

LANGUAGE AS ACTION: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE ON UNDERSTANDING LINGUISTIC MEANING

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ABSTRACT

Traditional linguistic views often reduce language to a mere descriptive sign system that represents reality. However, the paradigm shift toward pragmatism demonstrates that language is fundamentally a tool for taking action within social dynamics. This article aims to analyze how language meaning is reconceptualized from mere representation to action, and the extent to which situational context determines the meaning of an utterance. This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method, analyzing philosophical and linguistic texts rooted in Wittgenstein's concept of language games and the Speech Act Theory proposed by J.L. Austin and John Searle. The findings indicate that the meaning of an utterance is not merely embedded in its semantic and syntactic structure; rather, it is fundamentally shaped by its illocutionary and perlocutionary force during language use. Language does not simply describe the world, but actively alters and constructs social reality through performative acts such as promising, ordering, or declaring. Understanding language through a pragmatism perspective provides a more comprehensive framework for dissecting human interaction and is highly relevant for unraveling the complexities of modern communication, which relies heavily on contextual negotiation.

Keywords: Pragmatism, Speech Acts, Language Meaning.

A. Background

In the tradition of classical philosophy of language and linguistics, language has often been reductively understood merely as a medium for transferring information or representing reality. The views of structuralism and logical positivism, for instance, tend to measure the meaning of language based on its truth-value; that is, whether an utterance corresponds to empirical facts in the real world or not (Levinson, S. C., 1983). This paradigm places language in a purely descriptive and static function, as if words were simply "labels" for external objects.

However, over time, philosophers and linguists realized that this descriptive function is insufficient to explain the complexity of human interaction. A major shift occurred when Ludwig Wittgenstein introduced the concept of Language Games, asserting that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, L., 1953). This view was later further developed by J.L. Austin, who radically criticized what he termed the "descriptive fallacy." Austin demonstrated that many utterances do not aim to describe anything and cannot be assessed as true or false; rather, the utterance is the action itself

(Austin, J. L., 1962). When someone says "I promise," they are not reporting a promise, but are performing the act of promising.

This pragmatism perspective which views language as a form of performative action fundamentally changes how we understand the meaning of language. In this perspective, meaning is no longer sought exclusively in dictionaries or grammatical structures (pure syntax and semantics), but in the illocutionary force (the speaker's intention) and the situational context when the language is uttered (Searle, J. R., 1969). Although this theory has long been established, analyzing the mechanism of this shift in meaning from "representation" to "action," as well as how context negotiates this meaning in daily social interactions, remains a critical issue that requires continuous theoretical elaboration.

Based on this paradigm shift, this article aims to answer two main questions (1) The pragmatism perspective reconceptualize the meaning of language from a mere representational (descriptive) system into a tangible social action (performative), and (2) To what extent does the social and situational context

determine the illocutionary force and the ultimate meaning of an utterance.

This research aims to explain and analyze the mechanism of language as a social action based on the pragmatics theoretical framework. Specifically, this paper will dissect how performative elements operate beyond grammatical structures and map the crucial role of context in constructing the complete meaning of an utterance.

Theoretically, this article is expected to enrich the literature in the fields of pragmatic linguistics and the philosophy of language, particularly regarding the application of Speech Act Theory. A comprehensive understanding of "language as action" also possesses practical urgency, namely helping to unravel the complexities of miscommunication, ambiguity, and power dynamics in everyday conversational discourse and modern media.

B. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research design and conceptual analysis. The qualitative approach was selected because this research aims to deeply explore, understand,

and interpret the meaning behind linguistic phenomena, rather than measuring them statistically (Creswell, J., 2014). The library research is conducted by examining various relevant literatures to build a comprehensive understanding of the shift in language meaning from representation to action within the framework of pragmatism.

The data in this study consists of texts (corpus) sourced from primary and secondary literature. Primary sources include canonical works in the philosophy of language and pragmatics, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, and John Searle's *Speech Acts*. Secondary sources encompass journal articles, linguistic textbooks, and recent critical essays discussing the application of speech act theory and the role of context in modern communication.

