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Texts used include

- ⊙ Personal writing
- ⊙ Oral narratives
- ⊙ Public speeches
- ⊙ Extract from a language work book
- ⊙ Spontaneous face-to-face conversation
- ⊙ Telephone conversations
- ⊙ Computer chat-room logs

Speech events

Imagine how the conversation might go as you take your leave of someone after having had dinner at their house. You might signal your intention of leaving by some line such as 'I must be going', you might express gratitude for the meal, you might say thank you, you might praise the excellence of the food, you might suggest a return visit to your place, the conversation might drift back to an earlier topic or even start a completely new one, you might say thank you again, and then you

embark on the 'goodbyes' and 'goodnights' before finally going. In such a situation or speech event as this English speakers will be unconsciously following rules whose purpose is to express thanks, reinforce relationships, leave on good terms and allow a suitable length of time between first suggesting you must go and actually going. Saying you must go and then immediately fleeing the house would be considered inappropriate and rude – certainly in British culture. Conversation, then, exists within a social context and this context determines the shape of the discourse.

Activity

Consider possible interactions in the following speech events. What do you think the rules are that govern discourse here? And what would break the rules?

- Ⓐ Customer–hairdresser conversation
- Ⓑ Introductions
- Ⓒ Answering the phone and signing off
- Ⓓ Recording answerphone messages – both outgoing and incoming
- Ⓔ Phoning for an appointment at the doctor's

Conversation, however, is not always clear-cut, and sometimes a breakdown in communication occurs because intention is misunderstood. What the speaker intends but what the listener hears has informed much of Deborah Tannen's work on gender and conversation (1992). She cites, for example, the case of the woman who had just undergone surgery to have a lump removed from her breast. She tells her female friends that she found it upsetting to have been cut into, and that the operation had left a scar and changed the shape of her breast. Her friends replied: 'I know. It's as if your body has been violated.' But when she told her husband, he replied: 'You can have plastic surgery to cover up the scar and restore the shape of your breast.'

She felt comforted by her friends' comments, but upset by what her husband said. Her friends gave her *understanding* but her husband reacted to her complaint by giving *advice*. His intention was to offer help, but what his wife heard was him telling her to undergo even more surgery.

Intention lies behind a range of specific utterances called **speech acts**. When someone says, for example:

- I apologise
- I promise
- I do (at a wedding)

s/he is doing something *beyond* what's being said. By saying 'I apologise', for instance, s/he has performed an apology; there has been a change in the state of things, an act has been carried out. Speech acts are particularly prevalent and important in the language associated with ritual and ceremony. Here speech acts may contribute to the accepted rules or code of conduct or order that a ceremony has to follow; they often also have legal status. Saying 'I do' at the appropriate moment in a wedding ceremony – assuming you meet all the other criteria, being the bride or groom, for example; the choir boy or organist shouting out 'I do!' doesn't count – will get you married in the eyes of the law. The minister also confers legal status when s/he announces 'I name this child . . .'; the judge when s/he declares 'I sentence you to two years' imprisonment'.

Saying, then, is doing and doing is performing. Speech acts are involved in lots of everyday conversation and a simple test to check if an utterance is a speech act is to put the words 'I hereby' in front and see if it makes sense. So:

I hereby apologise

I hereby promise

I hereby do take

make sense, but 'I hereby know you' doesn't.

Several attempts have been made to classify the thousands of possible speech acts in everyday occurrence. Perhaps the most useful has been made by Searle (1969) who has suggested five groups:

Representatives: the speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to the truth of a proposition, e.g. 'affirm', 'believe', 'conclude', 'report'.

Directives: the speaker tries to get the hearer to do something, e.g. 'ask', 'challenge', 'command', 'request'.

Commissives: the speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to a certain course of action, e.g. 'bet', 'guarantee', 'pledge', 'promise', 'swear'.

Expressives: the speaker expresses an attitude about a state of affairs, e.g. 'apologise', 'deplore', 'thank', 'welcome'.

Declarations: the speaker alters the status quo by making the utterance, e.g. 'I resign', 'you're offside', 'I name this child', 'you're nicked', 'you're busted punk'.

(Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

Activity

Look at the following examples: which group does each belong to?

insist
congratulate
I now pronounce you husband and wife
vow
deny

(For answer and commentary on this activity, see p. 305.)

Activity

Read the commentary on the previous activity on p. 305 and then try a similar gradient from direct to indirect speech act.

- 1 *Asking* someone out on a date
- 2 *Requesting* someone to stop talking in the cinema.

Extension

- 1 Exploring the style and pattern of everyday speech events can prove valuable, fruitful and interesting. Consider also whether different ethnic groups follow different rules in some situations. Also can gender or age play a part in what happens? How does gender play a part on the phone, for instance? These questions are taken up in the final section of this unit.
- 2 Alternatively consider examining the ritualistic language of ceremonies such as weddings, baptisms, funerals. Oscar, Britpop, Booker Prize or similar award-winning ceremonies or the language of the courts are also areas fertile for investigation.

(Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)