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Reporting speech acts in EFL

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ABSTRACT

The presentation will focus on problems in EFL environments generated by poor understanding of the functions of utterances or rather by not viewing sentences as utterances of functional discourse. More specifically, it will concentrate on problems in reporting discourse or what is conventionally called 'reported speech'. Rather than following traditional 'recipes' of what needs to be done when confronted with such tasks, teachers need to sensitize their students to the multiple functions of utterances in discourse often forsaking their formal grammatical features and structures. In order to equip their students in this task teachers themselves need to be familiar with the fundamentals of the functionality of discursive utterances on a theoretical rather than a haphazard empirical basis. This presentation aims at demonstrating the need for acquiring a 'pragmatic slant' in our teaching of reporting discourse or at applying our knowledge of pragmatics to at least one area of language teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

The motivation of this paper lies back in the past when one of my children, a native or near-native speaker of English, came back from a well-known Institute of English, voicing incomprehension at the corrections by his teacher. He had to do a test on 'reported speech' and the teacher's correction of his exercise was not intelligible to him. He was in upper-intermediate level. Here is the exercise and the teacher's corrected answer:

1. The clock has stopped. Did you forget to wind it?
2. *Pupil's report:* Tom... Tom asked me to wind the clock because it had stopped.
3. *Teacher's correction:* Tom told me that the clock had stopped and asked me if I had forgotten to wind it up.

Well, at the time I pacified him by saying that that was the safe road to his getting the Proficiency certificate, or indeed, any certificate. But even if this is so, even if this is what is required of student performance in a proficiency exam, we need to query the adequacy of the teacher's corrected version of report *vis-à-vis* real conversational data and language use. I think that we can all agree that a report along the pupil's lines was definitely more competent and efficient than the teacher's corrected version.

2. UTTERANCES AS SPEECH ACTS

Let me start with a question. What is your reaction going to be to (1) addressed to you? The responses in the table below are all likely:

4. "Oh really? I didn't realize I had forgotten to wind it. Sorry".	12. "Why do you have to complain all the time?"
5. "I don't know, I don't remember".	13. "Oh, I can't stand you, you keep accusing me of everything".
6. "Oh no, I did".	14. "Am I to blame? Why don't you do it yourself?"
7. "Yes, I forgot to wind it".	15. <i>You say nothing but you get up to wind it (even if grudgingly).</i>
8. "No, I did not forget to wind it".	16. <i>You utter 4 or 5 but you also act as in 15.</i>
9. "Leave me alone".	
10. <i>Silence</i>	
11. "I don't need the wretched thing, anyway".	

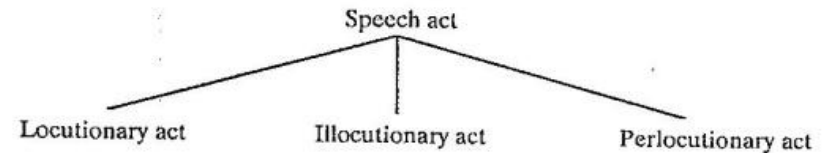
We notice that all are possible; however, some are more welcome than others, some are more helpful or co-operative than others, and, if we were to class them in terms of this element of co-operativeness, I am sure, we would start from the bottom with 16 or 15.¹

How is it that the most co-operative response is the one whereby you offer to wind the alarm? Because you recognize the speaker's intention in his or her utterance. It's either related to a request or to a complaint or, possibly, to an incrimination, especially if s/he is already winding it while talking to you. Why is it not so very co-operative to just say (4-9), since they all respond in a verbal manner to (1)? The answer is quite obvious, I think. We just do not normally communicate 'informational' statements regarding the status of everyday things like (non-)operating alarms without any specific intention of bringing about a particular effect, such as getting my daughter to get up and wind the clock, or complaining about her sloppy behaviour and possibly achieving the desired re-

1. In fact, (15) was the first option as was clearly demonstrated in the presentation where I posited the question. The responses heard from the audience are in the second column.

sult thereby, etc. So what is very significant in everyday communication and, hence, in inferring, or rather negotiating, meaning is the recognition of intentions invested in our utterances. What is the intention of the speaker in uttering what s/he did? Understanding the meaning of the words and the sentence of A may be a simple, compositional procedure. Understanding its speaker's meaning is quite another thing.

