

Implicative Potential of Structural Indicators in Speech Acts of Marine Engineering Communication

Jana Kegalj & Mirjana Borucinsky

*University of Rijeka, Faculty of Maritime Studies, CROATIA
Department of Foreign Languages, Rijeka*

Received 29 November 2019 ▪ Revised 21 December 2019 ▪ Accepted 22 December 2019

Abstract

Lexical and syntactic structures modify the illocutionary force of the speech acts. The paper tries to determine the connection between the syntactic and lexical structures and their pragmatic goal, i.e. speech act illocution. The paper uses the basic notions of the speech act theory (Austin, 2014, Searle, 1991), Altmann's (1993) theory of sentence types whose semantics may be determined by interpreting the speaker's attitude, and the theory of speech act modifiers (Blum-Kulka, 2005). The authors analyzed a corpus of Marine engineering written correspondence (e-mails), using a bottom-up approach, to establish how structural indicators modify the implicative potential of an utterance. The research was based on a qualitative analysis, taking into consideration the specific character of written communication, whereby the structures used by the speakers to communicate will also be specific. In that sense, it was expected that the speakers rely more on language structures as opposed to extra linguistic means, and to find a more powerful role of indirect speech acts. Based on that analysis, the potential of each category will be determined for this specific corpus so as to clarify the relation of language structures and cognitive processes.

Keywords: speech acts, Marine engineering communications, structural indicators, illocution.

1. Introduction

The paper deals with the communicative function of language and the pragmatic need for quick, precise and reliable communication as well as information-processing in the specific variety of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Maritime English. According to Bocanegra-Valle (2013), Maritime English is an umbrella term for a variety of English language which differs from other varieties from the syntactic and lexical aspect, while satisfying the communication needs of the specific group of professionals. More specifically, this paper deals with one of its subvarieties: English for marine engineering, which along with English for shipbuilding, is recognized as the most technical of the Maritime English subvarieties used by marine engineers, ship designers, shipbuilders, ship surveyors, and other technical staff dealing with the design, operation, and maintenance of a ship's engines, equipment, and systems. As Bocanegra-Valle (2013) pointed out, in this particular variety, written communication is more pronounced as marine engineers need to write and understand reports, specifications, manuals and other technical documentation. The language of marine engineering communications is characterized by transparency, clarity and conciseness. Its basic function, although not the only one, is fast, clear

and efficient transfer of information, whereby the linguistic structures have an important role. Such language variety has a limited domain and a precise function. It is also characterized by a specific way of communication and requires a community of people that share specialized knowledge (Pritchard, 2010). Furthermore, it is marked by unambiguous terminology, lexical density and complex syntax, with certain rhetorical elements and formulas (X & Y, forthcoming).

- Lexical and syntactic structures modify the illocutionary force of the speech acts.
- Structural indicators modify the implicative potential of an utterance.
- In written communication speakers rely more on language structures as opposed to extralinguistic means.
- The language of marine engineering communications is characterized fast, clear and efficient transfer of information, whereby the linguistic structures have an important role.

The framework of the research consists of a corpus of authentic e-mails composed in the English language by the following participants of the communication process: Chief Engineers, Masters, Superintendents, company vice-presidents, safety officers, quality management officers, commercial officers, etc. A qualitative analysis of the corpus provided an insight into the language effects of the participants in the speech activity, taking into consideration some extralinguistic factors, such as their role in the company and gender. The study relies upon the speech act theory, using Searle's (1991) taxonomy of speech acts, according to which there are five categories: (1) declaratives, i.e. those speech acts that influence and alter reality; (2) assertives, whereby the speaker states his views and beliefs about the world around him; (3) expressives, i.e. those speech acts that express the speaker's feelings and psychological states; (4) directives, used to make, persuade or talk the interlocutor into doing something; and (5) commissives, whereby the speaker commits himself to doing something in the future. Searle (2005: 2) also distinguished the illocutionary purpose, i.e. the speaker's intention, from illocutionary force, i.e. language means which will provide the power of statement to the intention. Illocutionary force is expressed and interpreted by means of various illocutionary force indicators, whereby the pragmatic competence of the interlocutor is activated in the speech act. These indicators encompass performative verbs, verb aspect, word order, tone, intonation, accent, adverbials, particles, non-verbal means and circumstances of utterance. It should be emphasized that the meaning and the illocution potential are intertwined, so parts of a speech act may be interpreted only if the speaker's attention is taken into consideration.

