The important of semantics knowledge in teaching english

Education, Teaching

Speech act theory and the analysis of conversations. Sequencing and interpretation in pragmatic theory Jacques Moeschler Department of Linguistics University of Geneva 1. Introduction Conversation has recently become a focus of interest for speech act theory and several proposals have been formulated concerning the possible extension of speech act theory to the analysis of conversation. This debate (cf. Searle et al. 1992) has to be interpreted as a reactive move rather than as a natural extension of the domain of speech act theory.

Nevertheless, this reaction, either sceptical (cf. Searle 1992) or optimistic (cf. Dascal 1992, Vanderveken 1992 and 1994), has brought interesting issues which contrast with the various attempts by linguists at extending speech act theory to the domain of discourse1 . The first purpose of this paper is to explicit the divergence between philosophers and linguists about the possible extension of speech act theory to discourse analysis. This paper has another purpose : it also deals with the possible domain of pragmatic theory withrespectto discourse analysis.

I shall argue that the main purpose of discourse analysis is the definition of necessary and sufficient 2 MOESCHLER conditions for sequencing and interpretating utterances in discourse. I claim that these two aspects of discourse (sequencing and interpretation) are intrinsically related and cannot be accounted for independently from each other. I claim furthermore that speech act theory cannot give any insight into the sequencing and interpretation problems, because speech act theory is neither a theory of interpretation (it is a theory of meaning) nor a global theory of action.

Finally I show how a radical pragmatic theory (in the Gricean sense) accounts for the sequencing and interpretation problems. 2 2. Speech act theory and conversation There is a common sense argument shared by philosophers and linguists in favour of the possible extension of speech act theory to discourse analysis. This argument is the following : Speech acts are not isolated moves incommunication: they appear in more global units of communication, defined as conversations or discourses.

Vanderveken (1994, 53) gives an explicit version of this thesis when asserting that speakers perform their illocutionary acts within entire conversations where they are most often in verbal interaction with other speakers who reply to them and perform in turn their own speech acts with the same collective intention to pursue with success a certain type of discourse. Thus, above all, the use of language is a social form of linguistic behavior.

It consists, in general, of ordered sequences of utterances made by several speakers who tend by their verbal interactions to achieve common discursivegoalssuch as discussing a question, deciding together how to react to a certain situation, negociating, consulting or more simply to exchange greetings and talk for its own sake. For terminological convenience, I will call such ordered sequences of speech acts conversations. SPEECH ACTS AND CONVERSATION 3 The basis of this argument is that conversation is made of sequences of speech acts.

This certainly is a plausible theoretical claim3 , but gives rise to a certain number of objections, raised mainly by Searle (1992) in his skeptical

argument. These objections concern essentially the possible relations between questions and answers in conversation, and can be stated as follows. First of all, questions are defined in speech acts theory as requests for information, and as such impose representative acts as replies. But this cannot be correct, since a reply may have another illocutionary point (as a promise) if the question is a request for a promise.

Secondly, certain questions require a directive as a reply, and not a representative, when the question contains a modal auxiliary verb (cf. the exchange : “ Shall I marry Sally ? ” - “ Yes, do”/ “ No, don’t” / “*Yes, you shall” / “*No, you shall not”). The third counter-example is given by indirect reponses, which do not satisfy syntactic conditions, although the answer is pragmatically appropriate. To these three arguments, we could add an even more embarrassing one : answer is not a specific illocutionary force, which could be analysed by the seven components of illocutionary force (cf.

Searle & Vanderveken 1985). Answer is a functional discursive qualification, but certainly not the semantic definition of a speech act type. These objections make explicit an important difference between the structure of illocutionary acts and the structure of conversation. In speech act theory, and more precisely in illocutionary logic, illocutionary force is decomposed into seven components, which are all necessary conditions for the successful and non defective accomplishment of illocutionary acts.

These components (cf. Searle & Vanderveken 1985, 12-20) are the illocutionary point, the degree of strength of the illocutionary point, the mode of achievement of the illocutionary point, the propositional content

conditions of the illocutionary act, the preparatory conditions of the illocutionary act, the sincerity conditions of the illocutionary act, and finally the degree of strength of the sincerity conditions. That predictions 4 MOESCHLER bout the sequencing in conversation are difficult to come by follows from the fact that the internal structure of illocutionary acts (and more specifically the set of conditions for success) cannot determine the set of possible replies for any type of illocutionary act. By contrast, discourse analysis, while specifying sequential relations in discourse between speech acts, does not constrain sequencing in conversation depending on the set of possible components of illocutionary force. The constraints are not structural, in the sense of speech act theory, they are on the contrary functional.

This means that the basic structures of conversation (exchanges) are made of lower order conversational units (moves) which carry functional properties. If speech act theory has been used so extensively within this paradigm of discourse analysis4 , it is because the functional properties associated with speech acts as units of meaning have been exported to speech acts as units of communication and discourse. This has several consequences for the description of speech acts within discourse analysis. The first consequence is that the structure of conversation is not only based on a hierarchy of constituency, but is also functional.