It is a common place that each utterance may constitute a speech act (or more). Speech acts are the minimal units of meaning and of human communication, as Searle (1978) claims. Speech acts consist of three layers, so to speak: the locutionary act, which is what is said constituting the sense and reference or the proposition, the illocutionary act which is performed in the utterance of the locutionary act *eo ipso*, and lastly the perlocutionary act, which is associated with the effects of the speech act. This is a schematic representation of the three levels of the speech act:



Now the question that is raised is: "How do we get from the utterance act to the illocutionary act; what has to be added to the fact that sounds come out of my mouth to get the fact that I make a statement that such and such, or as a question whether so and so? And the answer to that question involves a complicated yet marvelously coherent set of relations between the intentions of the speaker, the rules and conventions of the language he is speaking, and the conditions under which he makes the utterance" (Searle 1978:194).

In this study, we will look into those linguistic devices that constitute, or contribute to, the construction of the illocutionary point (roughly speaker-intention) of an utterance. More specifically, we will be concerned with the illocutionary force of the utterance rather than its illocutionary point, and we will assume that force is connected with the strength of the illocution. The force of an utterance has to be reported along with its proposition.

3. ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE MODIFIERS

As is well known, the language affords a plethora of linguistic devices both for mitigating illocutionary force as well as for boosting it. We need not go into the reasons of why we need to modulate the illocutionary force of our utterances (see Brown and Levinson 1987). This is a list of such devices adapted from Holmes (1984):

Linguistic devices for modifying illocutionary force:

- Boosters:**
- a. prosodic devices
 - b. syntactic devices: interrogative constructions, tags, *Isn't she great?*, etc.
 - c. lexical devices:
 - i. speaker-oriented: *frankly, believe me*, etc.
 - ii. hearer-oriented: *as you know, naturally*, etc.
 - iii. content-oriented: *such, very, immensely, absolute*, etc.
 - d. discoursal/cohesive devices: *furthermore, but, I would emphasize, let me stress*, etc.
- Attenuators:**
- a. syntactic devices: interrogative constructions, tags, etc.
 - b. lexical devices:
 - i. speaker-oriented: *I gather, I suppose, I reckon*, etc.
 - ii. hearer-oriented: *perhaps, if-clauses*, etc.
 - iii. content-oriented: *technically, generally*, etc. (deresponsibilizing mechanisms, *allegedly, possibly, epistemics, I could/would argue, 3rd person*, etc.
 - c. discoursal/cohesive devices: *incidentally, by the way, that reminds me*, etc.

3.1. Boosters

Apart from contrastive pitch and other prosodic features, there are a number of other linguistic devices that are used by the speaker in order to maximize the force of his or her speech act. Boosters can be syntactic structures such as interrogative constructions ("Isn't it great?"), rhetorical questions, which in effect are 'forceful statements' (Leech and Svartvik 1975), repetition ("That was great! Really great!"), and some forms of tag: "That was a lark *that was*" (Quirk et al. 1972).

3.2. Attenuators

Attenuators, apart from prosodic features, are also called various lexical and syntactic devices and structures that are used by the speaker in order to soften or mitigate the illocutionary force of his/her speech act or utterance. This softening may be applied both to positive speech acts for the face of the interlocutor, "You're *rather* pretty", but mainly to Face Threatening Acts (FTA) (Brown and Levinson 1987). Their role is to make the speech acts we perform with our utterances more digestible for the interlocutor so that the social wheel does not come to a halt. Mitigating devices downtoning the force of our utterances will include structures such as tags, passive constructions, impersonalization devices, agent deletion, nominalization, as well as lexical devices. These can be speaker-

oriented (*I gather, I guess, I suppose, I reckon*, etc.), hearer-oriented (*if-clauses, if you wouldn't mind, perhaps*, etc.), as well as content-oriented elements, such as 'deresponsibilizing mechanisms' (Brown 1980), epistemic modals, expressions such as *generally speaking, technically or academically speaking or theoretically*. In this category we may include various cohesive devices, such as *but-constructions or schemata* (Kitis 1987, Lauerbach 1993), *by the way, incidentally, according to*, etc. (Holmes 1984).

4. METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire consisted of 50 sentence-'utterances' containing mostly illocutionary force modifying devices (see appendix 1). It was administered to a total of 54 subjects including both freshers (33) and senior students (21) of the Department of English, Aristotle University, who were asked to produce indirect speech statements. It was designed to check to what extent students would successfully incorporate the illocutionary force of the utterances in their reports. The majority of them will be teachers of English employed either in the public or private sector. It goes without saying that these students are in their overwhelming majority fluent in using spoken English and have a high competence in English in general. Most of them hold either the First Certificate or the Cambridge Proficiency in English and have all successfully passed a separate exam in English upon joining the Department. Senior students were concurrently taking a course in pragmatics and were familiar with the rudiments of speech act theory (SAT), but had also been exposed to SAT in a number of other courses of the curriculum. I categorized their answers into four categories:

- *Report or appropriate* (first column, table 1) includes all those reports that manage to incorporate the illocutionary force of the speaker in some form, either by means of a reporting verb such as *invite, request, ask (politely), suggest, admit, claim* and so on, or by some qualification incorporating the force of the speech act. Minor mistakes or omissions, or even inattention to backshifting, have not been considered.
- '*Canonical*' (second column, table 1) includes all those reports that conform to the textbook recipes: lexical/tense backshifting, etc. For example, (11) (appendix) "*Honestly, you need to see a doctor*" will be reported 'canonically' as *He said that I needed to see a doctor*, and (50) "*As you say, this is a serious problem*" will be reported 'canonically' as *He said that this was a serious problem*. In other words, illocutionary force modulators, such as *honestly* and *as you say*, would not be incorporated in 'canonical' reporting, and the reporting verbs used are mostly *said* and *told*.

- *Wrong* (fourth column) are classed all those reports that either distort the proposition altogether or completely mess up the illocutionary force: For example, (49) "*Perhaps, you could pass me the pepper pot*" reported as *He wanted to know if she could pass him the pepper pot*. In all cases, there has been no emphasis on minor mistakes of grammar, tense/deictic backshifting, etc. Boosters in this questionnaire included questions numbered (4), (5), (7), (8), (11), (12), (13), (16), (22), (23), (24), (25), (31), (33), (37), (40), (43), (44), (47), etc. Attenuators included numbers (1), (3), (6), (15), (18), (19), (20), (28), (45), (49), etc.

I also identified a class of performative speech acts,² such as (14), (35), (39), (42), and in this class I included a distractor, (34). A class of embedded speech acts, such as (26), (27), was identified separately (but included in indirect speech acts in the results), as was a class of indirect speech acts, such as (28) and (29).³ Of course, it may be quite reasonably objected that all indirect speech acts are indirect just because they aim at reducing the force of their illocutionary act. Then, why did I choose to identify a separate class of indirect speech acts? Well, the answer is that I wanted to isolate what Searle (1975) calls conventionalized indirect speech acts from the more dubious class of non-conventional attenuators. For example, I classed (28) as a conventionalized indirect speech act, although it could be quite nicely categorized within the class of attenuators, since the construction *would you mind -ing* is indeed a structural device that embeds requestive acts and acts as a signal for the addressee.⁴ The same objections can be raised about (36): it can be classed either together with indirect speech acts or with boosters. The decision hinges upon the judgement of conventionality. I classed it together with speaker-oriented boosters because I think its force is not really as conventionalized as is that of (28) and (29).

5. FINDINGS

The following table summarizes the results of the administered questionnaire to both freshers, who had not been exposed to a course in Pragmatics, and to senior students concurrently taking the course.

2. Performative speech acts have the act lexicalized in a performative verb, such as *promise*, *bequeath*, etc.
3. Indirect speech acts are called those speech acts which have two illocutionary forces, a direct but secondary one such as a question and an indirect but primary one such as a request (Searle 1975).
4. For a criticism of Searle's (1975) 10-step inferential strategy for computing indirectness, see Kitis (1999).

Table 1. Questionnaire results for Fresher and Senior students.

	Freshers (33)				Seniors (21)			
	Report. Appr.	'canonical'	Void/ other	wrong	Report. Appr.	'canonical'	Void/ other	wrong
<i>Performative</i>	163 59,9%	96 35,3%	13 4,8%	-	125 74,5%	41 24%	2 2%	-
<i>Indirect</i>	60 45,5%	69 52,3%	4 3%	-	84 62%	31 40%	1 1,2%	-
<i>Boosters</i>	71 21,5%	126 38,2%	47 14,2%	80 24,2%	89 42,3%	80 38%	5 2,33%	28 13,3%
<i>Attenuators</i>	34 51%	0 0%	8 12%	24 36,4%	26 62%	0 0%	0 0%	13 31%

