structural configuration (syntactic, semantic and phonological), the context and the function, in relation to the stated intention of the speaker (pragmatic).

In the presentation, the utterances have been grouped into sections, according to the intention/function of the speaker. In other words, all utterances classified as either suggestions or requests or statements, by the speaker, are discussed together, irrespective of the sample's sequential numbering on the actual questionnaire. This non-sequential presentation style was adopted to reduce the repetition of introductory information which would need to be provided for each utterance if the same numbering, as on the questionnaire, was observed. This presentation style means that, for example, all samples identified as

'suggestions' are discussed together, once the introductory information on 'suggestions' has been given, as against some introductory information being provided every time a sample identified as 'a suggestion', on the questionnaire, is examined. This arrangement also allows for more comprehensive and focused discussions on the possible structural configurations possibilities in the realisation of a particular speech acts.

The composition of the various sections is:

Section A: Requests: utterances 1, 2, 3, 5 and 9

Section B: Complaints: utterances 4, 6, 7 and 8

Section C: Statements: utterances 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18.

Before the discussions in each section the details of that particular function, according to SAT principles are given to provide an immediate context for the samples. These details are in addition to explanations already given in Chapter Three. The type of details given here, therefore, only serves to focus the reader's attention on the ensuing analysis and discussion.

The presentation starts with the statistics of the responses given. Responses which represent less than 10% of the research population (hearers) are not reflected in the explanations but the information does appear in Table 4.2 The examination of each utterance includes stating the speaker's intention (**SI**) and

the hearer's interpretation (**HI**) (from the questionnaire data); identifying the locutionary act (**LA**); describing the utterance's status (**US**) in terms of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic norms; identifying the perlocutionary act (**PA**); determining whether communication (**C**) did take place; and finally discussing the status of the utterance in accordance with communication principles. One can see that these headings reflect a configuration of the evaluation units of communicative competence (language, context and function) as well as the components of a speech act.

In Speech Act Theory, a speech act is pronounced 'unachieved' if there is a discrepancy between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation, or whether an 'uptake'<sup>10</sup> was needed for the interpretation of the utterance. All the responses to the eighteen samples are discussed whether communication was 'achieved' or 'unachieved' according to SAT. This is because these utterances are 'unique' as their structures demonstrate some interesting discussion points, not only pragmatically but syntactically and semantically.

#### **4.5.1 SECTION A: REQUESTS**

Requests form part of the group of directives which embody an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. Requests are pre-events: they

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<sup>10</sup>'Uptake' further information supplied for clarification so that interlocutors can continue with a

express the speaker's expectation of the hearer with regard to a prospective event, verbal or non-verbal. Requests are face-threatening by definition according to Brown and Levinson (1978). Hearers can interpret requests as intrusive and speakers may hesitate to make the request for fear of losing face.

The abundance of linguistic options available for 'requests' testifies to the social intricacies involved in this speech function. As also noted in Chapter Three, the notion of indirect speech acts illustrates the wide range of possible structures that speakers can implore for this type of directive. For instance, a request can be realised by structures like:

72. I think you better go now. (**request** by a statement)

73. I have finished cooking. (**request** to come and eat by statement)

74. Could you please shut the door? (**request** by embedded question / imperative)

75. May I borrow your pen? (**request** by a modal question)

These examples demonstrate the flexibility that exists in the selection of language codes for articulating a language function. They also indicate that in the final analysis the determining factor is the context or the conditions under which the utterance is uttered. Some researchers like Brown and Levinson (1978), Mey (1993) and Thomas (1995) believe that the greater the risk of a refusal of a request, the more indirect the sentence form will be.

Some of the felicitous conditions for a request are: it is in the speaker's interest for this future action of the hearer to take place; it is not obvious to either interlocutors that the hearer will perform the action in the normal course of events without some kind of prompting; and the hearer is potentially able to comply with the request. Therefore, it is infelicitous, for example, for a speaker to request that the door be shut when it is already shut; or if the hearer does not care one way or another if the door remains open or if the hearer is physically incapable of shutting doors.

Directives differ in force so they may range from 'pious wish to peremptory harsh orders' (Mey, 1993: 164). Although 'orders' and 'commands' are also directives, they have the additional condition that the speaker must be in a position of authority over the hearer and the action the hearer is commanded to perform is obvious. The fact that the proposed action is obvious although the hearer is still not performing it is the justification for a speaker bringing her/his authority to bear on the situation, by issuing an order or a command.

**4.5.1.1 Utterance 1: A student needed a pen to fill in a form and said this to the lecturer: "I am asking for a pen to fill out this form."**

- a) SI: request HI: request: 83%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic blemish from the misuse of the stative verb, 'to ask'

- d) PA: lecturer lends the student the pen
- e) C: achieved

Although a clear majority of the respondents correctly interpreted the utterance as a 'request', the next response of any note identified the utterance as 'a statement'. That the respondents thought the utterance could also be a statement is in line with the notion of literal force, that is the view that illocutionary force is built into sentence-forms. Hence the three sentence types, the imperative, the interrogative and the declarative, have the forces traditionally associated with them, namely ordering, questioning and stating respectively.

In this sample, however, the speaker was employing an indirect speech act, in this case a statement being used as a request. This is not an unusual communication strategy for it is not out of the ordinary for a speaker to say, 'Those cakes smell divine' which could double as a statement (compliment) or an oblique request for some of the cakes. The non-use of the interrogative form to make requests is also a politeness strategy as the interrogative, according to Brown and Levinson (1978: 129), may sound abrupt. In addition the verb 'to ask', even if used ungrammatically, as in this utterance, has the fundamental function of 'a request' except when used in very marked utterance,<sup>11</sup> as in a mother sarcastically saying to her son who has taken her car out for the whole night without permission, 'May I ask for my car keys back?'

Another point of interest is the performative nature of the utterance. A performative, as may be recalled, is a speech act where ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’ (Austin, 1962: 6). Hence, in this utterance, the speaker saying these words, s/he is simultaneously performing the act of ‘asking’. However, if one were to follow this line of argument further one must acknowledge that the other conditions for a performative have not been fulfilled in this utterance. These unfulfilled conditions include the fact that the speaker has used a non-performative verb (the verb ‘to ask’ is not a traditional performative verb); the verb is not in the simple present tense and no conventional language form is employed here. This utterance lends credence to some of the objections raised by writers like Schrifin (1994) and Harnish (1997) who maintain that there are neither ‘contextual or textual conditions that support the constative-performative distinction’ (Schrifin, 1994: 54).

**4.5.1.2 Utterance 2: A student whose path was blocked by another student said, “Sorry, I can pass.” (With a rising intonation on the word ‘pass’).**

- a) SI: request HI: command: 41%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic blemish; misuse of the word ‘sorry’; use of a statement to request for a favour; not using the usual standard request form appropriate for the occasion, for example, ‘Excuse me, may I pass?’
- d) PA: hearer makes way for the speaker
- e) C: achieved

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<sup>11</sup> ‘marked utterance’ would be any utterance/structure not used with its normal meaning.



The interpretation of this utterance is not conclusive as 15% of respondents identified the utterance as a suggestion, 13% as a statement, 11% as a complaint and 10% were 'not sure'. This inconclusive interpretation may be attributed to the respondents' confusion with the term 'sorry' and maybe, also, their lack of awareness of the significance of the rising intonation on the word 'pass'. In Standard English, 'sorry' and 'excuse me' are usually not interchangeable and therefore context-specific. 'Sorry', a common preface to an expressive, presupposes that an infringement of some sort had occurred and the speaker's intention is to offer an apology, while an 'excuse me' announces a speaker's intention of seeking a favour which may or may not be very convenient for the hearer. If the speaker's intention is the former, communication would be achieved once the hearer accepts the apology after the hearer has assessed the infringement and has decided it was not deliberate and not too out of the accepted norms of social behaviour. Otherwise the perlocutionary act of the latter intention will include the hearer moving from that position.

In the South African linguistic context, as indeed in some other African societies such as the Ghanaian community of West Africa, such confusion, as evidenced by the data, should have been reduced, as 'sorry' and 'excuse me' in these countries carry the same meaning. However hearers, without the benefit of this shared linguistic culture, may need a further explanation, otherwise an alternative interpretation would arise if the hearer, anticipating such a request, had with

some inconvenience attempted to create an opening for the speaker. Had the speaker omitted the 'sorry' and just uttered the declarative statement, 'I can pass' in a rising tone the question would be: would that have helped with the interpretation? This is a point worth investigating. In addition, the usual phrase in such a situation would be 'Excuse me, may I pass?' The problems with this sample therefore include the use of the wrong modal auxiliary and the selection of an inappropriate request realisation.

This utterance also demonstrates the blurring of the distinction between the modals 'can' and 'may'. Traditional grammarians insist that the modal 'can' refers to ability, possibility and permission while the modal 'may' also means possibility and permission (Sinclair, 1992: 399). As an auxiliary used to express permission, 'may' is more formal and less common than 'can' which (except in fixed conventional idiomatic expressions) can be substituted for 'can'. However, 'may' is particularly associated with permission given by the speaker. That is, it is believed there is a difference between 'You may leave the room' (I permit you to leave the room) and 'You can leave the room' (where the permission is more general and impersonal). And that there is also a difference in meaning between, 'May I borrow your pen?' and 'Can I borrow your pen?' where the former is considered the 'true' request for permission, while the latter questions the speaker's ability to borrow the pen and is not a request for permission. Not all English first-language speakers acknowledge this distinction; however, the

prescriptive bias in favour of 'may' as the 'true' permission-seeking form for utterances sees 'may' being used in very formal and legal documents.

The interpretation may have been problematic also, because of the respondents' failure to realise the implication of the rising intonation on the last word. Raising one's tone on the last word to change a declarative statement into an interrogative, and in this case into a request, is one of the accepted formats for question formation, for example, 'The book is blue' ceases to be a statement if uttered with a rising intonation. With this background, there is little justification for only 8% of the respondents interpreting utterance 2 first as a question then logically inferring its use as a request.

One final explanation may arise from the fact that the contextual conditions for 'a command' and 'a request' are almost identical except that the status of the speaker and hearer may differ in the two speech acts. In 'a command' the speaker has some authority over the hearer so the acceptance of the speaker's right to issue that type of speech act. Since this exchange is between two students it is very unlikely that the speaker would command the hearer in such a situation. These two factors, equal status of the interlocutors, plus the raised intonation, should have alerted the respondents that this utterance cannot be 'a command' as some of them, (41%), indicated.

**4.5.1.3 UTTERANCE 3: A student absent from class when an assignment was given said, “She gave what.”**

- a) SI: request HI: ‘not sure’: 50%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic blemish; unusual utterance construction
- d) PA: hearer replied that an assignment was given but did not give, initially, all the details but did so when speaker asked more specific questions
- e) C: not achieved

The speaker indicated that it was not just a request as to whether an assignment had been given or not but rather a request for a clarification on the nature of the assignment as well. Hearer interpretation was quite varied; 18% identified them as ‘a complaint’, 13% identified them as ‘a statement’. Students would usually complain about being given an assignment or they would request the details of it, if they had not been in class when the assignment was given. It is therefore surprising that these two speech functions, request and complaint, do not have higher response rates. This raises questions as to how much reliance was placed by the respondents on the context clues, and the differences in the interpretative processes involved in written and spoken utterances.

If the speaker’s intention was to request not only confirmation that an assignment had been given, but its details as well, then the most common forms for the utterance would be either a direct speech act as in, ‘What kind of an assignment

did she give?’ (request by question); or as an indirect speech act as in, ‘I was not in class this morning’ (request by statement). One can only make a guess that the presence of the ‘wh’ word ‘what’ indicates that the speaker intended to use a ‘wh’ question. If the speaker intended to use this type of question formation then a syntactic error has occurred as these types of questions must begin with the ‘wh’ element.

However there are occasional declarative ‘wh’ questions where the ‘wh’ element remains in the position normal in declaratives for that item. Such constructions are very marked and associated with highly conventionalised occasions, such as interviews and formal interrogation sessions, as in the sentences:

76. So you locked the door, how?

77. And you went into the lounge, when?

A similar construction is also possible with ‘echo’ utterances. These are utterances which repeat as a whole or in part what has been said by another speaker. They may take any sentence form but they function as either questions or exclamations. Echo questions are either recapitulatory or explicatory, as in the examples:

78. A: The lecturer gave us a test.                      B: She gave what?

79. A: I saw Mandela yesterday.                      B: You saw whom?

80. A: I will pay for the lunch.

B: You will do what?

81. A: I will see you at midnight.

B: You will see me when?

Although recapitulatory echo questions are ostensibly requests for the repetition of information, they frequently have other functions, such as, to express irony, incredulity or irritation, or as a rhetorical utterance merely to fill in a conversation. Although they are informal, such questions may be considered impolite in an inappropriate situation, unless accompanied by some apology such as:

82. Sorry, you said the lecturer gave us what?

83. I beg your pardon, you saw who?

Therefore this request structure, in which the 'wh' question word is placed at the end of the structure instead of at the beginning, is not uncommon. However, if this utterance was used as an ordinary request for information, then the grammatical rule for the formation of the interrogative is being violated as well as some politeness norms. That explains why the hearer needed an uptake to interpret the intention and why communication was not achieved.

Despite the discussions above, the fact that 17% of respondents thought the utterance was a statement and 50% were not sure what the utterance meant is still surprising. After all, the brief context clues, shared knowledge of the academic world plus the presence of the word 'what' should have alerted

respondents to the fact that the utterance was in the question format and that the speaker's intention was to request information. One can find some justification for 18% of the respondents identifying the utterance as a 'complaint' as the giving of assignments is an occasion for complaints.

**4.5.1.4 UTTERANCE 5: A student who failed to hand in an assignment on the due date said to the lecturer: "I am asking to be apologised due to my failure to submit my assignment."**

- a) SI: request HI: request: 61%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic and pragmatic blemishes
- d) PA: the lecturer accepted the apology as well as the assignment
- e) C: achieved

This utterance, although quite similar in structure to utterance 1, has some differences which merit this utterance's own discussion. Although communication is achieved with this utterance it is still interesting as it highlights a number of issues within SAT. The perlocutionary act which normally follows this utterance is that if the lecturer accepts the apology, then the acceptance of the assignment is also usually assumed. But it is equally possible for a hearer just to accept the apology and to wait expectantly for the speaker to articulate the second speech act, a request for the acceptance of the assignment, with a statement like, 'Would you therefore accept my assignment?' The fact that a speaker does not need to

proceed to a second act is interesting. What this implies, is that in certain contexts, for example, in a learning institution, an apology for non/late submission of an assignment embraces a request for a later submission. Strangely enough the two functions, apology and request, belong to two different speech acts although there are both similarities and differences in the conditions governing their realisation. Apologies indicate a speaker's psychological state of mind or attitude and are expressives, while requests are directives to get the hearer to carry out an action. The similarities between the two are that they both refer to 'face-threatening acts and call for redressive action and they both concern events which are costly to the hearer' as Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper note (1989). This is perhaps why the two speech acts can be paired in one utterance. This is a clear example of an utterance with multiple functions. Another example of multiple functions is seen in utterance 4<sup>12</sup> (discussed below) where there is a complaint and a request in one utterance.