To take a classical discourse model (cf. Sinclair & Coulthard 1975), discourse categories (exchange, move, and act) are defined functionally. For instance, an act of ELICITATION is part of a move of ELICITATION, which governs an exchange of ELICITATION. Thus all discourse constituents receive a

communicative function, that is, an interactive meaning. But we are here far from the conventional and semantic-meaning defining speech acts in speech act theory5 . As we have just noticed, discourse analysis supposes principles of constituency which allow interpretive or functional inheritance.

If we assume, as above, that an ELICITATION is a two-place predicate relating utterance-units and discourse-units, we must assume too that the functional properties of the smallest discourse units (acts) are inherited by the larger constituents (moves and exchanges). This principle is structurally identical to the projection principle in generative grammar : a phrase is a maximal projection of a lexical head (for SPEECH ACTS AND CONVERSATION 5 instance NP is a maximal projection of a N); in discourse, then, an exchange is thus functionally a maximal projection of an act.

The principle of functional projection is not a necessary consequence of discourse analysis. Another classical discourse model, the Geneva hierachicalfunctional model (cf. Roulet et al. 1985, Moeschler 1985, Moeschler 1989a) makes a different claim : functional values do not stand in a one-to-one relationship with discourse structures. In this model, there is a basic difference between rules of discourse formation and principles of functional interpretation. The structural dimension is based on the following rules of formation : R1 Units of type Exchange are made of units of type Move.

R1’ Exchanges are composed of at least two Moves. R2 Units of type Move are made of units types Act, Move or Exchange. R2’ Moves composed by a single Act are well-formed. R2” Moves composed by an Act and another

discourse-unit type (Move or Exchange) are well-formed. R2”’ Moves composed by a single Exchange are ill-formed. Thus, the following discourse structures are well-formed : (1) a. b. c. > where E = exchange, M = move, A = act The structures in (1a-c) are the hierarchical representations corresponding to the following short exchanges in (2)-(4): (2) A B A B A Are you ready ?

We can leave. Are you ready ? Why ? We must leave now. (3) 6 B (4) A B A B A MOESCHLER Okay, but when I am in a hurry, I always forget something. Are you ready ? Because we must leave now. Yes I am Good. Let’s go Let’s go Okay We can represent the bracketting structures given in (1) by the following tree-schemata : (5) (a) E M2 A We can leave. M1 A Are you ready ? (b) E E M2 M M1 M1 M2 M M1 A A A A A A A A A A A A A A Are you ready ? Why ? We must leave now. Okay, but when I am in a hurry, I always forget something. (c) M1 E M2 M3 E M2 M3

Are you ready ? Because we must leave now. Yes I am Good Let's go Let’s go Okay These structures mean that in (5a) the exchange is made of two moves both composed of a single act, in (5b) the exchange is composed of two moves, the second of which is made of an exchange with two moves, and a move composed by an act and a move, and in (5c) the three-move exchange contains in the first move an exchange made of three moves. SPEECH ACTS AND CONVERSATION 7 What are the functional counterparts of the structural aspects of conversational discourse ?

There are two dimensions of functional properties associated with the structural device : the first dimension is a restricted inheritance principle,

and the second, a general procedure for assigning interpretation to discourse constituents. The first principle is a principle of functional composition : Principle of functional composition (i) Constituents of exchanges bear illocutionary functions. (ii) Constituents of moves bear interactive functions. Definitions (i) Illocutionary functions are of three types : initiative, reactive, and reactive-initiative. (ii) Interactive functions are of two types : directive, and subordinate.

The first move of an exchange (M1) is always initiative; the final move of an exchange is always reactive. For instance M2 in the exchange is the reactive move, and M1 is the initiative move. An inserted move (for example M2 in the structure) is a reactive-initiative move. A directive (D) constituent is of the type move or act, and contains the act from which the move receives its illocutionary function; a subordinate (constituent (of rank act, move or exchange) is cancellable, and generally completes, argues for, or justifies the main or directive constituent of the move. We can now ive the complete hierachical-functional structures given in (1) and (5) as (6) and (6') : (6) a. b. c. 8 MOESCHLER where E = exchange, sE = subordinate exchange, M = move, sM = subordinate move, dM = directive move, sA = subordinate act, dA = directive act (6') (a) E M2 dA We can leave. M1 dA Are you ready ? (b) E M2 dM sE M1 M1 M 2 dM dA dA dA sA sA dA dA sA dA dA dA dA dA Are you ready ? Why ? We must leave now. Okay, but when I am in a hurry, I always forget something. (c) M1 E M2 M3 sE M1 M2 M3 Are you ready ? Because we must leave now. Yes I am Good Let's go Let's go Okay

The second functional counterpart of the stuctural device is a procedure of interpretation assignment. It is not sufficient to have functional values assigned to discourse constituents; required is also to have a procedure governing the assignment of a functional interpretation to each constituent. In other words, the types of structures given in (1), (5) or (6) are syntactic representations of discourse; we need in addition a semantics, which can for instance assign to the hierarchical-functional structures given in (6) the following functional interpretations : SPEECH ACTS AND CONVERSATION 9 (7) a. b.