The percentages correspond to the four classes identified: performatives, indirect speech acts, which would also include embedded ones, boosters and attenuators. In the following subsections I will give some examples of students' reporting of the above identified classes. As becomes clear from the table, the first two classes, performatives and indirects, show no instances of 'wrong' reporting. In these cases, therefore, the examples below will be from the domain of 'canonical' reporting. In the case of boosters and attenuators, the examples will be from the domain of 'wrong' reporting. That means that our students completely messed up either the illocutionary force of the utterance or, worse, the very proposition of the utterance. It is also significant to notice that, while the percentages of void/other (mostly uncompleted) are rather small for both classes of performatives and indirects in both freshers and seniors,⁵ in the case of both boosters and attenuators there is a rather high percentage of wrong reporting for both classes of students, though there is improvement for seniors (from 24,2% improved to 13,3% for boosters, and from 36,4% to 31% for attenuators, see table 1).

5.1. Performative speech acts

Example (42) "I promise to marry you" as 'canonical' would be quite wrongly reported by students as: *He said to her that he promised to marry her*. Below, I present partial results indicative of the situation.⁶ 'Canonical' reports of performatives are the following

5. However, it must be noticed that seniors demonstrate a significantly improved performance in this respect, from 4,8% (freshers) dropping to 2% (seniors) for performatives, and from 3% (freshers) to 1,2% (seniors) for indirects (see table 1).
6. F=Freshers, S=Seniors, the figures stand for the number of students who produced the specific reporting.

- (14) "I solemnly promise I won't be late again". *He said that he solemnly promised he wouldn't be late again.* (F5, S0).
- (42) "I promise to marry you". *He said he promised to marry her.* (F8, S3).
- (34) He promised to marry her.⁷ *He promised that he would marry her.* (F9, S2).
- (38) "I give and bequeath to you my flat". *He said he gave and bequeathed to me his flat. He (hereby) promised to give and bequeath to me his flat.* (F18, S14).⁸

5.2. Indirect speech acts

'Canonical' reporting of indirect speech acts may be seen below:

- (27) "I'm afraid I can't take the application; it's late".
He said he was afraid he couldn't take the application; it was late. (F20, S6).

5.3. Boosters

An example of reports classed as 'wrong' is the following:

- (4) "Frankly, you're amazingly pretty".
He said that frankly/honestly I was amazingly pretty. (F13, S3).

5.4. Attenuators

Attenuating devices in speech acts classed as 'wrongly' reported include:

- (20) "Well, John, I think, is a bit perhaps foolish".
He told John that he thought it was perhaps a bit foolish.
He said to John that he thought is perhaps a bit foolish.
He said that he thought of it to be a bit foolish.
He told John that it was a bit foolish.
He thought it was a bit perhaps foolish.
He admitted to John that it is a bit perhaps foolish.
He thinks that is a bit perhaps foolish.
He said that he thought John was a bit perhaps foolish. (F14, S13)
- (49) "Perhaps, you could pass me the pepper pot".
He suggested/said that I/you could pass him the pepper pot.
He thought that perhaps I could pass him the pepper pot.

7. Sentence (34), not being a performative utterance, was included as a distractor, as the non-performative verb in the aorist might be confused with the first-person, singular indicative performative *I promise*.

8. It is interesting to notice that 'canonical' is a misnomer and in fact what is included in this column is mostly incompetently reported.

He wondered if she could pass him the pepper pot.

He wanted to know if I could pass him the pepper pot.

He thinks I could pass him the pepper pot. (F10, S2)

6. IMPLICATIONS

It is very interesting to note that, while freshers did much better in reporting indirect speech acts, their performance dropped considerably in reporting speech acts including non-conventionally encoded attenuators, such as *well*, interposed *I think*, *perhaps*, but also boosters such as *mark my words*, *believe me*, etc. For example, in reporting (20), only 14 out of 33 subjects reported it competently and out of the 14 only 5 dared to throw out 'perhaps'. There were 5 void ones: while the number of subjects who reported it wrongly (the proposition reported was not the same as that of the direct utterance) amounted to 14. Examples of reported (20) are included in section 5.4. It seems clear that oft-occurring illocutionary force mitigating or boosting devices such as *well*, *perhaps* or interposed *I think*, completely mystify our students, and they manage, instead of boosting or downtoning the illocutionary force, to 'modify' the propositional content of the utterance for them.