Of interest also in this utterance is the clear demonstration of the notion of implication. Why would a lecturer accept the assignment when the student had made no request to that effect? This is because of implication: the request is implied in the apology; hence a positive response incorporates the overt as well as the implied speech acts.

In similar 'face-threatening' situations, (Blum-Kulka *et al*, 1989) it is not unusual for the speaker to be brief as s/he does not want to prolong the interaction. In

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<sup>12</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.



that respect, the length of this utterance is surprising as a shorter version (even if ungrammatical) like \*'I am asking to be apologised' would have had the same effect. This lengthy utterance structure which is quite characteristic of Univen students is also a violation of Grice's maxim of quantity (Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.). When this maxim is flouted it usually results in stilted expressions and inappropriate formality, features which this utterance demonstrates.

Another feature of this utterance is the misuse of the verb 'to apologise' which is normally used in a performative manner, in other words, the speaker apologises as s/he is uttering the statement. Performative utterances as noted earlier are characterised by the first person indicative active sentences in the present tense with one of a limited set of performative verbs. The structure of this utterance therefore is almost in accordance with Austin's (1962) criteria except that the performative verb should be the main verb of the predicate and not part of the direct object of the sentence, as illustrated in this utterance. If Austin's rule is adhered to, the speaker expresses the performative that s/he is performing and does not ask permission from the hearer first.

This may also be an example of a 'hedge' or a cultural trait where a direct request to a person of higher status is frowned upon. Hatch (1992) defines a 'hedge' as an attempt by a speaker to soften the illocutionary force of an utterance by the selection of certain lexical items as well as in the construction of

the utterance. Cross-cultural studies have investigated different levels of directness in speech acts in languages quite extensively, for example, Levenston (1968) notes a higher level of directness in Hebrew speakers when compared to speakers of English in realising assents and disagreements. In Tshivenda, as in most languages, a certain level of indirectness is equated with politeness. Interestingly enough, hedged performatives may have some similarity with utterance 5 where speakers directly refer to the functions they intend to perform, as in the examples:

84. I must apologise for the error.

85. I would like to thank you for the effort.

86. I am happy to inform you that you have passed the examination.

The phrase 'due to' (in utterance 5)<sup>13</sup> also merits some mention. If an event is 'due to' something then it happened as a direct result of it. The speaker's failure to submit her assignment must be 'due to' some unforeseen circumstance, not the apology, as is implied in this utterance.

**4.5.1.5 UTTERANCE 9: Handouts were given out in class and a student who did not receive one said: "I am in need of a pamphlet."**

a) SI: request

HI: command: 45%

b) LA: positive declarative

c) US: pragmatic blemish

- d) PA: lecturer gives the student a handout
- e) C: achieved

A further 17% and 13% of respondents identified the utterance as a 'statement' and 'a request' respectively. Reasons for these results may be that in this utterance there is a declarative form functioning as a 'request' and the fact that the conditions necessary for 'a request' and 'a command' are similar except that, for 'a command' the speaker must have a higher status than the hearer and some urgency may be involved. The closeness of the conditions and contexts governing these functions explains why one constantly hears the utterance, 'Is that a request or a command?' A point worth noting is that, even commands are often phrased as polite requests, as in the expressions, 'May I request that you leave my office immediately?' or 'Please leave my office now!'

These results are noteworthy from yet another angle, that is, if these results are taken in conjunction with the results of utterance 8,<sup>14</sup> (discussed later) where cultural deference could have explained the speaker's reluctance to use a stronger expression or more direct utterance to complain or disagree with a lecturer. If the respondents know students find it uncomfortable to complain even about a false accusation from a lecturer then students should find it even more difficult to insist that a lecturer give them handouts. This accounts for the

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<sup>13</sup> Sample 5: I am asking to be apologised due to my failure to submit my assignment.

<sup>14</sup> Sample 8: The lecturer said I was late but I denied.

anomaly of respondents classifying utterance 9<sup>15</sup> as ‘a command’. These are some of the anomalies which make such a pragmatic study of language interesting.

The utterance also needs analysis from a syntactic point of view. In similar situations, the usual utterance could be on the lines, ‘I need one of the handouts/pamphlets, can I have one?’ or simply ‘Can I have one of these pamphlets?’ and it can be implied that an articulation of the request presupposes a need for the pamphlet (see earlier discussion of the can/may dichotomy). Hence, it is not usual to use the verb ‘need’ in such a construction. Normally the word ‘need’ is used as a noun as in the expression, ‘Our needs are being met’; or as a modal verb, ‘You needn’t stay up all night’; or as an ordinary transitive verb, ‘He needs some shoes’. The phrase ‘need of a pamphlet’ serves as an object complement after the copular verb ‘to be’.

The phrase ‘I am in need of...’ is quite formal, similar to, ‘I am in possession of some documents’. Not only is this utterance quite formal but also quite an elaborate way of expressing an ordinary request, in that context. Elaborate sentences, like utterances 5 and 9<sup>16</sup>, are examples of what Thomas (1983) calls ‘pragmalinguistic failure’ and Leech (1983: 67-8) would term violation of the ‘principle of economy’. Pragmalinguistic failure is a linguistic problem caused by differences in the linguistic coding of a non-native speaker of a language and the

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<sup>15</sup> Sample 9: I am in need of a pamphlet.

<sup>16</sup> Sample 5: I am asking to be apologised due to my failure to submit my assignment.

coding of a native speaker. Violation of the ‘principle of economy’ would result from ‘inappropriate complete sentence responses and inappropriate propositional explicitness’.

Finally, the word ‘pamphlet’ also deserves some mention. Students in Univen use that word as if it is synonymous with ‘handout’. Although the two words share many semantic features, there is a difference in the context of use. ‘Handouts’ are what are given in lectures to supplement the content given by a lecturer in class while a ‘pamphlet’ has more general usage explaining why the word does not sound quite appropriate in this utterance.

#### **4.5.2 SECTION B: COMPLAINTS**

Complaints are meant to contrast ‘what is’ with ‘what ought to be’. To make a complaint is to assert a proposition while expressing a dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs, so, complaints fall within the speech acts of representatives and expressives. Since, the utterances to be discussed below are all of the latter, the utterances in this section will be classified as ‘expressives’ and discussed as such. Expressive speech acts, as the title suggests, indicate an inner state of the speaker and is essentially subjective. Austin (1969) terms them ‘behabitives’ and they focus on a reaction to other people’s behaviour, fortunes, attitudes and accordingly are expressions to

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Sample 9: I am in need of a pamphlet.

someone's past conduct or imminent conduct. Complaints therefore would be a speaker's unhappy reaction to someone's past conduct or past event. Austin establishes a link among expressives and the two functions of commissives and directives. His reasoning for this linkage is that once speakers react negatively or positively to past events they commit themselves to a line of conduct which may involve the issuing of a directive to a hearer or the source of the complaint.

All languages have utterances that can be classified as having expressive functions. Our statements of joy and disappointment, likes and dislikes are reflected in expressive statements, therefore, compliments and complaints belong to one set. What research has established is that complaints and compliments exhibit a small number of syntactic structures and most are surprisingly formulaic (Wolfson, 1981). Like most of the speech acts, expressives can be arranged along a continuum of strength, and the range is mediated by social distance and other factors. The form and intensity of expressives and the expectations regarding when expressives are appropriate vary across languages. Much of our stereotyping of different cultures is bound up with expressives. We judge the speakers of a particular language to be cold, passive, aggressive, poetic, unable or unwilling to express their feelings by their use of expressives.

As noted above, expressives are closely identifiable with representatives and this fact is demonstrated by the responses to the utterances. There are six utterances

identified as complaints. Of these only one, sample 4<sup>17</sup>, was correctly interpreted, by a substantial 74% as ‘a complaint’. The rest were all wrongly classified as ‘statements’, the closest function to ‘a complaint’. In fact, in sample 7<sup>18</sup>, 38% of the respondents said the utterance was ‘a complaint’, while 33% said it was ‘a statement’. The debatable point here, perhaps, is whether those respondents who identified ‘complaints’ as ‘statements’ can be said to be ‘wrong’ as the theorists have not conclusively argued the differences between these two speech acts.

Another point to be noted is that complaints are not as easily identified in short dialogues as directives or representatives. One reason for this, as given by Brown and Levinson (1978), is that since complaints are categorised as ‘face-threatening acts’, they have a strong potential for disturbing the state of a personal relationship. In polite societies interlocutors, therefore, hesitate before voicing a complaint. This hesitation usually manifests itself in lengthy preambles, hedges, non-literal utterances and disfluencies all aimed at softening the message of the complaint. What this means is that complaints seldom stand alone as an isolated speech act; rather they are negotiated in a larger speech event. This may explain the low interpretation rate of 25%.

#### **4.5.2.1 UTTERANCE 4: Marked assignments were given back in class. One student followed the lecturer out and said, “My marks are somehow.”**

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<sup>17</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

<sup>18</sup> Sample 7: Student A: I had an accident last week. Student B: Sorry. Are you all right? Student A: I am

- a) SI: complaint HI: complaint: 74%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic blemishes
- d) PA: the lecturer asked what the problem was
- e) C: achieved

Although this utterance was correctly interpreted by a large percentage of the respondents, (74%), it is still examined because of semantic and pragmatic issues that are present. Like utterance 5,<sup>19</sup> this sample is a demonstration of multiple functions in a single act – a complaint and a request. Strangely enough, none of the respondents identified it as a request, rather, 11% of respondents said they were ‘not sure’.

The next point to be discussed in connection with the utterance is the presence of the word ‘somehow’. If the word is used as a qualifier then the usual structure is for the word ‘somehow’ to be followed by some sort of descriptive element for modification, as in the sentence, ‘This situation is somehow embarrassing’. If this is the manner in which the speaker intended to use the word then the sentence is incomplete. The utterance can also be said to be ‘incomplete’ in another sense, that is, if the student has not finished speaking but has paused long enough for the hearer to believe s/he has come to the end of the utterance. This is a very common communication strategy for second language speakers where lack of an

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fine, but it’s so boring.

<sup>19</sup> Sample 5: I am asking to be apologized due to my failure to submit my assignment.



appropriate word forces the speaker either to appeal for assistance by pausing or to avoid the word or to abandon the interaction totally.

But then 'somehow' may be functioning as an adverb complement after the copular 'are', in which case, the word would be an adverb complement of manner referring to a characteristic which is either intangible or nebulous or unspecified or unspecifiable. In this case, such usage is not unprecedented and this is exactly how the speaker intended to construct the utterance. The plausibility of this explanation is, of course, questionable. A student following a lecturer to discuss marks suggests only one reason: the calculations are inaccurate because some points have not been credited or counted. A student coming to discuss a lecturer's over-generosity in the allocation or calculation of marks must be rare indeed. If that is the situation, then the objective of the communication is clearly defined and there is nothing unspecific about the speaker's complaint. If this is so, then the inappropriateness of the word 'somehow' becomes obvious.

This could also be an example of a 'hedge'. If that is the situation then this utterance demonstrates a deliberate stylistic choice of the speaker in deference to the lecturer and the whole concept of complaining. In other words, the selection of the word 'somehow' may stem from the student's avoidance of the less positive, confrontational words like, 'miscalculated', 'wrong' or 'error' in the utterance. Brown and Levinson (1978: 225) mention avoidance, euphemisms and hedges as very common politeness strategies of second language speakers.

**4.5.2.2 UTTERANCE 6: A lecturer not sure whether a student had attended her lecture asked:**

**Lecturer: Were you in class today?**

**Student: Of course. (Please describe the second utterance)**

- a) SI: complaint HI: 'not sure': 42%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: pragmatic blemish
- d) PA: lecturer offended
- e) C: not achieved

This interaction recalls the extensive work done in cross-cultural pragmatics by writers, such as Thomas (1986) and Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989), House (1989) where particular attention has been paid to politeness or deference in speech act realisation and politeness phenomena across languages and cultures. Thomas (1986) gives examples of pragmatically inappropriate transfer of structures across cultures. She cites the example of 'konesno' a Russian word meaning 'of course' which is often used instead of 'da' (yes) to convey an enthusiastic affirmative in English like 'yes, indeed' or 'yes, certainly'. Often, however, 'of course' implies that the speaker has asked something which is self-evident so that if the utterance is a 'genuine' question, it can sound, at best, peremptory and at worst, insulting. One may therefore conclude that the response 'of course', in this sample, should be read as 'Yes indeed I was' or 'I certainly was in class' or

words to that effect, and not the usual hearer's interpretation of 'What a stupid question'.

A similar situation occurs with the expressions 'in my opinion' and 'it seems to me'. Normally these expressions are used to deliver considered judgements as in, 'It seems to me you have misunderstood my position on the matter'. Sometimes second language speakers use these expressions for less weighty issues. It is not unusual to hear Univen students say, 'It seems to me to be raining'.

**4.5.2.3 UTTERANCE 7: Student A had just had an accident. This was the dialogue between her and her friend: Student A: I had an accident last week Student B: Sorry. Are you all right? Student A: I am fine, but it is so boring. (Please describe the third utterance)**

- a) SI: complaint HI: statement: 38%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: semantic blemish
- d) PA: hearer continues with signs of sympathy
- e) C: not achieved

This is one of the interactions which hearers had a problem interpreting, for in addition to the above response detail, 33% of respondents identified the interaction as 'a complaint' while 21% of respondents were 'not sure'. These

results are rather surprising as the word 'boring' occurs so frequently in Univen students' utterances. The word 'boring' seems to have undergone a semantic broadening where it is now descriptive of any unpleasant experience or anything disappointing to the speaker. These may include diverse situations, such as, a disagreement with a friend, low marks in an assignment, inability to obtain semester marks from the administrator, unhappiness with the conditions in the hostel, a robbery on campus, being forced to walk in the dark to and from the library and so on. In these examples, other terms could have been used to better capture the emotions of the speaker. Although the expansion of the use of the word 'boring' has been explained as 'semantic broadening' that may not be strictly accurate. In semantic broadening part of the original meaning of the word is maintained but it is quite difficult to refer to some of the above situations as partially 'not interesting'. Alternatively, one can say a total 'semantic shift' has taken place, but here also there is a problem, as a word which has undergone a semantic shift contains no aspect of the original meaning. Therefore a componential analysis of the word 'boring' shows its inappropriateness in the above utterance. The word 'boring' is overused on this university campus and this has reduced its semantic value, in much the same way as words and expressions like, 'very', 'at this point in time', 'comrade', 'at the end of the day' and so on. In most cases, these words and phrases can be replaced by more meaningful substitutes. In spite of the linguistic laziness that this practice portrays, such usage does seem to have a 'bonding' effect on the speakers or confirms their 'membership' in a specific linguistic group.

