
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Taxonomy of Denial as a Speech Act

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| ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical examination of the classification of Denial within Speech Act Theory, advocating for its redefinition from an assertive to a directive speech act. Drawing upon the foundational principles established by J.L. Austin (1962) and further developed by John Searle (1969, 1979), the study applies Searle's twelve dimensions of illocutionary acts to Denial. Through this analytical framework, the paper demonstrates that Denial transcends the mere negation of propositions, actively engaging in modifying the hearer's beliefs or actions, a characteristic inherent to directive acts. The analysis highlights the dual nature of Denial, which not only contests a given proposition but also, and more importantly, endeavours to influence the listener's perspective or behaviour. This re-evaluation challenges traditional views and enriches the discourse on linguistic pragmatics by advocating for a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to speech act classification. By reclassifying Denial as a directive, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of communicative practices, emphasising the strategic use of language in social interactions and the complex dynamics of speech acts in communication. This reassessment calls for a broader reconsideration of speech act classifications, marking a step towards a more comprehensive representation of language functions within linguistic pragmatics and opening avenues for future research.

| KEYWORDS

Speech Act Theory, Illocutionary Acts, Directive Speech Acts, Denial in Linguistics, John Searle, Communicative Intent

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

This paper embarks on a critical exploration of denial's categorisation within Speech Act Theory, advocating for its reclassification as a directive rather than its traditional assertive designation. Through an analytical lens applied to Searle's framework, this study delves into the multifaceted nature of denial, underscoring its active role in influencing listener behaviour and belief. The structure of the paper unfolds in a systematic manner, beginning with a review of foundational concepts in Speech Act Theory, followed by a detailed application of Searle's dimensions to denial, and culminating in a compelling argument for its redefinition.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory is a crucial area of study within the field of linguistics, specifically under pragmatics, which explores how language is used for communication. It delves into how utterances perform actions beyond conveying information, such as making requests, promises, or commands. The theory originated with J.L. Austin in the 1950s, who introduced the idea that utterances could be viewed as actions themselves. John Searle further developed this theory by categorising speech acts into three types: locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary acts, along with propositional content and force, thus providing a structured way of understanding how language functions in communication.

Searle (1979) elaborates on the criteria for differentiating illocutionary acts, identifying 12 dimensions that distinguish these acts, with the first three being particularly fundamental. His proposal was a new classification system that supersedes Austin's original framework, organising speech acts based on their features into five main categories, which are briefly listed below:

1. Assertives are designed to convey the speaker's commitment to the truth of a proposition to varying degrees. These acts are characterised by their truth value potential and can be modified by other illocutionary features.
2. Directives aim to compel the hearer to perform an action, ranging from gentle suggestions to strong demands. This category encapsulates attempts to align the world with words.
3. Commissives involve the speaker's commitment to a future course of action, emphasizing the intention behind the speech act and its alignment from words to world.
4. Expressives serve to articulate the speaker's feelings or attitudes regarding a state of affairs, without a specific direction of fit, covering a wide range of psychological states.
5. Declarations create or alter a state of affairs by the act of declaration itself, requiring a specific status or institutional backing. A subclass of assertive declarations shares features with the latter.

Searle (1979) also discusses the nuanced application of illocutionary verbs, indicating that they may not correspond to a single illocutionary act but can express various degrees of force or manners of execution. This leads to a revised classification where some verbs do not directly mark illocutionary points, others combine illocutionary points with additional features, and some can signify multiple points or assume different points based on syntax (Searle, 1979).

Concluding, Searle (1979) echoes Wittgenstein's view that language use is not infinitely variable but rather centred around a finite set of core functions—informing, influencing actions, committing oneself, expressing emotions, and enacting changes. This reflects a fundamental perspective on the limited yet profound ways in which language can be employed to achieve communication.

2.2. The Classification of Denial

Denial, within the scope of speech act theory, is a nuanced illocutionary act that has garnered attention for its role in communication and its interaction with the beliefs and expectations of interlocutors. Rooted in the foundational works of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), the study of Denial has evolved, focusing on its pragmatic implications and assertive nature.

Levinson (1983) elaborates on the pragmatic functions of speech acts and situates Denial within the assertives due to its direct engagement with the truth-value of propositions. He argues that the act of Denial inherently involves the speaker's assertion that a certain state of affairs does not hold, thus committing to a truth claim about the world. This positions Denial as a mechanism for truth management within discourse, a key feature of assertive acts.