Another important notion was elaborated by Grice (1975). Grice found that conversations do not constitute a series of unconnected statements nor would it be rational if it were so, but rather that conversations are based on a shared cooperative principle, which Grice described in a series of the maxims: the maxim of Quantity, the maxim of Quality, the maxim of Relation and the maxim of Manner. Therefore, the participants act cooperatively, assuming that their interlocutors are also cooperative, i.e. that they contribute to the conversation. This is particularly important in the context of written e-mail communication as it lacks the non-verbal dimension of speech, therefore, the language itself with all its means and strategies is used as an indicator of mutual relations and roles of the participants in the speech act. As opposed to oral communication, there is no feedback from the interlocutor according to which we may modify our utterance, so it is extremely important for the written communication to be clear, concise, concrete, precise, coherent and complete. By recognizing and selecting proper language structures, we may act more efficiently, which is very important in daily work that is to be carried out by seafarers. To be more specific, when considering written communication, it is common to use hedges and polite expressions so as not to offend the reader, but still send the message across, even if the message is unpleasant. In written communication, one always strives to "tone down" the implicative force of the message, which is as a rule achieved by linguistic means, e.g. passive voice, modal verbs or indirect statements.

In accordance with that, Leech (1983) further elaborated Grice's maxims and proposed a politeness principle, with maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty and sympathy, whose main goal is to maintain the social balance and a friendly relation. The politeness principle may even dominate the quality maxim, in cases when one for instance wants to decline an invitation politely, and makes up a lie about having a prior engagement so as not to offend the other person. This connection between the sense (semantic representation) and the force (implicature) is based on listener's knowledge of the conventional meaning, i.e. the assumption that the speaker adheres to the cooperative principle, has knowledge of linguistic and any other context of the utterance and has background knowledge as well (KordiĆ, 1991).

In this sense, linguistic means are used as structural indicators having implicative potential, i.e. implying the intention of the speaker. As to the syntactic structure, the authors expect to encounter an extensive use of indicators such as conditional clauses, modal verbs, verb aspect and characteristic use of tenses. Among lexical means, we may encounter direct means such as performative verbs and indirect means such as pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, particles and other discourse markers which affect the strength of the utterance.

2. Method

The framework of the study is based upon a corpus of 395 e-mails from the field of marine engineering English, among various participants in marine engineering operations, such as chief engineers, masters, superintendents, company vice-president, safety officer, quality management officer, commercial officer, whose names were omitted owing to anonymity. The e-mails were collected during 2006, 2007 and 2008¹.

The corpus was subjected to a qualitative analysis, which enabled a deeper insight into the issue, observing the language effects from the inside, as well as focusing on individual phenomena important for the understanding of the speech act. The qualitative analysis also enabled us to see some erratic and unexpected phenomena in the corpus, to understand the development of the speech act and to explain the cause-effect patterns of certain speech acts. The emphasis is on details, which reveal patterns, thus inductively leading to a conclusion.