In addition, speaker A seems quite oblivious of the contradiction implied in the second utterance by the juxtaposition of 'I am fine' and 'it's so boring'. Logically, if a hearer asks the question, 'Are you all right?' after a speaker has just mentioned her/his involvement in an accident, the assumption is that the hearer is more concerned about the physical well-being of the speaker and much less about the social well-being of the speaker. This unexpected response from student A is partially due to the semantic emptiness of expressions, such as, 'How are you?' 'Are you all right?' and 'I am fine'. These phrases have now been reduced to routine conversation openings or gambits of little significance.

**4.5.2.4 UTTERANCE 8: A student accused by a lecturer of being late, reported this to her friend by saying: Student: The lecturer said I was late but I denied. [Please note that some explanation of utterance 8 has already been given in section 1.2. This section is therefore a continuation of these explanations.]**

- a) SI: complaint HI: statement: 50%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: semantic blemish
- d) PA: Student B: What did she do?
- e) C: not achieved

In addition to the above result, 23% of the respondents correctly identified the utterance as 'a complaint' and a further 13% selected 'not sure'. Part of the reason, is probably that the respondents thought it would be inappropriate for a student to complain or directly challenge a lecturer on such a point. This is clearly brought out by Student B's response, 'What did she do?' This is strange and unexpected, as the anticipated response could have been, 'What did she say?' as an apology from the lecturer is called for, if in fact the student was in class. Here, societal norms are directly influencing the interpretation of the English utterances.

### **4.5.3 SECTION C: STATEMENTS**

Statements or representatives have truth value, show 'words to world fit' and express a speaker's belief in a certain assertion, according to Searle (1969: 65-6). Conditions for a representative include the fact that the speaker has evidence or reason for the truth of a proposition; it is not obvious to both speaker and hearer that hearer knows or does not need to be reminded of the proposition. Statements are typically realised by declarative clauses. Representatives vary in terms of how hedged or aggravated the assertion might be.

**4.5.3.1 UTTERANCE 10: Speaker A wanted to know the hearer's reaction to a film: Speaker A: Did you enjoy the film? Speaker B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance).**

- a) SI: statement HI: statement: 44%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic blemish
- d) PA: --
- e) C: achieved

In addition to the above result, 23% of the respondents were 'not sure' of the intention of the speaker and 11% thought it was 'an invitation'. This confusion may have arisen because of the syntactic error arising from the expression 'too much'. The expression 'too much' is an intensifier used in front of uncountable nouns, as in the expressions, 'Too much food was cooked for the party' or 'Too much sand was used in the making of these bricks'. In these instances, the term 'too much' is used when there is more of something than is necessary or desirable. In such utterances the speaker's intention is to complain, whereas the intention in this case was the speaker's desire to express the magnitude of the pleasure s/he got from the film – an utterance meant as a compliment.

At face value, the syntactic codes of this utterance express the opposite of what the speaker intends as the utterance as it stands is 'a complaint'. A modification in the structure of the utterance to read, 'Very much' would then better express the speaker's intention. With this explanation it is no wonder that 23% of the respondents were 'not sure' of the meaning of the utterance. 11% of the respondents who understood that the speaker's intention was to make a

recommendation assumed that the utterance was an indirect invitation for them to go and watch the film. Strictly speaking, the utterance could also be an indirect suggestion or even a command (directive) to the hearer to make an effort to see the film. The respondents have also made similar deductions, for 8% and 7% of the respondents had identified the utterance as ‘a suggestion’ and ‘a command’ respectively.

**4.5.3.2 UTTERANCE 11: When asked whether there were other students in the classroom, a student replied: “I was left lonely in the class.”**

- a) SI: statement HI: statement / complaint: 42%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic blemish
- d) PA: --
- e) C: achieved

The interpretation of this utterance was equally split between ‘a statement’ and ‘a complaint’. Part of the contributing factor to the uncertainty is the semantic and/or syntactic errors in the utterance. The errors arose from the awkwardness of the lexical items ‘left’ and ‘lonely’, although one cannot rule out that part of the confusion also arose from the lack of theoretical distinction between ‘a statement’ and ‘a complaint’.



In utterance 11, a syntactic error inheres in the word 'lonely'. The words 'alone' and 'lonely' have some semantic properties in common except that the former has a neutral connotation while the latter has a negative connotation. The word 'alone' is both an adjective and an adverb; 'lonely' functions as an adjective complement only and has the implication that the person or thing so described is uncomfortable with the situation. 'Lonely' therefore extends an otherwise ordinary representative (statement) into a complaint. Although the common linguistic practice is to use adjectives as complements after the copular verbs, there are other instances where either the adjective or the adverb form appears with little or no semantic differences as in the examples, 'Her visits are frequent' and 'She visits frequently'. Some of the confusion surrounding the use of adjectives and adverbs stems from the fact that there is a certain amount of overlap between the adjective and adverb classes as adverbs are regularly, though not invariably, derived from adjectives by suffixation. The speaker may have been aware of this close relationship between adjectives and adverbs and hence the belief that they are interchangeable without any structural amendment to the sentence. Therefore in this utterance the non-adjustment of the constituents of the sentence has resulted in the utterance reading like a complaint.

The verb 'left' and the use of the passive have also increased the belief that the utterance is a complaint. The meaning of the utterance is in no way enhanced by the addition of the word 'left' as the same meaning is captured by the expressions, 'I was alone in the class' or 'I was lonely in the class'. One of the

uses of the passive voice is to demote the subject while bringing to prominence the object of the active sentence. A construction of this nature thus implies some 'helplessness' on the speaker's part (the subject) while a central controlling position is awarded to the former object.

But having said that, one can argue that the representatives: 'I am alone in the classroom' or 'There is no one else in the classroom' are equally capable of being misinterpreted as 'complaints'. Then the misinterpretation of utterance 11 does not arise from the student's inappropriate use of the word 'lonely' which has an additional semantic property of '+unwanted' but that the distinction between a 'complaint' and a 'statement' rests on other felicitous conditions which may be paralinguistic.

**4.5.3.3 UTTERANCE 12: An agricultural student describing a plough he was using said: 'The broken plough, it is fixed'.**

- a) SI: statement HI: statement: 65%
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c) US: syntactic and pragmatic blemishes
- d) PA: hearer is now better informed
- e) C: achieved

13% of the respondents identified the utterance as a 'suggestion' while a further 13% said they were 'not sure'. Although the majority of respondents, 65%,

correctly interpreted this utterance, it will be discussed because of the construction of the utterance. There seems to be a syntactic blemish from the insertion of a pronoun 'it' immediately after its precedent noun 'broken plough'; in other words, the subject of the sentence has been repeated or referenced (by using a pro-form) without any intervening constituents. This seems to be the case if only the surface structure is examined, but an examination of the deep structure shows a case of ellipsis. The notion of ellipsis is postulated to explain why some obligatory elements of a sentence are lacking. Although sentence reduction may, in general, be regarded in semantic or pragmatic terms, as a means of avoiding redundancy of expression, what constituents may be reduced is a matter of what is permissible semantically, syntactically and pragmatically. Pragmatically, ellipsis can also be justified by Grice's maxim of quality which requires interlocutors to be brief and avoid unnecessary prolixity. Reduction, however, should not be undertaken if, for example, the general meaning is distorted, or if it creates ambiguity or confusion or difficulty for the interpreter. Usual means of ellipsis include, coordination, omitting of descriptive relative phrases, main verbs after auxiliaries in tags and the use of pro-forms. It is a fair assumption that the full version of this utterance could read; 'You remember the broken plough that you asked about, it is fixed', hence in sample 12 the relative phrase has been omitted.

From the response, the ellipsis seems not to have affected the utterance's interpretability, although the resultant construction is both stylistically and

syntactically questionable. Pragmatically, the reduction may have some effect on the illocutionary act. In the first instance, one is forced to read the first part of the utterance as an echo of questions such as, 'Where is the plough?' 'What happened to the plough?' 'What did you do with the plough I saw at the Agriculture Department?' and so on. 'The broken plough' would then function as an echo-question, in a statement form, and be said with a rising intonation, so that the second part, 'it is fixed' is seen as an answer. This scenario seems a plausible explanation because of the shared mutual knowledge that is necessary to make ellipsis comprehensible. There is an inevitable association between the use of ellipsis and the existence of in-group knowledge.

In addition, the construction of this utterance, a nominal group followed immediately by a pronominal reference to the same item, may raise some doubt as to the type and degree of emphasis that is being placed on the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act intended. Is it an ordinary representative (low emphasis) or is the student boasting, or is s/he irritated at an implied doubt of her/his mechanical abilities? Perhaps a more extensive context which would include the utterance immediately before this could have given some clues, for constatives, unlike some performatives, do not have specific linguistic conventions. In other words, there is no conventional way, linguistically, of showing emotions like boasting or showing irritation. In instances where there is a need to show such emotions, the speaker would make use of prosody to show the relevant emotion. Most of the linguistic emotions can be either replaced or

emphasised by prosodic and kinesic features. The raised eyebrow, the widening of the eyes, the frown and the stance are some ways of communicating tentativeness, irritation or emphasis.

**4.5.3.4 UTTERANCE 13: Describing the size of her discussion group a student said: “The students in our group are many.”**

- a. SI: statement HI: statement / complaint: 35%
- b. LA: positive declarative
- c. US: syntactic blemish
- d. PA: hearer is now better informed
- e. C: achieved?

In utterance 13, the respondents were equally divided as to whether the utterance was a complaint or a statement. Part of the problem is created by the fact that both statements and complaints are representatives. The felicity conditions for the two are therefore similar, as noted earlier. In fact, a statement can be transformed into a complaint merely by a special ‘look’, tone or posture accompanying an utterance. These non-linguistic context factors can be augmented by other factors in attempts to separate the two acts. For example, Hatch (1992: 141) identifies ‘hedges’ as one of the main characteristics of complaints. Phrases like ‘please don’t get me wrong but...’, ‘I hope you don’t mind if I say this...’, usually would start a complaint session. Such hedges, Brown and Levinson (1978) believe, are employed if the speaker suspects the

complaint to be 'face-threatening' to the hearer as most complaints are. In this sample, no such situation exists as the context indicates that the speaker is 'describing' the size of her discussion group. The word 'describing' is deliberately enclosed in quotation marks as the point will be developed further. The speaker can give this response to different questions. These questions could be, 'Aren't there too few students in your discussion group if these are the only ideas you have come up with?' or 'These are very well-thought out points, how many students are in your discussion group?' or 'How many students are in group five, the last group?' or 'Are there enough students in your group?' One would recognise that different speech acts are intended by these questions – a criticism, a compliment and two enquiries respectively. Now, if the speaker is responding to what s/he believes is a criticism (question two), then sample 13 is a complaint against what the speaker saw as lack of appreciation of the well-developed points put forward. However, if the speaker is responding to questions three and four (genuine information-seeking utterances), then sample 13 is a statement. Naturally the respondents (not being privy to any extra context) are divided in the interpretation.

Another issue with the interpretation stems from the physical arrangement of the codes, or the word order. The ordering of the constituents of a sentence depends on the stylistic preference of the speaker in addition to the focus of the message. According to Quirk *et al.* (1985), it is a 'courtesy' to the hearer as well as a convenience to the speaker to provide the point of the message with

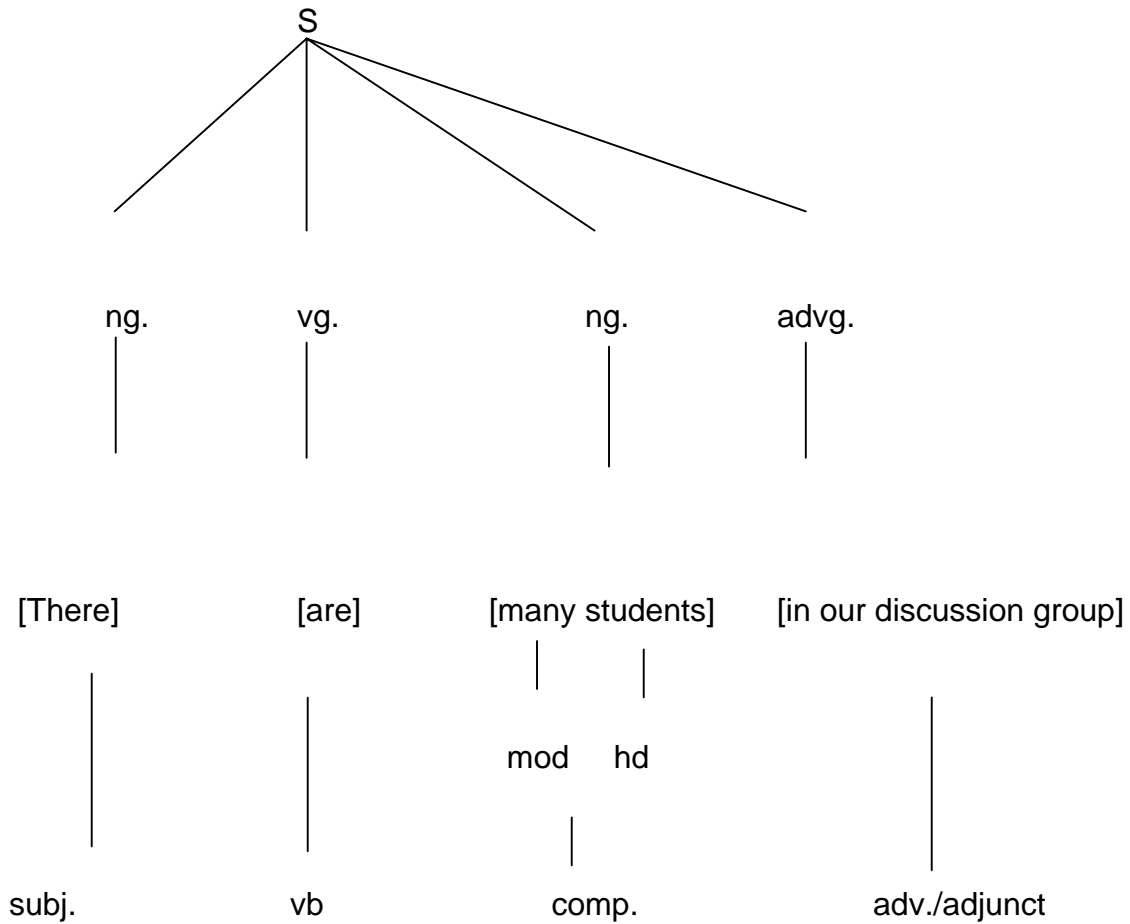
minimum fuss by placing the utterance in a normal linguistic framework. The 'normal' linguistic framework is governed by the 'given' and the 'new' information contained in an utterance; the 'theme' - the initial part of any structure when considered from an informational point of view - and the 'focus'. These four factors usually govern the way that we structure the linguistic codes. A sentence which is constructed in such a manner that the 'new' information is not focused by either 'fronting' or 'end-focusing' is then regarded as 'marked'. In utterance 13, the 'new' focal information can be either 'the students' or 'many' depending on the question the speaker is responding to and the style that the speaker prefers. If the utterance is a mere statement, in accordance with the speaker's stated intentions, then the unmarked form (Figure 4.1), 'There are many students in my discussion group' would be the logical form. For respondents then the choice of the marked form (Figure 4.2), which this statement shows, is not an arbitrary exercise, causing respondents to think the utterance is not a 'statement' (information giving) but a 'complaint'.