Similarly, Schegloff (1988), through his detailed analysis of conversational structures and sequences, identifies Denial as an integral component of managing agreement and disagreement in interactions. By categorising Denial as an assertive, Schegloff underscores its role in affirming or disaffirming propositions within the flow of conversation, emphasising its contribution to the construction and negotiation of shared understanding among interlocutors.

3. Methodology

This paper attempts to argue that Denial is more suited to be considered as a directive rather than its traditional categorisation as an assertive. In order to relocate Denial's place among the five aforementioned types of illocutions, this paper looks at it through the same twelve dimensions Searle (1979) used to generalise that all illocutions can fit into one (or more in some cases) of these groups: Assertives, Directives, Comissives, Expressives, Declarations. Hence, in a nutshell, this paper's methodology consists of using the twelve dimensions given below to categorise Denial.

1. Illocutionary Point: This pertains to the act's purpose or goal, distinguishing actions like requests and commands based on their aim to influence the hearer's behaviour (Searle, 1979).
2. Direction of Fit: This dimension describes whether the act aims to align words with the world or vice versa, as illustrated by assertions (aligning words to the world) versus promises (aligning the world to words).
3. Expressing Psychological States: Illocutionary acts express various psychological states, such as beliefs in assertions or intentions in vows.

4. Force or Strength: The strength with which the act's point is conveyed varies, distinguishing, for example, a suggestion from an insistence.
5. Status or Position: The social status or role of the participants affects the force of the utterance, transforming a request from a teacher to a student into a command.
6. Interests of Speaker and Hearer: The act may align with the interests of the speaker or hearer differently, such as in the case of boasts versus laments.
7. Relation to Discourse: How the act connects to preceding or following discourse is also a distinguishing factor, as seen in expressions like "I conclude" or "I object".
8. Propositional Content and Truthfulness: The illocutionary force-indicating devices dictate differences in propositional content, differentiating between reporting on the past and predicting the future.
9. Speech Act Requirement: Some acts inherently require speech, while others can be performed without uttering words, emphasising the variability in the performance of speech acts.
10. Extra-Linguistic Institutions: Certain acts necessitate an institutional backdrop for their performance, such as the act of blessing within the context of a church.
11. Performative Use of Verbs: While many illocutionary verbs have a performative function, like promising or ordering, others do not directly facilitate actions like threatening or boasting through their verbalisation.
12. Style of Performance: The manner in which an act is performed can also differentiate illocutionary acts, highlighting the role of style in the execution of speech acts.

These dimensions underscore the intricate ways in which speech acts are classified and understood, reflecting the depth and breadth of illocutionary actions in human communication.

4. Results and Discussion

What follows would be an examination of Denial in each of the 12 dimensions to see where exactly it lands on these spectrums; which would ultimately allow us to classify Denial in one of the 5 categories postulated by Searle (1979).

1. Illocutionary Point:

For Denial, it seems like the point of the act is somewhere between assertives and directives. While Denial does commit the speaker to a contrary position against a stated proposition, resembling an assertive's function to declare something as true or false, it seems like Denial also functions as a directive because it not only negates but also implicitly or explicitly urges the listener to adopt a new belief or understanding. This dual nature leans towards a directive's characteristic of intending to bring about a change in the hearer's actions or beliefs.

2. Direction of Fit:

Denial, in attempting to align the hearer's beliefs with the speaker's assertion (world to words), acts to correct or modify the listener's worldview. This function aligns with your argument for Denial as a directive since it seeks to alter the hearer's perception or action, akin to directives that aim to change the world to match the words.

3. Expressing Psychological States:

Denial shares a psychological function with directives, such as commanding or requesting, by seeking to influence the hearer's mental state or belief system. This is a departure from the purely assertive act, which primarily expresses a state of affairs without necessarily intending to modify the hearer's beliefs or actions directly.

4. Force or strength:

Using an explicit performative Denial verb might be the only systematic way to increase the strength of the illocution's force. The variable force with which Denial can be presented supports its directive nature in your view, as it can range from a gentle correction to a strong command to revise one's understanding, mirroring the spectrum of force found in directives.

5. Status or Position:

The effectiveness and reception of Denial, influenced by social dynamics, further align with directive characteristics. The speaker's authority or social standing can impact the hearer's responsiveness, similar to how directives function in hierarchical relationships.

6. Interests of Speaker and Hearer:

While most illocutions are very reliant on the context to determine whether the interest aligns with the speaker or the hearer, Denial is Primarily Speaker interest-oriented.

7. Relation to Discourse:

The role of Denial in discourse, while not always explicitly marked by performative verbs, aligns with its function to correct or challenge, paralleling directive acts that seek compliance or acknowledgment.