Besides that, the utterances in the corpus were not observed exclusively as statements, imperative and interrogative sentences like in traditional grammars, but the authors differentiated between the formal and the functional aspect of the sentence mode (Altmann, 1993). Altmann describes the sentence mode as a complex language sign, consisting of a formal aspect, encompassing grammar characteristics such as mood, intonation, word order, and a functional aspect, relating to the application of the formal aspect in a specific speech act, i.e. the fact that the speaker, depending on his/her intention, chooses among certain types of utterances and takes the one which seems most suitable for his/her intention. In that respect, there is no strictly determined relation between the formal and the functional aspects of a certain sentence mode, but we may conclude that a functional aspect may be expressed by means of different formal aspects, just as a formal aspect may serve to realize several functional aspects. For example, the interrogative sentence mode may be expressed by means of a question word or by means of the sentence intonation. Similarly, the imperative may express other meanings besides ordering, such as request (e.g. *Close the door.*), warning (e.g. *Watch out!*), instructions (e.g. *Remove the cover.*), etc. We may conclude that sentence mode, as opposed to sentence type, includes a semantic aspect and thus represents a wider notion, i.e. a sentence mode may include several sentence types (Palašić, 2015).

¹ The corpus was compiled by prof. Josip Luzer from the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Maritime Studies for the purposes of teaching ESP.

Furthermore, the research also considered the so called internal and external modifiers (Blum-Kulka, 1985), i.e. modifiers within the core of the speech act and those outside the speech act, whereby the internal modifiers provide an additional tone to the speech act which, by means of these modifiers, is not necessarily understood as a speech act of the intended illocutionary force. Such modifiers may serve as downgraders or softeners or even upgraders of an utterance, depending on the speaker's intention. In this study, the focus was on internal modifiers, among which Blum-Kulka (1985) distinguishes two types: syntactic, such as interrogative sentences, conditional clauses, negative sentences, marked verb aspect, and lexical or phrasal modifiers, which consist of a large number of words/phrases/expressions, whose function is softening the illocutionary force of the utterance. In addition to internal modifiers, a speaker may use external modifiers which are not directly related to the speech act core, i.e. they are not part of the speech act, but form part of the context of the speech act, and as such participate in the illocution in an indirect way and contribute to the understanding of the speech act.

The research presented in this paper focused on structural indicators of syntactic and phrasal nature and their illocutionary force or their modifying force within a speech act. The study focuses on the meaning and understanding of the speech act segments.

3. Results and discussion

The compiled corpus of authentic e-mail consists of 89,772 tokens (analysis performed in the parallel concordance MonoConc (MonoConc Pro, Barlow, 2002). Table 1 shows the most frequent lexical words in the corpus.

Table 1. Frequency list for the most frequent lexical words in the corpus

Lemma	instances
master	617
please	599
message	543
subject	542
overseas	500

The quantitative data has further yielded basic information and insight into the communication process (i.e. to whom and by whom the messages are sent). However, to gain a deeper insight into the meaning of particular speech acts, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative analysis, case by case.

3.1 *Adverbials*

According to the quantitative data, the most common modifier appears as one of the most frequent words in the corpus – *please*, which is used to modify utterances in various ways, either to persuade someone to do something as a commissive, to thank, to ask for something, or just as a form of polite opening, e.g. “*please be informed...*”. Another similar modifier is ‘kindly’ (appearing more than 50 times in the corpus), which is also used to emphasize a request, soften an order or request, and is followed by an imperative. These are frequent linguistic tools for alleviating the force of illocution, a way of avoiding directness and abruptness of an utterance. In addition to this, there are other lexical indicators used as modifiers, upgraders such as ‘highly’ and ‘immediately’ in examples:

(1) **Kindly** confirm once this has been completed.

(2) Your consideration on this matter is **highly** appreciated.

In some cases, even entire phrases may be used as modifiers, as in (3) where the directive speech act is further enhanced by the phrase 'at your earliest opportunity'.

(3) **At your earliest opportunity** please open up the back-flush filter for inspection.