Another plausible explanation for the confusion is the preference of Univen students for the longer relative clauses, rather than the genitive clause, as descriptive elements. In most cases adjectives can be used either attributively, 'The red books are on the table' or in a longer predicative manner, 'The books which are red are on the table' without any change of meaning. Whether a speaker uses descriptive units attributively or predicatively, usually is a question of the person's linguistic style and/or the semantic demands or justification of the

sentence. However, it is not unusual, in Univen, to hear expressions like, ‘At our place we have poor service of electricity’, ‘The book which is torn is on the floor’ or ‘The violence of the taxi is caused by these different organisations’ (Kaburise and Phalanndwa, 1997: 34) where there is no clear justification for the choice of that style. If utterance 13 is rephrased as, ‘There are many students in our discussion group’ then it is a case of simple pre-modification of the noun ‘students’ and ‘in our discussion group’ then is an adjunct of place (Figure 4.1). This will then be regarded as the ‘unmarked version’ as it is the more usual expression. In the marked version, utterance 13, ‘in our discussion group’ functions as a relative qualifier for the nominal phrase ‘many students’ (Figure 4.2). The analyses following will illustrate the point:



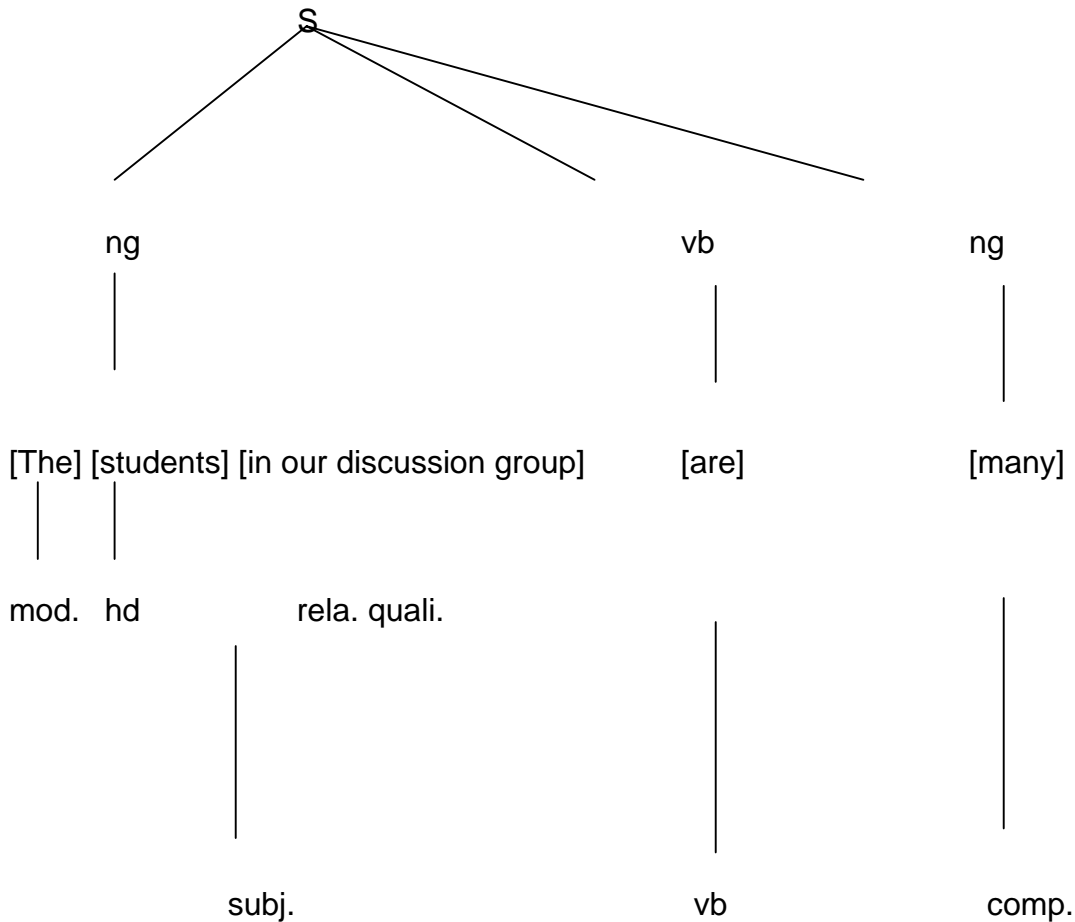
There are many students in our discussion group.



**Key:** ng = nominal group                      mod. = modifier  
 vg = verbal group                                hd = headword  
 advg = adverbial group                        comp. = complement  
 subj. = subject                                    adv./adjunct = adverb/adjunct  
 vb = verb

**Figure 4.1: Unmarked Version**

The students in our discussion group are many.



**Key:** rela. quali. = relative qualifier

**Figure 4.2: Marked Version**

The significance of these tree diagrams stems from the fact that English is a SVO/CA (subject, verb, object or complement and adjunct) language and that order is usually not adhered to for a reason. In the marked version (Figure 4.2), the speaker has not adhered to this sequence, therefore the assumption that the

utterance is not just a statement but maybe, a complaint as well. The difference is the phrase 'in our discussion group' which functions in Figure 4.2 as a 'relative qualifier' for the nominal phrase, whereas in Figure 4.1 'in our discussion group' is part of the predicate functioning as an adjunct of place.

Although the argument so far is that if the speaker had used 'many' attributively, therefore creating an unmarked statement, the utterance is more likely to be interpreted as 'a representative' one can also make a case against this assertion. One of the deciding factors in this utterance's interpretation is the tone in which the statement is uttered, particularly how the word 'many' is articulated. A stress on 'many' may be the student's way of drawing attention to the fact that this particular group has many students as its special feature. Or the stress may be in response to what the student sees as an implied doubt (or an articulated question) on whether the group has the required number. In this case, a pre-modifying adjective is open to a similar interpretation as a predicative one.

In summary, one can say that although the similarity in the felicity conditions of a 'statement' and a 'complaint' has contributed to the confusion, the sentence construction, particularly the predicative use of the adjective or post-determiner 'many' has also contributed to the difference in the interpretation. Some respondents tend to believe that the speaker is not merely describing the quantity of students in the group but that further information is being provided.

**4.5.3.5 UTTERANCE 14: A lecturer concerned about a student, Kate, said to her roommate: Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate.**

**Student: No, she is not around. (Please describe the first utterance).**

- a. SI: statement HI: statement: 34%
- b. LA: positive declarative
- c. US: semantic blemish
- d. PA: the lecturer became more informed
- e. C: not achieved

In addition to the above result, 23% of the respondents said they were 'not sure', 18% thought it was 'a suggestion' while 12% thought it was either 'a command' or 'a request'. These results are not at all surprising as the student's response indicates clearly that she has misunderstood the speech act. In that context, the respondents' subsequent confusion is justified. Non-communication has resulted from this utterance because of the difference between utterance meaning and speaker meaning. As discussed in Chapter Three, one of the reasons pragmatics emerged as a separate branch of language studies was the notion that sentence or linguistic meaning may be different from speaker or utterance meaning. The same argument is used to distinguish semantics from pragmatics where the former is concerned with sentence meaning while the latter is concerned with speaker meaning. As Grice (1971: 54) observes, the content of a locutionary act (what is said) is not always determined by what is meant by the sentence uttered

Ambiguous words or phrases need to be precisely defined; assumptions and the references of indexical and other context-specific expressions need to be explained for what is said to be interpreted fully.

The discussion of SAT has demonstrated the variety of ways that a single speech act can be realised. A speech act can be directly or indirectly performed (using a non-conventional form to perform a speech act); literally or non-literally (depending on how the words are used); explicitly or inexplicitly (depending on whether what is meant is fully spelt out). Therefore in indirectness the usual form and function match is not maintained. With non-literality the illocutionary act being performed is not the one that would be predicted simply from the meanings of the words used. Quite frequently utterances are both non-literal and non-direct. For example, one might say 'I love the sound of your voice' to tell someone non-literally (ironically) that one cannot stand her voice and thereby indirectly to ask her to stop singing.

Non-literality and indirectness are the two main ways in which the semantic content of a sentence can fail to determine the full force and content of the illocutionary act being performed in using an utterance, as is demonstrated by the lecturer's utterance. In this sample, the lecturer was performing all three types of non-conventionality (indirectness, non-literality and inexplicitness) in the utterance.

The utterance 'I would like to speak to Kate' is a positive declarative statement functioning as a command. As a result, there is an indirect speech act, as a direct act would utilise an imperative form. The use of the modal 'would' may have confused the hearer causing the inappropriate response. The modal 'would' has multiple uses, among them, politeness and tentative markers, features not normally associated with a 'command' in the traditional sense. Instead of utterances like 'Tell Kate to come to my office' or 'Kate must see me as soon as possible' the lecturer used an utterance which sounded almost like a tentative request instead, with a modal verb 'would' and a main verb such as 'like', which minimises the illocutionary force of a command.

This sample is also interesting from the point of politeness theories inherent in pragmatics. Van Dijk (1977b: 221) talks about the need to defer to the positions and relations existing between the interlocutors. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978) also argue that the more power the speaker has over the hearer and the more socially distant the speaker is from the hearer the less tact is required in handling the situation.

All these factors may have led the hearer to believe that the lecturer's utterance was not a command but an indirect question meaning 'Is Kate around? May I speak to her?' The response of the student, 'No she is not around' is reminiscent of the anecdote repeated in Yule (1985: 101):

Visitor: Excuse me, do you know where the Ambassador Hotel is?

Passer-by: Oh sure, I know where it is. (and walks away)

In this scene, the visitor uses a sentence form usually associated with a question and the passer-by answered the question literally. Instead of responding to the request the passer-by replies to the question, treating an indirect question (request) as if it were a direct one. Similarly, the hearer in this sample has treated a command as a question since questions can be realised with a statement form as in the exchange:

87. A: Your walls look very clean.

B: Yes, they have just been painted.

**4.5.3.6 UTTERANCE 15: A student whose friend had missed some lectures, when asked to explain the notes to the absent student said: “He is a popular somebody.” (As a description of the absent friend)**

- a. SI: statement HI: statement: 42%
- b. LA: positive declarative
- c. US: semantic blemish
- d. PA: the lecturer became more informed.
- e. C: not achieved

In addition to those respondents who interpreted the utterance as a statement, 30% were ‘not sure’ and 14% thought it was a ‘suggestion’. The reasoning

behind respondents interpreting the sample as 'a suggestion' is difficult to determine, although perhaps respondents were merely being mischievous. Of more significance is the 30% of the respondents who were not sure of the meaning of the utterance and the reasons for this. The reasons may stem from not only the surface codes of the utterance, but also from the conversation style of the speaker.

The word 'somebody' is both an indefinite and a compound pronoun. As such it cannot be pre-modified by an adjective as in the expressions \*'a tall somebody', \*'a nice somewhere'. Such pronouns can, however, be post-modified as in the expression, 'somebody tall' and 'somewhere nice' which are more usual. The first problem, therefore, is the positioning of the adjective 'popular' before the pronoun.

The word 'somebody' usually implies that one is not fully aware of the particulars of that person and would prefer to use the less definite term. With that understanding one would hardly describe one's 'friend' as 'somebody'. However, a common practice in Univen is to describe an acquaintance as a 'somebody'. The same, supposedly can be said of the meaning of the word 'individual' which is not an antonym for 'group' but has now been broadened to substitute for the similarly vague word 'person' as in the sentence, 'She is an outgoing individual'.



Semantic non-differentiation, under which this utterance would fall, usually also flouts Grice's (1989) conversation principle of manner – avoid obscurity of expression. As noted in Chapter Three, flouting of the maxims is an everyday occurrence and a flouting of the maxim of manner may be a deliberate decision of a speaker with an aim of, maybe, hiding a fact, confusing an issue or indicating an unwillingness to be associated with an issue. None of these aims can really be attributed to the speaker in this situation; the obvious explanation is the speaker's personal preference for such a vague, ambiguous statement. Utterances of this nature can also be classified as an indirect speech act.

Indirectness can be generated intentionally in the case of the speaker deliberately wanting the hearer to infer utterance meaning by using implications, which is then an example of a stylistic choice; or it could be accidental when performance constraints have created some indirectness in the speaker's utterance. In this instance, performance constraints have resulted in the utterance having an implied meaning, that is, 'popular' students do not need missed lectures explained to them, or that the hearer cannot or should not be entrusted with the task of explaining the missed lecture. The two possible meanings would necessitate two different actions from a lecturer, a clear example of the risk involved in using indirect speech acts. In a very illuminating discussion, Dascal (1983: 54) makes the point that indirectness is costly and risky. It is 'costly' in the sense that an indirect utterance takes longer for the speaker to produce and longer for the hearer to process (a fact which has

frequently been confirmed in psycholinguistic experiments). It is risky in the sense that the hearer may not interpret accurately the intention of the speaker, causing a breakdown in communication.

Furthermore, a pragmatic blemish may also have occurred from the student's inability to make a semantic adjustment in the utterance. The use of the colloquial 'somebody' would be appropriate among peers in an informal dialogue but could hardly be appropriate in a lecturer-student interaction over formal issues like assignments and non-attendance at lectures.