8. Propositional Content and Truthfulness:

Denial affects the truthfulness of a previously stated propositional content¹. The correction of a previous statement's truthfulness positions Denial within a realm that transcends mere assertion, as it actively engages with and seeks to modify the propositional landscape.

9. Speech Act Requirements:

Denial is always a speech act. It cannot be performed non-verbally. This underscores its active engagement with discourse, akin to directives which necessitate verbal expression to achieve their purpose.

10. Extra Linguistic Institutions:

While Denial can function independently of institutional backing, its use in formal settings (like legal contexts) to demand reconsideration or reversal mirrors directive's capacity to influence actions and beliefs.

11. Performative use of verbs:

The use of a verb is optional. As stated earlier, it might add to the strength of the illocution, and this is why juristic institutions often prefer to the use of the explicit verb. The optional use of explicit performative verbs in Denial, which can enhance its illocutionary force, supports its classification as a directive by emphasising its intent to influence or command.

12. Style of Performance:

The fixed style of performing Denial, focused on negation and correction, aligns with its directive function to actively seek a change in the hearer's state of mind or actions.

Based on these dimensions Denial fits the most in the Directive category, whose features are reiterated below:

Directives: aim to compel the hearer to perform an action, ranging from gentle suggestions to strong demands. This category encapsulates attempts to align the world with words.

The classification of Denial as a directive, rather than merely an assertive, is compellingly supported by its active role in communication, aiming not just to negate a previous assertion but to significantly alter the hearer's beliefs or actions. This intent-driven nature of Denial aligns more closely with the defining characteristics of directives. To advocate for this perspective, it is crucial to focus on how Denial operates on two levels: it not only refutes a given proposition but also endeavours to change the listener's viewpoint or behaviour. This dual functionality transcends the simple binary of truth or falsity that typifies assertive acts, venturing into the realm of influencing and guiding the listener's responses.

Further strengthening this argument is the observation of Denial's contextual adaptability and its nuanced interaction with social dynamics. These aspects underscore the directive's goal-oriented essence, where the act of Denial is not just about the rejection of a claim but about steering the conversation and the listener towards a new understanding or action. The imperative nature of Denial in discourse—where it functions to prompt reconsideration or a shift in perspective—also distinguishes it from the static conveyance of information typical of assertives.

Challenging the conventional assertion that Denial is purely an assertive requires addressing its limitations in capturing the interactive and intent-driven facets of Denial. Assertives primarily deal with the expression of truths or beliefs, neglecting the active engagement and influence exerted on the hearer's stance, which is central to directives. By underscoring these aspects—Denial's aim to effect changes in the hearer's belief or action, its sensitivity to the conversational context, and its dependency on the relational dynamics between the speaker and the listener—an argument can be made for a re-evaluation of Denial's place within speech act theory as a directive. This reclassification acknowledges the complexity of Denial and its pivotal role in not just negating propositions but actively shaping the course of interactions.

¹ Negation is a core element in performing the act of Denial. Just like the past tense is a core element for 'I report' and the future tense is a core element for 'I predict'.

5. Conclusion

This study advocates for a reassessment of Denial's classification within Speech Act Theory, proposing its reclassification from an assertive to a directive. By methodically applying Searle's (1979) twelve dimensions to Denial, this analysis has illuminated its directive qualities, particularly its capacity to influence the hearer's perspective and actions rather than merely negating propositions. This nuanced examination reveals that Denial engages with the listener in a manner characteristic of directives, aiming to modify beliefs or behaviours through communicative interaction.

The research underscores the necessity of acknowledging the interactive and intention-driven aspects of Denial, which the traditional assertive categorisation fails to capture. It highlights Denial's dynamic role in discourse, emphasising its capacity to navigate and reshape interactions—a hallmark of directive speech acts. This paper demonstrates the significance of contextual and relational dynamics in interpreting Denial's function, further substantiating its directive nature.

By challenging established classifications within Speech Act Theory, this paper enriches the discourse on linguistic pragmatics, advocating for a context-sensitive approach to speech act categorisation. The reclassification of Denial as a directive not only contributes to theoretical discussions but also provides insights into the strategic use of language in social interactions. This reassessment encourages further exploration into the complexities of speech acts, promoting a more nuanced understanding of communicative practices.

Therefore, this study calls for a broader re-evaluation of speech act classifications, emphasising the need for flexibility in understanding the diverse functions of language in communication. The proposed shift in categorizing Denial as a directive marks a step towards a more comprehensive and accurate representation of speech acts within linguistic pragmatics, offering avenues for future research in the field.

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