3.2 Verbs and verb forms

According to Searle (1991), the verbs are one of the devices used to indicate the illocutionary force of an utterance. There are few instances in the corpus where the speaker uses a strong, performative verb in a speech act, which is in line with the nature of written communication, as it requires impersonal and indirect addressing. The illocutionary force of verbs is usually downgraded by a modifier, which may be an adverbial or a structural modifier, such as a passive voice or a conditional clause. In accordance with the function of the e-mail messages, the majority of speech acts in the corpus are explanatory or informative in content, therefore the speech acts found are mostly assertives. Another frequent speech act in the corpus is the expressive speech act, which in this case indicates the relations of power and solidarity between the interlocutors, or may be used for expressing emotions (e.g. *Sorry for the mistake*). Furthermore, verbs are used in speech acts promising or committing to do something, e.g. *We intend to carry out these jobs on receipt of office clearance*. The verbs expressing a directive speech act, i.e. persuading or convincing somebody to do something, are always softened in the written communication, to avoid abruptness, e.g. *Also, we would kindly request you to clarify following items*. Declaratives are avoided in the analysed corpus. The reasons may lie in their high illocutionary force or the fact that there were no such situations which required the use of such verbs.

An important structural indicator of illocutionary force found in the analysed corpus is the present tense, which is used to express a strong illocutionary force, levelling up to imperative. It is mostly used by the superiors to order or impose something to their subordinates, like in (4) where the vice-president, by emphasizing the master's duty, adds weight to his statement, so the present tense here is not just used to state a fact, but also highlight the meaning of the sentence.

(4) *The master of each ship **remains** always in command of and responsible for his vessel.*

In example (5) the superintendent uses his position to order the engineer to stay longer than the due time; the present tense is used for such purpose, whereby it gains the force of the imperative, having the power of a declarative speech act.

(5) *The First Engineer **remains** on board and should provide full details of the failure.*

Example (6) shows how the present tense may be used for expressing requirements, demands, thus acting as an upgrader of illocutionary force. As this semantic role does not represent its usual usage, it is even more emphasized and in this context is perceived both, as an order and a reproach.

(6) *The reason for the failure **requires** clarification.*

Example (7) expresses a direct prohibition and the present tense employed here strengthens the force of the utterance, further emphasizing the prohibition.

(7) *Please find attached a terminal report from Cabinda as you can see your vessel **is not acceptable** to this terminal.*

The following example (8) represents a statement from the Chief Engineer to the superintendent, reproaching him for his oversight. However, as the Chief Engineer is inferior in this relation, the utterance is softened in a number of ways. First of all, the extralinguistic knowledge or the responsibility of the superintendent is never mentioned, so this impersonal structure is used to soften the illocution. Secondly, the use of the Present Continuous tense in this context also downgrades the force of the utterance.

(8) *I wish (to) inform you that due to delay to provide spare parts; some requisitions **are now becoming** quite urgent.²*

It should also be pointed out that each indicator, including the present tense as such, has a conventionally determined denotation, but when the speaker uses it to mark his illocution, it is not its denotative meaning that he uses, but he actually indicates its correlation. Here the speaker uses the present tense as indicator with its appertaining denotation in order to indicate the illocutionary force. Therefore, the present tense is a means to indicate, not perform, the illocutionary force.

As opposed to the present tenses, past tenses are neutral in their illocutionary force. They can be found exclusively in reports about failures and descriptions of performed work. The use of past perfect is disregarded and is often replaced with past simple tense especially in the passive voice owing to simplicity of form and structure (cf. Spinčić & Luzer, 2007), while present perfect is used only occasionally. When it comes to expressing future, only Simple Future is used, expressing various meanings, such as intention (9), apology and promise (10), warning (11).