**4.5.3.7 UTTERANCE 16: A student asked (in October 1999) whether she would be going home for the weekend said: "I won't go there no more."**

- a) SI: statement HI: statement: 25% statement
- b) LA: positive declarative
- c. US: syntactic blemish
- d. PA: hearer is not better informed
- e. C: not achieved

In addition to the above results, 22% of the respondents identified the utterance as 'a complaint'; 18% were 'not sure'; 16% and 12% thought it was 'a command' and 'a suggestion' respectively. This variety of interpretations is difficult to explain

except to hazard a guess that confusion was created from inadequate context clues and the idiosyncratic utterance construction.

Two central tenets of pragmatics, as noted in Chapters Two and Three, are that a comprehensive context is vital for the achievement of communication and that pragmatics is 'language in use'. A comprehensive context includes all the clues (physical, linguistic, paralinguistic); knowledge of general principles of conversation and mutually shared factual information (encyclopedic knowledge) that the interlocutors bring to a conversation situation. With that in mind, some of the information needed for a hearer to correctly interpret this utterance should include the fact that the hearer

- a) must be a long-standing acquaintance of the speaker so as to be aware that the speaker does not come from the immediate vicinity;
- b) is aware that the speaker does go home on weekends;
- c) knows the speaker has not gone home recently;
- d) knows that since the speaker is 'a student' she must be in some learning institution either at secondary or tertiary level;
- e) knows that the academic calendar runs from January to December in South Africa;
- f) knows that some examinations are written in the latter part of the year, around October;

- g) knows that most learners who do not reside at home when they do go home for a short break, like for a weekend, find it difficult to study during their stay at home; and
- h) knows that the average student would like to pass her/his examinations.

These are just some of the factors that must be shared by the interlocutors for correct inference to take place of this utterance. In addition there are other paralinguistic clues like prosody, body language and the physical location of the interlocutors at the time. Should any of these clues not be available to a hearer, miscommunication can occur. It can be deduced that respondents, having available only the sketchy context given, may have missed the significance of some of the details.

The physical structure of utterance 16 has also contributed to its multiple interpretation. A syntactic blemish has occurred from the use of the two negative particles, 'won't' and 'no more'. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 782) explain that such an utterance has failed to observe the negation proceedings governing assertive and non-assertive pronouns. Assertive pronouns include 'some', 'somebody', 'somewhere' and 'something', while their non-assertive forms are 'any', 'anybody', 'anywhere' and 'anything'. In addition to this classification, there are negative forms for these pronouns, 'no', 'nobody', 'nowhere' and 'nothing' respectively. 'No more' as used in this utterance is therefore the negative form of

the time adverb 'still' (assertive) and 'any more' (non-assertive). A combination of the negator 'not' and a non-assertive form is possible giving an example like, 'I am not painting anymore'. It is equally possible to negate the sentence by just using the negative form, as in, 'I am painting no more'. Strictly speaking, the speaker should have used the negator plus the non-assertive form 'any more' resulting in 'I won't go there any more'. Alternatively, the speaker could have omitted the negator and used only the negative form of the pronoun as in 'I will no more go there'. So what has happened in this utterance is that the speaker has included the negator 'not' with the negative form 'no more', a case of a double negative. In most cases the combination of the negator (n't) and the non-assertive form is more colloquial and idiomatic than the other negative formation.

Double negation is possible in certain contexts as in 'I can't not obey her', 'You can't not admire her', 'No one has nothing to offer society', 'Not many people have nowhere to live.' These sentences are similar to the double negative of logic where the two negative values cancel each other leaving the sentence positive. Syntactically, these sentences are still negative as for example, they will be followed by positive question tags as in 'I can't not obey her, can I?' or 'Not many people have nowhere to live, have they?' However, Quirk *et al.* (1985: 799) argue that the double negative in standard English is very different from double or multiple negation in some varieties of non-standard English. In non-standard English, a negative item can be used wherever in standard English a non-assertive item follows a negative, as in 'No one ever said anything to anybody'

(standard), 'No one never said nothing to nobody' (non-standard). The additional negatives, in non-standard English, as in this utterance, do not cancel out previous negatives to make the utterance positive but rather emphasises the negativity of the utterance. In addition, the notion that two negative elements in a sentence transform it into a positive one is not strictly adhered to in colloquial situations nowadays, and the Americanism which has crept into linguistic performances of the younger generation means that this utterance remains a negative response to the question asked. It is clear that some emphasis was intended as those familiar with South African universities' calendars would be aware that October is indicative of the examination period. What is also of significance in the assigning of meaning to this utterance is the student's use of the words 'there' and 'no more'. 'No more' has some finality to it, giving the impression that the student has an issue with the home ('there') and not with the time of going.

**4.5.3.8 UTTERANCE 17: Student A's bag strap came undone and student B said: "Leave me do it for you."**

- a. SI: statement HI: command: 33%
- b. LA: positive declarative
- c. US: syntactic blemish
- d. PA: hearer is now better informed.
- e. C: achieved

This is another of the utterances the interpretation of which caused some confusion for the respondents. A further 29% of respondents identified the utterance as a 'suggestion' as well as 14% who were 'not sure'. Although SAT posits that an interpretation of an utterance rests with the speaker, this is an occasion to question the speaker's stated intention in relation to the context. The initial reaction is to view the utterance as either a 'suggestion' or an 'offer' or even a 'request'. As a 'suggestion' (because the speaker is proposing a course of action which the hearer may not otherwise pursue; it is in the hearer's interest that such an action take place) the hearer has the option to accept or reject the course of action. These are all conditions which this utterance fulfils. Likewise, the utterance could be an 'offer' since the speaker is making something (her services) available to the hearer and the speaker is not sure the hearer would accept the offer. That the utterance can also be a 'request' is also possible as the speaker could also be 'requesting' that her services to be made available to hearer. With all these possibilities it is rather odd that the speaker has indicated that her intention was merely to inform the hearer, as that is the main function of a statement. This is one of the utterances that highlights the possibility that the speakers and the respondents were not fully conversant with the different speech acts involved in this questionnaire.

A question that arises at this juncture is whether the respondents identified the utterance as a 'command' because of the sentence construction used, that is, the imperative, and the use of the word 'leave' or whether had the speaker replaced

it with 'let' the interpretation would have been the same. The answer to the first part of the question cannot be in the affirmative as the use of the imperative even in orders and requests, in normal conversational interaction, is dispreferred in many languages, English included, despite its status as the genuine expression of these illocutionary acts (Mey, 1993). However, the imperative form, rated by Walters (1979: 295) as the most impolite, accounts for a large number of utterances of spontaneously-occurring requests. The responses to this utterance demonstrate the closeness in linguistic conditions between 'a suggestion', 'a request' and 'a command'.

The other point worth noting is the semantic properties of the word 'leave' and the alternative, 'let', that could have been used. In other words, is there difference in meaning between 'Leave me do it for you' and 'Let me do it for you'? Apart from the syntactic blemish and the implied physical unpleasantness of the first sentence, the meanings are similar, if context clues are taken into account, although the use of 'leave' could also indicate either a lapse of time or the incompetence of receiver of the message rather than simply an offer to help. The confusion surrounding this utterance, therefore, rests more on the inconclusive conditions surrounding the various speech acts rather than on the surface codes.

**4.5.3.9 UTTERANCE 18: A student anxiously waiting for her supplementary results said: "I feel hopeless for this week."**



- a. SI: statement HI: statement: 31%; complaint 30%
- b. LA: positive declarative
- c. US: syntactic blemish
- d. PA: hearer is now informed that the speaker does not have much hope of getting the results this week.
- e. C: achieved

In addition to the above results, 25% of the respondents indicated that they were 'not sure' of the meaning of the utterance. This diversity in the interpretation, perhaps, has occurred from the use of the word 'hopeless'. The word 'hopeless' is an adjective meaning either 'without hope' as in 'The rains would not stop; the situation is hopeless'; or 'a feeling of inadequacy or incompetence' as in 'I am hopeless in Mathematics'. However, 'hopeless', when used to modify an object with animate qualities, can only have the latter meaning as in the sentence, 'I am hopeless at Mathematics/chess/public speaking'.

In this utterance 'hopeless' seems to be a subject complement after a verb of perception, 'feel'. One would, therefore, use the first part of this utterance to refer to a situation or an issue over which the speaker would normally have or should have some control but for some reason, this is not the case currently. However, if you believe that it is impossible or unlikely for something to happen, as in the first meaning discussed, you can say that there is 'no hope' of it happening, as in,

'There seems to be no/little hope of my getting my results this week.' In this case, 'no hope' is not synonymous with 'hopeless', as 'no hope' is not an adjectival phrase. It is rather part of the nominal group functioning as the object of the sentence. That is to say, in such a construction, it is not the speaker who is without hope but rather the situation which does not look promising.

The use of either meaning naturally goes with a definite sentence construction. What the student has done is to intend the first meaning but use a sentence construction which is usually reserved for the second meaning. That seems to be part of the reason for the misunderstanding by the respondents.

## **4.6 CONCLUSION**

Demonstrated in this fairly extensive analysis is the variety of interpretations or functions possible in a written utterance if one has recourse only to a written context. Critics of SAT, such as Leech (1983: 176) and Vandereveken (1990: 167), have maintained that in everyday linguistic interaction it is problematic to attempt a match between structural codes and speech functions as the interpretation process relies quite heavily on very comprehensive linguistic and non-linguistic context clues. This has been shown by the analysis in this chapter. Also demonstrated by the variety of possible interpretations of these utterances, is the fact that creation of linguistic meaning is a negotiated process between the speaker and the hearer.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter Five concludes the thesis by examining the implications of the application of Speech Act Theory on the collected data. The discussion in this chapter is informed by the main investigative issue articulated in Chapter One, section 1.4.2 – the status of Speech Act Theory and pragmatics in establishing communicative competence of English second language users. The discussion also focuses on the questions below which were formulated from the main research issue:

- How does a hearer decipher the intention and meaning of an utterance?
- What does linguistic well-formedness entail? In other words, what is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one?
- What is the status of non-standard but meaningful utterances within the concept of Speech Act Theory?
- What is the status of Speech Act Theory as an analytical tool for the establishment of communicative competence in the chosen contexts of Univen and the Venda area?

## 5.2 CONCLUSIONS

These questions raise issues concerning the whole notion of communication in a second language and what deductions can be arrived at from an examination of the data. The conclusions will be discussed under two main sections – the first section will review the first two questions on the nature of communication, as formulated from the main research issue, and second section will focus on the next two questions which focuses on the status of SAT in relation to the data collected.

### 5.2.1 NATURE OF COMMUNICATION

Perhaps one of the most complex and perplexing concepts in communication studies is the role of the hearer in linguistic interactions. Indeed, it can be argued that understanding what a hearer does during communication, still remains open to debate. Part of the problem surrounds the arbitrary nature of word meaning and the number of linguistic deductions necessary to interpret an utterance. The samples analysed in Chapter Four, in particular samples 13 and 16,<sup>20</sup> give some indication of the background knowledge a hearer needed for the relevant interpretation to be arrived at. Contending with such a complex cognitive process it is hardly surprising that misunderstanding can frequently occur as some of the

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<sup>20</sup> Sample 13: The students in our group are many.  
Sample 16: I won't go there no more.

samples demonstrate, for example, samples 17 and 18<sup>21</sup> where only 33% and 31% of hearers, respectively, were able to correctly interpret the speakers' intentions. How a hearer processes propositions in utterances or how understanding is created has been a mystery,

In what has been hailed as one of the influential works in language philosophy, John Locke's 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' (1689) portrays verbal communication as a form of 'telementation'<sup>22</sup> a concept not original to Locke as it has existed in language thinking as far back as the era of Aristotle. But what does appear to be original to Locke is his concern with the 'imperfection of words' and, by logical extension, utterances. We can never know, Locke argues, that the ideas we signify by certain words are the same for speaker and hearer, giving rise to his notion of 'intersubjectivity of understanding'. Since, under Locke's telementational view of communication, understanding is a private, mental activity, as any understanding of a word or utterance is likewise private and subjective.

The remedy to the perceived problems of the imperfection of words and intersubjectivity of understanding, according to Locke, would be if 'speakers clearly defined all complex ideas in terms of the simple ideas of which they are composed' (McGregor, 1986: 92). How the defining of the initial simple ideas can be undertaken is not clearly demonstrated in his writings and really not of

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<sup>21</sup> Sample 17: Leave me do it for you.  
Sample 18: I feel hopeless for this week.

relevance to this study. Of interest to this study is Locke's point of the subjectivity of meaning and hence of understanding. If this notion is carried even further, then the role of the hearer is not as passive as it is made out to be in the discussion so far. In fact, the burden of successful communication, then, is equally shared by hearer and speaker. Just as it is the responsibility of the hearer to integrate all linguistic and non-linguistic clues to arrive at a logical and acceptable interpretation, it is also the responsibility of the speaker to ensure that such clues are available and that any 'imperfections' are eliminated from his or her utterances. Yet in ordinary interactions it is speakers who have the luxury of complaining that they have been misunderstood, and, in fact, when they have to rephrase an utterance, the assumption is often that they are doing the hearer a favour.

With the samples analysed, one can say with a fair amount of certainty that misunderstanding has mainly occurred because of the surface structure of the samples and not from the imperfection of words or the intersubjectivity of understanding. However, if the samples were structurally and pragmatically unblemished but were still misunderstood, then the question which could be asked would be similar to the one this section is attempting to answer, that is, 'How does a hearer decipher the intention and meaning of an utterance?' Or, how does one make explicit (provide outward criteria) for an implicit (mental) act? One such obvious criterion is hearers' resultant linguistic and non-linguistic action, but that is all well and good if the understanding of a linguistic interaction

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<sup>22</sup> The transmission of thoughts from the mind of the speaker to that of the hearer (Locke, 1689).

can appropriately be evidenced in such manner. Where such behaviour is not appropriate then evidence of understanding would have to be demonstrated in an alternative way.

The second question asked, 'What does linguistic well-formedness entail or what is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one?' can be discussed along a similar line. 'Meaningful' is a word capable of 'inter-subjectivity of understanding'. A word, or an utterance can be declared meaningful or meaningless linguistically as shown in Chapter Two. Creation and miscreation of meaning is possible syntactically, semantically and pragmatically. Highly structured restrictions ensure that utterances are syntactically and semantically meaningful; however, the same cannot be said for the creation of pragmatic meaningfulness. Pragmatic well-formedness, as demonstrated by the samples given in Table 4.1 of this study, seems to rest on a variety of circumstances, among them, shared linguistic culture (samples 4 and 15<sup>23</sup>), physical setting of the utterance (samples 2 and 9<sup>24</sup>), relationship between the interlocutors (samples 6 and 17<sup>25</sup>), implications (sample 10<sup>26</sup>) and the notion of indirect speech acts (samples 4 and 13)<sup>27</sup>. The aspect of inter-subjectivity is

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<sup>23</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

Sample 15: He is a popular somebody.

