

Applied Speech Acts Analysis: Speaker Intentions as Motivational Factors in Substance Abuse Therapy

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Speech acts such as requests, verbal commitments, warnings, and threats are a ubiquitous aspect of everyday language use. They provide a means to share mental models of our knowledge in social interactions. With them we can direct the assignment of future actions for ourselves and others by simply uttering certain words arranged in a particular way. The purpose of the present study was to determine whether a theory of speech act comprehension concerning the sharing of speakers' intentions in request-to-commit dialogs can be used to isolate motivational factors in a therapy context in which the therapist's goal is to obtain a verbal commitment from the client to change his or her drug habit (see Miller & Rollnick, 1991). According to speech act theorists (e.g., Searle, 1969, 1977), for each speech act type, different intentions (e.g., desire, ability, need) are assigned to the speaker of an utterance and the listener who receives it. When these intentions are not actually present in a discourse situation, yet a speech act has been uttered, its performance is unsuccessful to varying extents. The intentions of desire and ability have received the most attention in the empirical literature (e.g., Amrhein, 1992; Gibbs, 1986; Holtgraves, 1994; Francik & Clark, 1985). For example, in the case of a successful request, the speaker wants a specified act to be carried out by the listener, and the speaker believes that the listener wants and is able to carry out that act. With these intentions in place, it is likely that the act will indeed be carried out. Not so coincidentally, verbal commitments can also be characterized in terms of these intentions. That is, for a successful commitment, the speaker believes that the listener wants a specified act to be carried out by the speaker, and the speaker both wants and is able to carry out that act. Data will be presented from experiments which illustrate the basic pattern of the contribution of speaker intentions to the strength of verbal commitments as well as from therapist (qua requester)-client (qua committer) protocols which

replicate this pattern. Collectively, these data will demonstrate how speaker intentions influence the frequency, form and strength of speech acts in discourse.

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