(9) *Findings **will be reported** soonest.*

(10) *Vessel **will not fail** reporting anymore any H₂S concentration in cargo tanks despite any time constriction or tiredness.*

(11) *Combination carriers (OBO O/O) **will not be accepted** beyond 15 years of age.*

(12) *SAUDI GOVERNMENT STRICTLY ADHERE THAT, MASTER WILL BE FULLY RESPONSIBLE OF CREW MEMBERS WHOM ARE WORKING ON BOARD/TANKER SIDE, WITHOUT WEARING LIFE JACKET WHEN YOUR SHIP ENTERED TO SAUDI WATERS.*

Example (12) is a perfect example of several illocutionary aspects acting at the same time to upgrade the force of the illocution. Firstly, we notice the capital letters which in written communication provide a special non-linguistic means of expressing one's thoughts. Secondly, the future tense which emphasizes the meaning of the verb, and thirdly, lexical means, such as the adverbs *fully* and *strictly* which intensify the meaning of the verbs which they modify.

Furthermore, modal verbs as structural indicators modify the utterance according to their denotative meaning. "Should" softens the meaning of the verb 'must', which has a greater illocutionary force. Therefore, "must" is used between speakers at the same level of power, in some indefinite utterances or in the commissives when the speaker commits himself to doing something.

(13) *This matter **should** be considered to be of high priority.*

² The examples provided here are taken from real-life situations, and therefore contain occasional mistakes, which have been corrected in brackets.

(14) *Clearly, we **must** avoid any further reoccurrence of this.*

(15) *You **should** follow the WMM instructions for the completion of the Incinerator Log Book.*

The use of imperative in the corpus is quite common, but opposite to expectations, the imperative used here does not have the expected illocutionary force, rather it is quite neutral, serving as a rule for giving instructions, like in (16) and (17). It seems that the speakers do not perceive this usage of the imperative to be too direct or abrupt, and therefore, see no need to downgrade it. Accordingly, the imperative verbs are not modified when referring to instructions for operation.

(16) ***Check** for satisfactory operation of the purifier*

(17) ***Confirm** changes to your fire/emergency plan direct to your fleets, copied to myself.*

Passive is another structural tool for mitigating the illocutionary force. It is used instead of the imperative, to soften the order or request, or to avoid a direct labelling of the interlocutor, as in (19). Example (18), besides passive voice as a downgrader, also uses lexical means, an inanimate subject, to soften the request, as it is clear that the request is directed towards the masters.

(18) *All vessels **are requested** to open up the inspection doors/covers on their own unit.*

(19) *It is difficult for us here in the office to go back and recode items when we discover they **are wrongly coded** so it is best if it is correctly coded in the first place.*

3.3 Sentence structure

The conditional is used mainly for two purposes: 1. as a mitigator of the illocutionary force, as in (20) and (21) and 2. politeness as in (22). This is also a frequent tool for making hedges in writing, as well as for downgrading the force of the utterance.

(20) *Grateful **if you would advise** findings before UK 17.00 please.*

(21) ***If it would be possible**, could you put the figures onto a vsl headed sheet stating what bunkers were consumed with the vsl stamp and your signature.*

(22) *He can suspend the operation immediately **if he finds it necessary**.*

Another structural characteristic of the corpus is a large number of elliptical sentences. These occur between the speakers at the same level of power or speakers who feel closer to one another, as in (23), (24) and (25). The speakers are relaxed, they do not find it necessary to be grammatically correct and these sentences are time-saving, still passing the message across.

(23) *Presume no c/e disembarking.*

(24) *Reverting soon with off signers details.*

(25) *Awaiting your further comments.*

Example (26) is specific as it was sent by the Chief Engineer to his Superintendent, i.e. from an inferior position to a superior one. It is not usual for a person inferior in rank to send such a message without any downgraders of illocutionary force or hedges, therefore, this exception may

be attributed to some other factors (e.g. saving time, long-term good relationship with the superintendent, cultural norms, etc.).

(26) *Affirmative, send two fitters on board.*

Interrogative sentences are rarely used, but when they are used, they often upgrade the illocutionary force of the speech act, having the power of the imperative as in (27) or serving as indirect suggestions (28). Example (29) seems like a statement, but the punctuation mark in the end provides an additional meaning, replacing intonation from the speech, thus requiring an answer on the part of the interlocutor. In the last example (30), the interrogative structure further emphasizes the responsibility of the interlocutor. A direct question is rare in written communication, therefore, in this particular case this structure intensifies the illocutionary force.

(27) *Is this a possible factor, and has it been checked?*

(28) *Are there any outstanding jobs in the tanks that can be undertaken at this time?*

(29) *I mainly mention this to clarify that you are able to locate the controlled document in the SMS?*

(30) *How can this be possible?*

3.4 Salutation as indicator of illocutionary force

Another important aspect of written communication is the salutation. There are several introductory sentences in which the e-mails in the corpus are opened, depending on the purpose of the mail, the interlocutor and the tone of the mail. This particular part of the mail sets the tone, defines the distance between the sender and the receiver and indicates the affective tone of the message. The most frequent salutation in the corpus is “Good day”, regardless of the sender’s nationality. This sets a relaxed friendly tone of the message, accompanying e-mails concerning everyday situations, new insights or information, gathering information, etc. It may be followed by the title (e.g. “Good day Captain”) or the name of the receiver (e.g. “Good day Jeffrey”). The second most frequent salutation is “Attention”, which is a bit more formal and sets a more serious tone of the message, thus putting a distance between the sender and the receiver. The salutation “Dear” is not as frequent, however, it is quite neutral and formal, indicating strictly business-like content. The salutations “Hello” and “Gents” can also be found, although not as frequently, indicating a friendly tone and a close relationship between the sender and the receiver. Another possible salutation is just by using the name of the receiver, which is an indication of the close relationship between the participants.

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that written communication in marine engineering uses structural indicators to consciously amplify or mitigate the illocutionary force of an utterance. In that respect, some structural indicators, such as the present tense, besides its basic meaning, assumes an additional dimension, while other indicators, such as lexical indicators, contribute to the force of the utterance with their meaning. The paper provides a new perspective of the speech acts in a very specific context of on board communication, whereby the understanding of these linguistic mechanisms would greatly contribute to the interlocutors and the overall efficiency of their communication in a specific multinational environment. Furthermore, this sheds a light on some everyday aspects of speech acts thus contributing to the overall understanding of speech acts.

In that sense, it would be interesting to study the orientation of the speech act, i.e. whether it is directed towards the speaker, the listener, or neutral, and the relation of this speech act orientation with the illocutionary force indicators.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Maritime Studies – Institutional financing of scientific activities in 2017 and 2018 (Project title: “Jezik i njegov učinak: primjer brodstrojarske prakse” [Language and its effect in Marine Engineering communications], No. 2170-57-01-17-8).

The authors declare no competing interests.

References

- Altmann, H. (1993). *Satzmodus, Handbuch der Syntax*, ur. Jacobs, Joachim et al., 1006–1029, de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1985). Modifiers as indicating devices: The case of requests. *Theoretical Linguistics*, 12, 213.
- Bocanegra-Valle, A. (2013). Maritime English. In: C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopaedia of applied linguistics* (pp. 3570-3583). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). *Logic and conversation*. U P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics vol. 3: Speech acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Kordić, S. (1991). Konverzacijske implikature [Conversational implications]. *Suvremena lingvistika*, 17(31-32), 87-96.
- Palašić, N. 2015. Odnos rečeničnoga modusa i implikatura [The relation of sentence mode and implications]. *Fluminensia*, 27(2), 31-43.
- Pritchard, B. (2010). Maritime English: Speaking in tongues. *Telegraph*, 43(6), 30-36.
- Searle, J. R. (1991). *Govorni činovi. Ogledi iz filozofije jezika* [Speech acts. Essays from the philosophy of language]. Beograd: Nolit.
- Searle, J. R. (2005). *Expression and meaning. Studies in the theory of speech acts* (1st ed. 1979), Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Spinčić, A., & J. Luzer. (2007). *English in marine engineering communications*. Rijeka: Adamić d.o.o. and University of Rijeka Faculty of Maritime Studies.