<sup>24</sup> Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With a rising intonation on the word 'pass')

Sample 9: I am in need of a pamphlet.

<sup>25</sup> Sample 6: Lecturer: Were you in class today? Student: Of course. (Please describe the second utterance)

Sample 17: Leave me do it for you.

<sup>26</sup> Sample 10: A: Did you enjoy the film? B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance).

<sup>27</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

Sample 13: The students in our discussion group are many.

illustrated more vividly, therefore, when an analysis factors in pragmatic considerations, as shown by these samples.

Perhaps a relevant discussion at this stage should focus on the role that form and function play in meaning creation. All approaches to discourse, at one time or another, has to pay attention to either the form or function of an utterance. The impression should not be created that paying attention to form, as this analysis has done, implies meaning, particularly within and an ESL cultural environment, such as the context of these samples, has not been accommodated. Meaning is not possible with a 'formless' utterance. In fact a string of words cannot be designated an 'utterance' unless it has some form recognisable to the users.

Doing a formalist-structural analysis, in addition to the more pragmatic review, as done in this investigation, is not a negation of the socio-cultural stance advocated in the earlier parts of this study. Neither is it an abandonment of the earlier assertions that language is first and foremost a societal tool. In fact the opposite picture is true. If the rationale behind a formalist evaluation is an acknowledgement of the supremacy of structural codes over meaning, then this investigation should not have even started. I say so because, it was declared right at the beginning that these utterances have structural flaws of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic nature, then the assumption would be that these utterances should be incapable of creating meaning. However, I went on to analyse these samples to prove that despite these flaws the majority of the



utterances created meaning. A clear indication that I do not believe structural codes are the only yardstick for the evaluation of communicative competence but rather other considerations, which by logical deduction are socio-cultural, must account for the interlocutors' ability to communicate. The argument here is that, because the interlocutors share a code or repertoire of interpretation which may be different to outsiders this has enabled communication to take place. Indeed, studies have shown that in South Africa, black students learn ESL in formal contexts (hence the stilted constructions of some of the utterances) and from teachers who are not L1 speakers of English. Others have argued that striving for L1 norms in an L2 situation is difficult, if not impossible.

Secondly in pointing out that in the majority of the utterances, 56%, pragmatic considerations assisted the meaning-creating process is an indication of the non-abandonment of socio-cultural involvement in meaning creation. Part of what this investigation aimed to do was to downplay the importance of mentalist language attributes while demonstrating that in the majority of ESL utterances socio-pragmatic considerations have to be factored into the equation. For example, in the above discussion on the pragmatic well-formedness of the samples, I have listed, quite comprehensively, the non-structural factors influencing the interpretation of some utterances. I have identified factors, such as shared linguistic culture, physical setting of the utterances, relationship between interlocutors, implication and the notion of indirect speech acts, all of which are in line with the context of situation as discussed by Malinowski (1923).

Whether a researcher belongs to either the formalist or the functionalist school of thought, the creation of meaning necessitates two or more individuals exchanging messages and this is what is termed 'communication'. One therefore talks of 'non-transmission' of such messages and when that happens, one can say that communication or the interpretation of the speaker's intention has not occurred. Variety of reasons can be offered to explain this, one could be that the codes were too foreign and hence failed to capture the intentions of the speaker or that the manner of meaning-creation among the interlocutors is different, therefore they could not create meaning, uniformly. These results demonstrate that, with these samples it is a combination of these factors. This is in line with the aim running through this investigation; that communicative competence is a multi-faceted attribute. These results show that knowledge of grammar (as outlined in first language domain and may be represented by Quirk *et al* [1985]), is not more important than such socio-cultural characteristics, as the place of the utterance, whether it was in a formal or non-formal setting or whether the interlocutors were first or second language speakers.

One cannot, in all honesty, champion a cause that totally ignores values of semiotic codes ascribed to it by the custodians of such codes on the argument that such codes infringe on other users particular linguistic style, in their own language. Would it not be better for such users to restrict their linguistic activities to a language where the cultural and structural codes can be synchronised? Of

course that is point worthy of a whole research project and cannot be answered by this report, but it is a point worth pondering over.

## 5.2.2 THE LIMITATIONS OF SPEECH ACT THEORY

The uncertainty and hesitation in assigning illocutionary acts (function) to some of these samples is in accord with one of the criticisms levelled against the theory, that it is difficult to assign one intention to one utterance or the 'one-sentence/one-case principle'. In other words, it is not always possible to find a match between the form and function, therefore an interrogative utterance does not always seek information; an imperative does not only command an action, neither does a statement only offer information. As sample 17<sup>28</sup> illustrates, an imperative can be interpreted as an offer or as a suggestion, and the participants would integrate the linguistic codes with a comprehensive context to identify the appropriate act. A similar point is made by Halliday and Hasan (1989) when they observe that language is multi-functional, a point demonstrated by some of the samples: 4, 6, and 10<sup>29</sup>, for example. All of these utterances are statements of a proposition as well as complaint, complaint, invitation respectively. The notion of multi-functionality does not imply that one can isolate a certain portion of the sentence as indicating one function and another part as the other function, rather the meanings are interwoven. To understand the meanings, each utterance

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<sup>28</sup> Sample 17 Leave me do it for you.

<sup>29</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

Sample 6: Lecturer: Were you in class today? Student: Of course. (Please describe the second utterance).

Sample 10: A: Did you enjoy the film? B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance).

needs to be examined from different angles, each perspective contributing towards the whole interpretation. This notion has implications for the classification of speech acts as it questions the necessity of having such distinct categories or asks whether more flexible groupings or acts classified on some kind of continuum might not better reflect what actually happens with language.

The unease in attempting a one-utterance/one-function classification, it seems, can be reduced only by the provision of extremely comprehensive, linguistic and non-linguistic situational details. For example, for the interpretation of utterance 16<sup>30</sup> in the previous chapter, very many autobiographical facts had to be included in the processing of the internal structure of the utterance, by the hearer. A tension arises as to the amount of influence that either the structural codes or the context clues play in the eventual interpretation. Although pragmatic thinking would have us believe that both factors play an equal role, that way of reasoning is acceptable where the utterance is syntactically acceptable and hence can be said to have equal 'status' with the situation details. However, in an instance where the syntactic blemishes are so intrusive, for example, sample 18<sup>31</sup> that one is forced to rely very heavily on the situation details for interpretation, there would be an impact on an evaluation of the communicative competence of the speaker. The analysis of that utterance shows that it was correctly interpreted as a statement and a complaint, but one cannot really say that the speaker of such an utterance is competent, even if the hearer has correctly interpreted the utterance.

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<sup>30</sup> Sample 16: I won't go there no more.

<sup>31</sup> Sample 18: I feel hopeless for this week.

This opens a debate as to the role of syntax and context in interpretation, communication and communicative competence. If there is no role awarded to syntactic accuracy then the implication is that context details are paramount in communication and syntax plays 'second fiddle' or vice versa. The debate questions the fundamental principles of the notions of linguistic competence and communicative competence as articulated by Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1967). (See Chapter Two).

On the basis of Chomsky's (1965:4) distinction between 'grammatical competence' and 'pragmatic competence', the speakers of the samples used in this study may be classified as 'pragmatically competent' in English, for 56% of the utterances were correctly interpreted. Although considered pragmatically knowledgeable, it is no guarantee that their grammatical competence is also at the same level, for, according to Chomsky, performance competence does not directly reflect grammatical competence as 'a record of natural speech will show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, changes of plan in mid-course and so on' (1965: 3). Chomsky, as noted earlier, believes that language use is only one indication of language proficiency, hence it is quite difficult to assign language proficiency only on pragmatic knowledge. This is a point not stressed by Hymes who rather maintains that use should be the main criterion for establishing communicative competence.

A relevant issue at this stage would be to determine the quality of the role that linguistic knowledge (knowledge of grammar) and pragmatic knowledge have played in achieving communication with these utterances. If grammar has played the major role then one can talk of the superior role of syntax in communication or vice versa. One should also be able to talk empirically of 'grammatical competence' as distinct from 'pragmatic competence' (awareness of appropriateness of situations). But we know that pragmatic competence is not possible without syntactic competence; as Chomsky in Botha (1987: 102) notes, '(grammar) competence is presupposed by every instance of (pragmatic) performance'. Therefore, what these utterances demonstrate is that the interlocutors in this investigation do have some grammatical and pragmatic competencies as they have managed to communicate successfully in some instances. Also deducible from the analysis is the fact that, relatively, a lesser role is played by syntactic accuracy in informal communication than in written communication in these samples. Chomsky, in Botha (1987: 85), argues the point differently. He talks of the conceptual system of language as 'more primitive' and therefore inferior to the computational system<sup>32</sup>. The conceptual system 'permits us to perceive, and to categorise, and symbolize, maybe to even reason in an elementary way'. Argued in this way communication, which is part of the pragmatic and conceptual systems, is primitive as compared to the more sophisticated mental features of the computational system. Chomsky (*ibid.*) even notes:

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<sup>32</sup> Chomsky equates the computational system with grammatical competence.

One might speculate that higher apes, which apparently lack the capacity to develop even the rudiments of the computational structures of human language, nevertheless may command parts of the conceptual structure just discussed and may thus be capable of elementary forms of symbolic function or symbolic communication while entirely lacking the human language faculty.

Although Chomsky is not equating the mental challenges of human communication with those of the other primates, he does imply that communication is a lesser mental operation a fact which the concept of communicative competence rejects.

This fact also explains part of linguists' unhappiness with the lack of observable sustainable theories in pragmatics and its difficulty in sustaining its status as a separate branch of language study (see Chapter Three). So, although SAT is usually not employed in the debate between 'competence' (grammar) and 'performance' (linguistic events) it indirectly contributes to the discussion when its tenets are applied in discourse analysis and as an evaluator of communicative competence.

Another point also worth noting hinges on the fact that in the domain of SAT, meaning is created if the hearer's interpretation matches the speaker's intention; and when meaning is created, communication is assumed to have been achieved. However, in samples 14, 15 and 16<sup>33</sup> (16%) although hearer

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<sup>33</sup> Sample 14: Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate: Student: No, she is not around (Please describe the second utterance)

interpretation matched speaker intention, communication did not occur, while in samples 2 and 5<sup>34</sup> (11%) although there were mismatches between speaker intention and hearer interpretation communication did occur. The pertinent question is what this means for SAT. SAT does not seem to have a satisfactory rebuttal for the point that other variables, apart from structural codes and context, contribute to communication. This is because most of the utterances which the Speech Act theorists have exploited in discussing their assertions have been devoid of blemishes, hence making no provision for meaning-bearing blemished utterances like those examined by this study. The English language is now an international commodity spoken as non-mother tongue by more nations than those who speak it as their mother tongue. A web site, <<http://englishenglish.com>> (3 June, 2004) states that more than a billion people are learning English, of these 375 million speak it as a second language, while 750 million speak it as a foreign language. SAT will have to accommodate the fact that there are a vast number of English second language speakers, if the theory is to remain relevant in the current linguistic picture.

The use of SAT's as a discourse evaluator is also in question because of the similarity of the conditions for the different speech functions. For example, according to Searle (1969: 66-67), the differences between a request, an offer and a command rest on the fact that with commands there is some urgency and the speaker has a higher status than the hearer. A suggestion can be expressed

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Sample 15: He is a popular somebody.

Sample 16: I won't go there no more.



using literally all forms of sentence structures and all the speech acts can be expressed by the declarative forms of utterances. This point, coupled with the notion that the meaning of an utterance rests with the speaker, reduces the objectivity of SAT which, in turn, adversely affects its value as a scientific evaluative tool.

SAT also has limited value and accuracy with written utterances, as the analysis demonstrated. If SAT is needed to make definite statements about the communicative competence of a speaker, then the exercise should be limited to spoken utterances; or if written utterances are used, they must be triangulated with another evaluative tool. This is because written utterances, with sketchy context details, stand a greater danger of being ambiguous or misunderstood.

The role of context in utterance interpretation is an obvious one for, as Corder (1981:39) has pointed out, almost all sentences are either ambiguous or difficult to comprehend when taken out of context. However, instances of sentences being genuinely ambiguous in context are rather rare if the deep structure is also taken into account. For second language speakers, where the deep structure of an utterance is not so obvious, owing to limited grammatical insight, misinterpretation is a real danger.

This last point highlights the question of the volume of situational detail needed to eliminate the problem of miscommunication. It was clear that some of the

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<sup>34</sup> Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With a rising intonation on the word, 'pass').

respondents did not realise the significance of the context in utterance meaning and interpreted only the structural codes, thereby coming up with inexplicable responses. Such a problem would be minimised if the hearers were responding to spoken utterances. For example, it is quite difficult to miss the rising intonation in spoken interrogatives, hence respondents would have had no problem with sample 3.<sup>35</sup> That is because prosodic features and other non-verbal features are extremely difficult to capture when setting in a written context.

The above discussion has outlined some of the shortcomings of SAT as an utterance and communicative competence evaluator. This may cause one to believe that, that undermines the validity of SAT. Not at all. It has been acknowledged in the initial pages of this report that using SAT in an evaluative mode for ESL utterances is a pioneer move. One can, of course, use some of the more tried evaluation tools, such as functional grammar or the social-semiotic approach of Hymes, but the intention of this project, as frequently mentioned, is examining the realisation of speech act or functions, and the most appropriate strategy for this is SAT.

### **5.2.3 RESPONDENTS**

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from some of the responses in Chapter Four is the respondents' inability to differentiate among the speech functions offered on the questionnaire. For example, it is quite difficult to find justification

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<sup>35</sup> Sample 3: She gave what.

for the respondents interpreting samples 2 and 9<sup>36</sup> as commands or the majority of respondents being 'not sure' about utterance 3.<sup>37</sup> Such unjustifiable responses forces one to the conclusion that some respondents were reacting solely to the linguistic codes without recourse to the contextual details given, although it could also point to the level of competence (in a Chomskian sense).

## 5.2.4 SAMPLES

An analysis of this nature has the tendency to develop into establishing a balance between the grammatical and pragmatic explanation of the features of the utterances. Caution has to be exercised so that the research does not read like a social justification for features observed with the utterances. For, naturally, standard utterances and those which successfully communicated the speakers' intention did not merit as extensive a discussion as those in which communication faltered. Those with idiosyncratic characteristics of one kind or another have been more extensively examined. Difficulties arose in gauging the degree of 'delicacy' that can be undertaken with the samples at both pragmatic and structural levels. An important precaution has been that this analysis should not degenerate into a solely grammatical analysis or a free-for-all subjective pragmatic justification of these samples. Finding a balance has not been easy. Maybe highly structured evaluation criteria would have alleviated the dilemma, although too rigid a criterion would thwart reaction to some of the highly individualised utterances. In these samples, attempts have been made to identify

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<sup>36</sup> Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With rising intonation on the word 'pass').  
Sample 9: I am in need of a pamphlet.

the features most obstructive to the transmission of that message, and the analysis has continued by demonstrating how the miscommunication occurred. The identified source of the mismatch plus the explanations are, of course, open to debate.

