

Linguistic Means for Marking Speech Acts: Discourse Formulae

Ekaterina Rakhilina, Polina Bychkova
National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia
rakhilina@gmail.com, polyatomson@gmail.com

Keywords: speech acts, Construction Grammar, formulaic sequences, typology, discourse

The philosophic category of speech acts by J. L. Austin and J. Searle and their followers (see overview in Kissine 2013) is aimed at classifying types of interaction between the members of conversation, focusing on two things: the intention of the speaker and the effect on the addressee.

To be treated as a standard linguistic category, speech acts should consist of a set of values (cf. singular, dual and plural for number), and a set of markers distinguishing the values (cf. -Ø for singular and -s for dual and plural in English). Language typology reveals the patterns of categorization, studying which types of marking occur across languages. Speech acts cannot be regarded as a linguistic category and therefore have no basis for linguistic typology until they are described in terms of linguistic markedness.

The problem was raised in Croft 1994 where speech acts were accounted for in terms of types of sentences which have special syntactic markers. However, the notion of “types of sentences” concerns exclusively the surface structure of the utterance. Meanwhile, an important idea of the speech act theory is that the illocutionary force does not always directly correspond to the form of the utterance (cf. suggestion ‘Let’s go!’ conveyed in a sentence of interrogative type – *Are you coming?*). Therefore, types of sentences cannot be regarded as proper markers for the category.

We suggest to consider what we call **discourse formulae** (speech formulas in Fillmore 1984) as linguistic markers for speech acts.

Discourse formulae are a special type of constructions such as *You bet!*, *No way!*, *Say what!* that are used in dialogue as an isolated reaction to the interlocutor’s utterance, cf. (1).

- (1) - *Are you coming for a drink?*
- ***You bet!***

Unlike prototypical constructions (like *what’s X doing Y* in Kay & Fillmore 1999), discourse formulae are entirely fixed and do not have any variables within their body. It is the preceding interlocutor’s remark that fills the slot. Discourse formula, as a reaction to this remark, marks its illocutionary force. We argue that discourse formulae equally interact with indirect and direct speech acts. This means that they can be treated as linguistic markers of speech acts and speech acts can be accounted for as linguistic and cognitive category.

The further problem is whether natural language classification of illocutionary stimuli (provided by discourse formulae marking) matches the traditional speech act classification. To answer this question, we built a database containing around 200 Russian discourse formulae with their semantic and pragmatic classification and annotation of the types of preceding context.

Our analysis shows that language marking of speech acts not only supports the traditional speech acts classification but also enriches it. E.g., concerns, apologies, news and compliments are marked by different discourse formulae across languages and therefore should be added to the list of conventional speech acts as cognitively relevant patterns of speech situation.

References

- Croft, W. (1994). Speech act classification, language typology and cognition. *Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives*, 460-477.
- Fillmore, C. J. (1984). Remarks on contrastive pragmatics. *Contrastive linguistics: Prospects and problems*, 119-141.
- Kay, P., & Fillmore, C. J. (1999). Grammatical constructions and linguistic generalizations: the What’s X doing Y? construction. *Language*, 1-33.
- Kissine, M. (2013). Speech act classifications. *Pragmatics of speech actions*, 173-201.