Therefore, the implications derived, from our findings demonstrate quite clearly that even advanced students with a high competence in English need to be more attentive to the multiplicity of functions of utterances. There is no doubt that textbooks have considerably improved in this respect and, indeed, there are exercises directing the student towards using a multiplicity of reporting verb that would also report the illocutionary point of the speaker. However, they stop short of including such particles and constructions examined here as boosters or attenuators, which clearly affect significantly the illocutionary force, as well as embedded and non-conventionalized speech acts. While such constructions and particles are the bread and butter of everyday speech, students are not equipped to competently handle the social functions of utterances as speech acts.⁹

It is suggested here that teachers of English need a good training in the rudiments of pragmatics in order to equip themselves with a working knowledge of the various social functions of language. Indeed, the improved performance of senior students concurrently taking a course in pragmatics is significant. In relation to reported discourse, rather than reported speech, as I would call it, students clearly demonstrate a lack of sensitivity to various aspects of the illocutionary force of the speech act. In most cases the results clearly demonstrated,

9. Limited space does not allow me to discuss textbooks.

- a) a neglect in reporting the force of the utterance (reporting just the proposition, i.e. 'canonical' reporting) or,
- b) in the absence of conventional illocutionary force modifiers, a high degree of confusion between the proposition reported and the conventional force of the initial utterance.

The clear conclusion to be drawn, even from this limited data, is that students need to distinguish clearly between the various aspects of the utterance. That is, between the main gist or the meaning or the proposition, on the one hand, and its force or the intention of the speaker in performing the particular speech act, on the other. Appreciation of the role of the various conventional or less conventionalized illocutionary force modulating devices must be enhanced. This can be done within a 'pragmatic' framework of language teaching. The pragmatic slant, however, need not be taught, indeed, should not be taught in EFL environments, but it should significantly inform teachers' methodologies. How such a pragmatic framework in ELT environments can be implemented does not fall within the purview of the present paper.

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APPENDIX 1

Put the following sentences in indirect speech as when they are reported.

1. "You are a bit of a fool you know". He...	26. "You'll regret getting involved in this affair". He...
2. "I was so sorry I couldn't be there!" He...	27. "I'm afraid I can't take your application; it's late". He...
3. "You are kind of pretty in a way". He...	28. "Would you mind opening the window?" He...
4. "Frankly, you're amazingly pretty". He...	29. "Can you close the door?" He...
5. "My God, you're such a fool". He...	30. "What a waste!" He...
6. "I guess it's probably a public building". He...	31. "Frankly, you've gone too far". He...
7. "I'm quite sure it's a nursery". He...	32. "I'm sorry, but I can't really be there". He...
8. "I really want you to read this to me". He...	33. "Really, you're such a fool!". He...
9. "You are an idiot". He...	34. "He promised to marry her". He...
10. "What a pity! I can't really come". He...	35. "I predict that they will separate within a month". He...
11. "Honestly, you need to see a doctor" He...	36. "I can tell you this marriage won't last". He...
12. "I most certainly won't allow him to hurt you". He...	37. "Didn't she behave rudely?" He...
13. "Really, you need to marry a rich man". He...	38. "I give and bequeath to you my flat". He...
14. "I solemnly promise I won't be late again". He...	39. "I apologize for being so hard on you" He...
15. "I guess I'll probably call you tomorrow". He...	40. "Isn't she lovely!" He...
16. "Frankly, you are a fool". He...	41. "Besides, we must not be oblivious of her condition". He...
17. "I'll fire you if you don't do as I tell you". He...	42. "I promise to marry you". He...
18. "I'm not at all sure Sue's coming". He...	43. "The play as you can imagine was awful". He...
19. "It's pretty good I suppose". He...	44. "Undoubtedly I think that's absolutely all right". He...
20. "Well, John, I think, is a bit perhaps foolish". He...	45. "Perhaps, you need to think more about it". He...
21. "What a mess you've made!" He...	46. "Furthermore, we must take into account the new situation". He...
22. "Isn't that great!" He...	47. "Wasn't she awful?" He...
23. "Believe me the film was boring". He...	48. "I'll tell you just once more that you are making a terrible mistake". He...
24. "Quite frankly, you've lost weight!" He...	49. "Perhaps, you could pass me the pepper pot". He...
25. "Mark my words, you'll hate yourself for it". He...	50. "As you say this is a serious problem". He...