The analysis also provides a picture of the number of variables, linguistic and otherwise, involved in the creation of meaning. For example, interpretation of utterances 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 15 and 18<sup>38</sup> involves familiarity with Univen tertiary norms, while matching samples 1 and 5<sup>39</sup> correctly with their functions requires a knowledge of Tshivenda and the cultural norms of the interlocutors. A fair amount of the interpretation of these utterances is therefore dependent on the respondents' membership of the Univen linguistic 'in-group'.

As indicated earlier, the samples were collected from one group of students (1997 ELP students) and were responded to by another group (English major students of 2002). Because the only variables were the years and the courses these students were pursuing, one would have assumed that the commonality among the speakers and the hearers would have ensured a greater percentage

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<sup>37</sup> Sample 3: She gave what.

<sup>38</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

Sample 6: Lecturer: Were you in class today? Student: Of course.

Sample 7: Student A: I had an accident last week. Student B: Sorry. Are you all right? Student A: I am fine, but it is so boring. (Please describe the third utterance).

Sample 9: I am in need of a pamphlet.

Sample 10: Student A: Did you enjoy the film? Student B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance)

Sample 15: He is a popular somebody.

Sample 18: I feel hopeless for this week.

<sup>39</sup> Sample 1: I am asking for a pen to fill out this form.

Sample 5: I am asking to be apologized due to my failure to submit my assignment.

of respondents correctly matching the listed speech acts with speaker intention. However, achieving only 56% success in this regard, and with such a large number of respondents selecting 'not sure' for several utterances raises some questions. One wonders whether the difficulty lies either with the selection of samples or with the respondents' lack of knowledge of the precise nature of the speech acts or too much variety in the offered speech acts on the questionnaire or a lack of variety of offered speech acts.

An analysis of this kind is also indicative of the sameness of the discourse analyses strategies which fall under the umbrella of 'cross-cultural analysis'. Malcolm Coulthard (1977) and Deborah Schiffrin (1994) have detailed the diverse strategies possible in analysing discourse within and outside a pragmatic framework quite extensively. Although both writers admit that discourse analyses strategies fall within two main paradigms – structural and functional – they do go on to differentiate strategies within these main paradigms. The contention of the study is that the dissimilarities among some of the functional analyses, ethnographic, conversational and pragmatic, are not so obvious with an analysis of the kind undertaken in this study. The theoretical orientations of these strategies may diverge, but their applications to utterances are not so dissimilar. In other words, areas such as the procedures, the assumptions running through the exercise, the nature of the end results and their evaluative significance are comparable in the various discourse evaluation methods.

The conclusions from the sample analysis of Chapter Four are reported at two levels in the following sections; level one, structural or grammatical and level two, pragmatic, depending on the identified main source of the miscommunication within the samples. These two levels of processing overlap in many instances, and part of the hypothesis of this study is an acknowledgement of this fact. Indeed, research into information processing suggests that although one can talk, theoretically, of pragmatic failure or grammatical error, these different levels of processing are carried on simultaneously, constantly feeding into each other and reinforcing each other. But separating the levels in this artificial manner allows one to be more specific in the explanations.

### 5.2.1.1 GRAMMATICAL CONCLUSIONS

It is legitimate, in my view, to speak of grammatical error, since grammaticality can be judged according to prescriptive rules. In the samples used for this investigation, 14 utterances (78%) (samples 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17 and 18)<sup>40</sup> had some grammatical errors. Out of these, 5 utterances (28%) (3,

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<sup>40</sup> Sample 1: I am asking for a pen to fill out this form.

Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass.

Sample 3: She gave what.

Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

Sample 5: I am asking to be apologized due to my failure to submit my assignment.

Sample 7: Student A: I had an accident last week. Student B: Sorry. Are you all right? Student A: I am fine, but it is so boring. (Please describe the third utterance)

Sample 8: The lecturer said I was late but I denied.

Sample 10: Speaker A: Did you enjoy the film? Speaker B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance)

Sample 11: I was left lonely in the class.

Sample 12: The broken plough, it is fixed.

Sample 15: He is a popular somebody.

Sample 16: I won't go there no more.

Sample 17: Leave me do it for you.

Sample 18: I feel hopeless for this week.

7, 8, 15 and 16<sup>41</sup>) were misinterpreted by the respondents. The conclusion therefore is that grammatical errors are not as far reaching as other types of error. That may explain why writers like Thomas (1995: 94) refer to them as 'lower-level' errors. This is not in any way to underestimate the amount of impediment that such errors can place on the interpretation process. Grammatical errors may be irritating, and in most cases temporarily impede communication, but as a rule, they are apparent in the surface structure, so that the hearer is aware that an error has occurred, a fact which is illustrated in the samples. For example, part of the blemish of sample 1<sup>42</sup> is not treating the verb 'to ask' as stative; in sample 2<sup>43</sup> the blemish is the unusual word order and non-recognition of the rising intonation or an inappropriate form of a question; in sample 4<sup>44</sup> the blemish is semantic laziness; in sample 7<sup>45</sup> it is the seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of ideas in student A's second response; in sample 8<sup>46</sup> the use of the wrong word, and so on. These errors therefore involved either single lexical items or whole structures. In spite of these glaring malformations, respondents managed to correctly interpret most of these utterances because meaning is also dependent on socio-cultural issues.

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<sup>41</sup> Sample 3: She gave what.

Sample 7: Student A: I had an accident last week. Student B: Sorry. Are you all right? Student A: I am fine, but it is so boring. (Please describe the third utterance)

Sample 8: The lecturer said I was late but I denied.

Sample 15: He is a popular somebody.

Sample 16: I won't go there no more.

<sup>42</sup> Sample 1: I am asking for a pen to fill out this form.

<sup>43</sup> Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass.

<sup>44</sup> Sample 4: My marks are somehow.

<sup>45</sup> Sample 7: Student A: I had an accident last week. Student B: Sorry. Are you alright? Student A: I am fine, but it is so boring. (Please describe the third utterance)

<sup>46</sup> Sample 8: The lecturer said I was late but I denied.

What has happened in most of these grammatically blemished utterances is that hearers, once alerted to the fact that the speaker is not a native speaker of the language, seem to have little difficulty in making allowances for the imperfections in the utterances. A similar process, I believe, happens in the outside world. Out of the 18 utterances analysed, 13 contained grammatical errors but despite that, communication was achieved in 9 instances, that is, 70% of grammatically inaccurate utterances were successfully interpreted. Meaning creation, it seems, is considerably shortened for the hearer, by the knowledge that the speaker is abiding by usual conversation principles, hence the hearer can immediately eliminate certain options as likely interpretations.

While grammatical errors may reveal a speaker to be a less-than-proficient language user, pragmatic failure is not so indulgently regarded.

#### **5.2.2.1 PRAGMATIC CONCLUSIONS**

Whereas it is possible to talk of grammatical errors, with pragmatic competence it is not as straightforward since pragmatic principles are more normative than prescriptive. The nature of pragmatic ambivalence is such that it is not possible to say the pragmatic force of an utterance is 'wrong'. All one can say is that it failed to achieve the speaker's intention or that the hearer could not interpret the pragmatic force. While a grammatical error puts one outside the grammatical system of the language, one can flout pragmatic principles and still remain in the



pragmatic system of the language, although maybe as an impolite, aggressive or an unappreciative member of the system. Sophisticated users of a language deliberately flout or break pragmatic conventions with impunity and great effect, once the interlocutors have established each other's linguistic statuses.

The analysis has shown that of the four utterances which contained pragmatic blemishes (6, 9, 14 and 17)<sup>47</sup> only two, (50%) successfully communicated the speakers' intentions. Sample 15<sup>48</sup>, which contained both syntactic and pragmatic blemishes, was also unsuccessful in communicating the speakers' intentions. In addition to the lack of success in interpreting samples 6 and 14<sup>49</sup>, these utterances are also capable of generating some offence and irritation in the hearer. Likewise sample 17<sup>50</sup> may create some annoyance or irritation if taken as a command and not as a suggestion or an offer. The conclusion is that pragmatic blemishes are more capable, relatively, of causing miscommunication than grammatical inaccuracies.

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<sup>47</sup> Sample 6: Lecturer: Were you in class today? Student: Of course.

Sample 9: I am in need of a pamphlet.

Sample 14: Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate. Student: No, she is not around. (Please describe the second utterance).

Sample 17: Leave me do it for you.

<sup>48</sup> Sample 15: He is a popular somebody.

<sup>49</sup> Sample 6: Lecturer: Where you in class today? Student: Of course. (Please describe the second utterance)

Sample 14: Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate. Student: No, she is not around. (Please describe the second utterance).

### 5.3 SUMMARY

In this chapter, the conclusion reached is that within certain contexts (in this case, on Univen Campus) grammatical errors are, relatively speaking, less obstructive in the communication process, although such blemishes may categorise the speaker as not fully proficient in the English language. It is further concluded that grammatical errors affect the 'outward appearance' or the surface structure of the utterance but that hearers, once alerted to the fact that the speaker is less than proficient in the language, penetrate the deep structure of the utterance to decipher the intended meaning. The willingness of the hearer to lengthen the meaning creation by this extra level of processing is an indication that hearers are accommodating towards speakers of such calibre, a fact which facilitates communication. Pragmatic failures, however, have more potential to result in miscommunication, in addition to generating emotions such as irritation, annoyance and ill-will between the hearer and the speaker of different cultural background.

Ultimately the question is whether the respondents in the study are able to meaningful communicate, however 'blemished' the form might appear to an L1 speaker. The thesis proves this to be the case. A conclusion may be reached that some of the structural forms contained in these utterances might prove difficult for English first language speakers to understand and interpret, although

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<sup>50</sup> Sample 17: Leave me do it for you.

not for ESL who share a linguistic repertoire and history, and why this might be so.

Such conclusions are in line with the hypothesis which contends that blemishes in utterance construction, from whatever source, do not always result in a violation of the intended meaning and the function of the utterance, particularly when such blemishes occur within a specific or confined context such as that within which this research was conducted.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

This is the final chapter of an investigation into the application of Speech Act Theory to selected utterances of Univen students. The exercise has aimed at establishing the factors which contribute to communication between interlocutors. In other words, an attempt has been made to determine the procedure hearers undergo when interpreting the intentions of speakers by analysing the utterances in accordance with speech act principles. The results of the analysis are presented in Chapter Four while Chapter Five details the conclusions that can be reached from the presented data. This closing chapter offers some recommendations accruing from the analysed data.

This section, firstly, suggests ways of enhancing the communicative competence of second language speakers such as the Univen students who participated in the research. Secondly, with the benefit of hindsight, the discussion outlines some variables that can be incorporated into a research project of this nature to increase its contribution to scholarship in language use. The discussion focuses on the application of SAT as a discourse evaluator as well as the general methodology employed in this research. Thirdly, a section is also provided which

identifies possible related research areas, all aimed at extending our understanding of the meaning-creation process, particularly, of second language speakers.

## **6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.2.1 ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

In most linguistic contexts, individuals who use the language, particularly those for whom it is a second language, are allowed a certain amount of latitude in their performance and a chance to be idiosyncratic to a certain degree. Nevertheless, in order to be considered pragmatically and structurally competent, one must be able to perform linguistically in such a manner as to avoid being unintentionally offensive and to communicate one's intentions accurately.

Pragmatic failure or inappropriateness is not as widely discussed in linguistic literature as, for example, phonologic, semantic and syntactic blemishes. It is not difficult to understand why this should be so and why many writers on language studies, such as Swan (Practical English Usage) [1980], Leech (An A-Z of English Grammar) [1989] and Sinclair (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database) [1992], prefer to contribute to the more formalised, well-established and easily observable branches of phonology, semantics and syntax. Pragmatic meaning description has yet to develop some

of the metalanguage for the precision the other branches have achieved in their description. Secondly, the relatively subjective nature of aspects such as politeness or prosodic features, the fact that pragmaticians talk of 'pragmatic norms' and not 'pragmatic rules' and the ambivalence of 'appropriateness' of a particular usage also mean that it is not immediately obvious how pragmatic proficiency can be enhanced in second language speakers. Despite these problems, the 1970s concerns with the 'communicative' aspects of English for second language speakers were attempts to address questions of 'use' (pragmatism) as well as problems of 'well-formedness' (grammar).

Before focusing on strategies to enhance pragmatic competence it is essential to distinguish two types of pragmatic failure namely, pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure as outlined by Thomas (1983). Both of these types of failures were evident in the samples gathered from the Univen students and analysed in Chapter Four. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force or function mapped onto an utterance is different from the force most frequently assigned to it by proficient speakers of the target language, for example, samples 2, 10, 11 and 12<sup>51</sup> in Chapter Four. Sociopragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour, for example, samples 6, 8, 14 and 17<sup>52</sup> in Chapter Four.

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<sup>51</sup> Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With a rising intonation on the word 'pass')

Sample 10: A: Did you enjoy the film? B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance)

Sample 11: I was left lonely in the class.

Sample 12: The broken plough, it is fixed.

<sup>52</sup> Sample 6: Lecturer: Where you in class today? Student: Of course. (Please describe the second utterance)

Sample 8: The lecturer said I was late but I denied.

Sample 14: Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate. Student: No, she is not around. (Please describe the

When these lists of examples from Chapter Four are examined it becomes obvious that pragmalinguistic failures result from the unusual linguistic physical encoding of the various speech functions. For instance, the construction of the sample utterances in Chapter Four differs from the construction a proficient speaker would use. Thus, sample 2<sup>53</sup> would not normally constitute a request; sample 10<sup>54</sup> would be construed more as a complaint and not a compliment while sample 12<sup>55</sup> could be understood by other language users as a strong assertion of a fact following an implied question or criticism and not as an ordinary representative. Despite the shortcomings of these utterances, the speech acts that the speakers intended in these examples are logical for the specific contexts in which the exchanges took place, and similar exchanges are taking place. The failure occurred because the choice of linguistic codes was not that which a competent speaker would normally choose. The problem, therefore, is linguistic, arising from the wrong formation of the various speech functions. When such a failure is apparent the hearer takes into account both contextual and linguistic clues for interpreting the utterance. Therefore, the possibility of miscommunication is minimised.