Data collection was carried out using the documentation technique (Bowen, G. A., 2009). The researcher inventoried, conducted close readings, and categorized quotes, arguments, and key concepts from the reviewed literature. The collected data focused on theoretical explanations and utterance examples that illustrate

the operation of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary forces, as well as how context influences the interpretation of meaning.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and pragmatic interpretation (Krippendorff, K., 2018). The stages of analysis include: (1) Data Reduction: selecting and focusing on philosophical arguments that specifically address the performative nature of language; (2) Data Display: systematically arranging these concepts to demonstrate the evolutionary thought of language pragmatism; and (3) Drawing Conclusions: formulating a conceptual synthesis regarding how language operates as a social action and validating the essential role of context within it.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Language is Not Merely a Mirror of Reality

The analysis of various literatures indicates that the primary failure of traditional linguistic views is the assumption that grammatical form (syntax) always aligns with its

communicative function. Declarative sentences are often treated purely as *constatives* (statements of fact). However, the pragmatism perspective proves otherwise. For instance, the utterance "The dog is fierce" is syntactically a statement describing the condition of the dog. Yet, in practice, this utterance is not merely a mirror of reality, but an act of warning the hearer to stay away from the dog (Austin, J. L., 1962). Thus, the meaning of language transcends its literal structure; it is shaped by what the speaker does through those words.

2. The Dynamics of Illocutionary Acts in Social Interaction

Further discussion confirms that illocutionary force is the driving engine of social dynamics. Through language, humans do not only describe the world but also create "institutional facts" that alter reality (Searle, J. R., 1995). This is most evident in declarative and commissive speech acts. When a judge strikes the gavel and says, "The defendant is sentenced to five years in prison," the social reality of the defendant is instantaneously changed by that

utterance. Similarly, when someone says, "I promise to come," they have generated a new moral bond and social expectation that did not previously exist. Language, in this sense, is an instrument of power and social commitment.

3. Negotiating Meaning Through Context

From the findings above, it is clear that actions in language cannot be predicted from a dictionary alone. Meaning ambiguities are resolved through pragmatic negotiations that rely heavily on situational context (Mey, J. L., 2001). For example, the utterance "It's really cold in here" can be interpreted as a complaint (expressive), mere phatic communion, or an indirect request for the listener to close the window (directive). A listener with pragmatic competence will use context such as an open window, the listener's proximity to it, and the relationship between the participants to deduce the most accurate illocutionary force. Context is not just a background setting; it is an active component that determines the ultimate meaning of an utterance.

4. Implications of Pragmatism for Modern Communication

Speech act theory and pragmatism hold strong relevance in dissecting the complexities of modern communication, especially in the digital era. On social media, situational context is often reduced or lost (context collapse), triggering high rates of miscommunication. Furthermore, the perspective that "language is action" is crucial in analyzing phenomena such as hate speech. Hate speech is not merely a passive expression of opinion; it is a performative act that actively harms, degrades dignity, and creates tangible threats to its victims. Therefore, pragmatism provides the philosophical groundwork for why legal interventions against certain types of speech are justified.

D. Conclusion

1. Summary of Main Findings

This study concludes that the pragmatism perspective has fundamentally revolutionized the way we understand the meaning of language. Language is no longer viewed merely as a passive sign system or a mirror that neutrally describes reality. Instead, language is a tangible social action (performative). Through utterances, humans perform

acts such as promising, threatening, ordering, or declaring things that actively shape and alter institutional reality. Furthermore, the illocutionary force (the intended action) of an utterance cannot be separated from its situational context. Context is not just a background setting; it is a primary determining element negotiated by speakers and listeners to achieve complete meaning and avoid ambiguity.

2. Implications

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the importance of pragmatics as an essential foundation in linguistics and the philosophy of language, surpassing traditional syntactic and semantic analysis. Practically, the understanding that "speaking is acting" has crucial implications for real-world communication. This understanding provides an analytical basis for unraveling miscommunication, understanding political rhetoric, and offering philosophical justification that certain linguistic phenomena, such as hate speech or disinformation in digital media are performative acts that carry tangible destructive impacts on society.

3. Limitations of the Study

Despite providing a comprehensive review, this study has several limitations. First, it is purely based on theoretical library research and conceptual analysis, thus it does not present empirical or quantitative data from actual conversations. Second, the focus on canonical pragmatism literature (such as Austin and Searle) tends to be universal and has not touched upon more specific sociolinguistic variations, such as how local cultures or power structures influence the parameters of illocutionary force in particular regions.

4. Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the limitations above, future research is recommended to conduct empirical studies based on real conversational corpora to test this speech act theory in more specific contexts. Additionally, exploring the application of pragmatism to contemporary digital communication phenomena, such as context collapse on social media, human-AI interaction, or cross-cultural multilingual discourse analysis would provide highly valuable contributions to the development of modern linguistics.

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