Sociopragmatic failure, in the examples given in Chapter Four, arose from the speakers not accommodating hearer-factors such as position, roles, status,

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second utterance)

Sample 17: Leave me do it for you.

<sup>53</sup> Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With a rising intonation on the word 'pass')

<sup>54</sup> Sample 10: A: Did you enjoy the film? B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance)

relations, time and location. Sociopragmatic failures may result in speakers talking out of turn, introducing what hearers may view as taboo topics and generally behaving, linguistically, in an uncalled for manner.

The border line between these two types of failures is not so clear-cut, since one type of failure may lead to the other. In fact, it cannot be claimed that any absolute distinction can be drawn between the two; they form a continuum with a grey area between the two.

Pragmalinguistic failures are more correction-friendly as they usually reflect the developmental stage of the speaker and unless 'pragmatic fossilisation' has taken place in the speaker such failures will gradually diminish with time and more practice. Raising the awareness of the speakers to the possible misinterpretation of their utterances is usually the first step. In general, second language users are not noticeably more sensitive about having pragmalinguistic failures pointed out than about having grammatical errors corrected. Insofar as users are prepared to learn the language at all, they are usually willing to try to conform to the pragmalinguistic norms which govern the target language.

Sociopragmatic failures, however, are not so easily remedied, as the corrections often involve the speaker making far-reaching socio-cultural adjustments in accordance with the pragmatic norms of some other language which may not be

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<sup>55</sup> Sample 12: The broken plough, it is fixed.



explicit or objective. Sociopragmatic decisions are 'social' before they are 'linguistic' and while second language users are fairly amenable to corrections which they regard as 'linguistic', they understandably become quite parochial in decisions which such users see as 'betraying' their own sociopragmatic practices.

Sensitising second language users to recognise and accommodate the target language's pragmatic norms is one of the ways of ensuring that such users become competent and sophisticated users of the target language. When in doubt, most users of a second language resort to transferring language practices in their mother tongue to the target language, as the utterances in Chapter Four demonstrate. But it is an accepted fact that one does not learn a language in a vacuum; there are pragmatic norms that surround any language and users must accept the inevitable fact that 'correct' usage includes 'appropriate' usage. It is, therefore, important that learners understand the different pragmatic and discoursal norms associated with the target language, as this will go a long way towards eliminating simplistic and ungenerous classification of users whose linguistic behaviour is different from the target language users. Individualistic pragmatic behaviours, similar to some of the examples in Chapter Four, are sometimes exhibited by sophisticated users of the English language with impunity, because such linguistic behaviours is deliberate, appropriate and therefore represents informed choice. But when there is no overt justification for such constructions, questions are asked about the level of competence of the

speaker. Second language users need to familiarise themselves with the target language in its totality if they wish to exploit it as a communication tool.

## **6.2.2 ENHANCING SPEECH ACT THEORY AS AN EVALUATIVE TOOL**

As established by this research report, the sameness of the criteria for the different illocutionary acts detracts from Speech Act Theory's viability as an analytical tool which can make definite statements about interlocutors' control of a language or their communicative status. One solution to this inadequacy would be for an extensive description about what exactly these speech functions are and what their distinguishing features are. For example, a statement is defined as an utterance that 'represents reality' (Mey, 1993). The question arises as to what exactly that expression means and also what 'reality' is in relation to language. If a hearer is ordered to shut the door, there is 'reality' here, in the sense that the door is open and there is a hearer around. However, such an utterance would not be classified as 'a statement' but as 'a directive'. It is arguable that only the commissives (see Chapter Three) which commit the speaker to a future action can be classified as 'not real' at the time the utterance is made. Such ambivalence poses restraints on a categorical evaluation of interlocutors' linguistic ability. For instance, it is problematic to declare that a hearer is unable to interpret directives if s/he has accurately deciphered representatives since directives are made up of representatives. This criticism

has been partially resolved by the notion of indirect speech acts but the solution would be enhanced further if the theory can, additionally, examine the notion of multi-classification of functions and the conditions for speech acts articulation. Thomas (1995: 109) has offered an alternative suggestion. Where Searle (1969) has formulated 'rules' in describing speech acts, Thomas (*ibid.*) suggests that these should be replaced by 'principles' which are regulative, tentative and are motivated by the context; all of which, she feels, are the characteristics of speech functions.

Opponents to this suggestion may argue that putting such principles into practice could reduce the definitive quality of speech functions which could, ultimately, lead to miscommunication. That possibility cannot be ruled out. However, as the analysis in Chapter Four has demonstrated, actual miscommunication and ambiguous utterances are quite rare, as interlocutors employ a variety of clues in the interpretation process, ruling out the less likely interpretation in favour of the more logical meaning. Interlocutors employ clues such as the syntactic arrangement, pragmatic conditions and conversation maxims to negotiate the meaning of an utterance.

Although such an exercise in the multi-classification of functions would result in copious details about speech functions, the exercise would be in line with Austin's observation about language, that we 'do things with words' (from the title of his book) (1969).

As noted earlier, in Chapter Four, SAT as a discourse-analysing tool falls within the concept of cross-cultural communication. This implies a sharing of attributes with other culture-analysing paradigms like conversational, ethnographic and sociolinguistic. The similarities among these discourse strategies are quite unmistakable while their points of departure are very tenuous. SAT, therefore, needs to have more distinguishing features to separate it from the other such theories. SAT, for example, might evolve into an evaluative tool which requires a very extensive cultural context and not just general social context, as is currently the case. Here, the recognised distinctions between 'society' and 'culture' are invoked. The former is usually taken to refer to the fixed and stable characteristics like region of origin, social class, ethnicity, sex, age and so on, while the latter term refers to more changeable features of an individual, such as the relative status, social role and current beliefs and behaviour. This is an indication that social factors are more static, whereas culture is more dynamic and transient. Although pragmatic analysis is parasitic upon a sociolinguistic analysis there is a point of departure in that the latter analysis provides data on what linguistic repertoire the individual has while the former analysis tells us what the individual is doing with it in a particular instance. A pragmatic analysis with extensive cultural information extends the analysis in such a way that cultural, as well as grammatical answers, are provided for the linguistic choices that the interlocutors make. The variety of cultures which employs English as a second language would ensure even more prominence for the theory. The amount of literature which would be generated in such a dynamic setup is unimaginable.

SAT is not very forthcoming on the role of structural codes in the processing of meaning. The significant role of context is unquestionable and the discussion of speech acts is abundant with examples of the drastic alterations in utterance meaning, in reaction to context changes. A similar treatment, on such scale, is not available with alterations in structural codes. This point is particularly pertinent, as an evaluation of second language utterances will focus, equally, on the pragmatic and the structural statuses of the utterance. If this point is accommodated, some kind of comment should be possible on meaning-bearing structurally-blemished utterances, such as those analysed in Chapter Four of this research. The flexibility of such an approach will enable the richness of expressions, particularly those of second language speakers to come through.

Another distinguishing feature of SAT is the passive or reactionary role accorded hearers in the communicative event. Although some recognition has been given to the cooperative nature of communication, Speech Act theorists are not very vocal on the hearers and the context in which hearers also become dominant creators of meaning. The hearer has to interpret the speaker's utterance for the act of communication to take place, thus ensuring hearers do play a role, albeit not as initiators of the process. Thomas (1995: 203) notes that 'meaning is not given, but constructed (at least in part) by the hearer; it is a process of hypothesis-formation and testing, of making meaning on the basis of likelihood and probability'. Pragmatics is not about one-directional meaning; it is meaning

creation through negotiation by the participants. In a situation where the onus of the creation is on both parties, the role of the hearer is just as important. The book, *Language for Hearers* (Graham McGregor, 1986) puts some of the spotlight on the hearers by investigating what processes hearers require to decipher the intentions of the speakers. That is another area that almost all the other strategies of discourse analysis are also silent on and work in a SAT paradigm to pursue that aspect of meaning production would enhance the understanding of communication.

### **6.2.3 FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH**

- The analysis in Chapter Four suggests that the respondents, to some extent, had problems with the number of speech acts they had to react to; in other words, there may have been too many alternatives offered. A similar investigation might be undertaken where the options are reduced. The improvement in validity from such a format, in addition to ensuring that the respondents are more focused, will also lessen the danger of 'guess work'.
- One of the criticisms which has come to the foreground during this investigation is the difficulty in achieving communication between interlocutors because of the sameness of the conditions for the various speech acts. This issue has resulted in anomalies where in one instance respondents have accurately identified one speech act but failed to recognise the same act in

another context. One of the reasons may, of course, be that the respondents are really not conversant with the speech acts and had been guessing accurately for the majority of the items in the questionnaire but it is also possible that the problem arose from the sameness of the conditions for the various speech acts. Although such respondents' behaviour is certainly not limited to this research project, nevertheless such practice should be discouraged in any attempt to obtain empirical data. That is the rationale for suggesting that a similar research project with less easily-confused speech acts has the potential to generate even more valid results. Such a project should aim at items from the different classes of speech acts (representatives, commissives, expressives, directives and declaratives) and not different acts from the same class, as this type of selection is open to confusion.

- As indicated in Chapter Four, there are some commonalities among the speakers and the respondents. A similar project in which participants have fewer characteristics in common might yield some exciting results. For example, the respondents might be chosen from other South African linguistic groups, from those who are non-Tshivenda speakers. In fact, in an attempt to bring different dimensions to the study, variables such as age, gender, location, socio-economic status and educational background, can all be introduced into the investigation.

- As mentioned earlier, the speakers play a dominant role in the creation of meaning since they determine the meaning or the intention of an utterance. Research, similar to the one carried out in this study, usually evaluates discourse from the speakers' perspective and miscommunication is said to have occurred if the hearers fail to match their interpretation with the stated intention of the speakers. A research project with a different approach could be one which starts off with the hearers' interpretation and if no communication occurs the speaker does the explaining and the justifying for his choice of codes and the speech function. Such research would examine the 'created meaning' and work backwards to determine the negotiations (from both parties) which have gone into the creation of meaning.
- An even more challenging research scenario can be designed where the participants can be asked to indicate, in sequence, the deductions they have made to arrive at a particular decision. In other words, the process of hypotheses testing would become more transparent, more formalised and more structured. Naturally this kind of investigation would require a certain calibre of participants, that is, those who can introspect psychologically, and put a linguistic label to the processes they have undergone.
- A similar research project, but this time undertaken jointly by researchers, one of whom should be a native speaker of Tshivenda, should produce some insightful results. With such a project some of the advantages of cross-



cultural research would be exploited, which should provide even more comprehensive data.

- Another challenging research project could be one that uses other discourse evaluators more in the line of ethnographic analysis. It should be quite insightful if these same utterances were subjected to ideas proposed by Halliday (1994) in his functional grammar approach. This would be a case where an identification of the quality of the message would be paramount. Similarly a systemic functional approach of writers like Berry (1975) would establish the systems portrayed in these utterances.

### **6.3 CONCLUSION**

In this final chapter of this investigation attempts have been made to identify strategies in enhancing the pragmatic ability of the researched population, that is, selected students from Univen. Secondly, amendments have been suggested to certain features of Speech Act Theory to boost its status as an analytical tool and its application to various aspects of this investigation. Thirdly, the last section has offered possible similar research areas, all aimed at providing more insight into the process of negotiating meaning within a second language context.

The hypothesis of this research was that **‘the correlation of form and function implicit in the pragmatic approach of the Speech Act Theory may not**

**always occur in the utterances of non-native speakers of English (for example, in the utterances of Tshivenda speakers of English) because of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic blemishes but that these blemishes may not always result in a violation of the intended meaning and function of the utterance.'** This investigation has shown that this is indeed the case.

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## APPENDIX

### QUESTIONNAIRE

**Below is a list of both standard and non-standard utterances. Please indicate with an 'X', in the spaces provided, whether you think the utterance is; (a) an ordinary statement providing information; (b) a suggestion, (c) a complaint, (d) a command, (e) an invitation, (f) a request, (g) not sure. You may select more than one phrase to describe an utterance.**

| Situation/context  | Utterance   | Statement | Suggestion | Complaint | Command | Invitation | Request | Not sure |
|--|---|-----------|------------|-----------|---------|------------|---------|----------|
| 1. A student needed a pen to fill out a form and said this to his lecturer:                        | 1. I am asking for a pen to fill out this Form  |           |            |           |         |            |         |          |
| 2. A student's whose path was blocked by another student said:                                     | 2. Sorry, I can pass. <b>(With a rising intonation on the word 'pass')</b>  |           |            |           |         |            |         |          |
| 3. A student absent from class when an assignment was given said:                                  | 3. She gave what.   |           |            |           |         |            |         |          |
| 4. Marked assignments were given back in class. One student followed the lecturer and said to her: | 4. My marks are somehow.  |           |            |           |         |            |         |          |
| 5. A student who failed to hand in his assignment on the due date said:                            | 5. I am asking to be apologised due to my failure to submit my assignment.  |           |            |           |         |            |         |          |
| 6. A lecturer not sure whether a student had attended her lecturer asked:                          | 6. Lecturer: Were you in class today?<br>Student: Of course. <b>(Please describe the second utterance)</b>  |           |            |           |         |            |         |          |
| 7. Student A had an accident. This was the dialogue between her And her friend:                    | 7. Student A: I had an accident last week<br>Student B: Sorry. Are you alright?<br>Student A: I am fine, but it's so boring. <b>(Please describe the third utterance)</b> |           |            |           |         |            |         |          |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 8. A student accused by a lecturer of being late reported this to her friend by saying:  | 8. The lecturer said I was late but I denied.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Handouts were given in class but a student who did not receive one said:  | 9. I am in need of a pamphlet.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Speaker A wanted to know speaker B's reactions to a film:  | 10. A: Did you enjoy the film?<br>B: Too much! <b>(Please describe the second utterance).</b>                                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11. A student when asked whether there were other students in the classroom with him said:   | 11. I was left lonely in the class.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12. An agric-student describing a plough he was using, said:   | 12. The broken plough, it is fixed   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13. A student describing the size of her discussion group said:  | 13. The students in our discussion group are many.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14. A lecturer concerned about a student, Kate, said to her roommate:  | 14. Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate<br>Student: No, she is not around<br><b>(Please describe the second utterance)</b> |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15. A student whose friend had missed some lectures, when asked to explain the previous lectures to the non-attending friend said: | 15. He is a popular somebody.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. A student asked (in October 1999) whether she would be going home for the weekend said:  | 16. I won't go there no more.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17. Student A's bag strap came undone and student B said:  | 17. Leave me do it for you   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18. A student anxiously waiting for her supplementary results said:  | 18. I feel hopeless for this week.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |