

Sociolinguistic Factors Affecting The Illocutionary Force of an Utterance (Examples from Hindi and Arabic)¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how sociolinguistic factors affect the illocutionary force of an utterance. The sociobiological factors discussed are age, profession and sex. The linguistic factor discussed is sub-cultural assumptions that underlie a particular utterance. The illocutionary force is discussed with reference to locution, illocution and perlocution. It is discovered that even in the same culture, interlocutors fail to understand the illocutionary force of an utterance. The paper tries to find out the reason for the breakdown of communication.

The Hindi and Arabic data collected from real conversation are analysed from the point of view of communication failure and reasons are found out.

The conclusions arrived at in the paper are that even in the same culture, there can be differences in sub-cultural assumptions because of differences in age, profession and sex. The failure to understand the sub-cultural assumptions lead to the break down of communication. In an exhaustive theory of speech acts, these differences should be taken into account.

1.0. Introduction

Phonetic, morphological and syntactic intralanguage variation is noticeable in every speech community. Several well-known sociolinguists have studied the correlation between linguistic variables and social stratification. Shuy, Wolfram and Riley (1967) have studied negative concord and pronominal apposition with reference to social stratification for Detroit. Trudgill (1971) has studied class and style stratification of (ing) in Norwich. Labov (1972) has studied the correlation between **ing** and sex, formality and cultural orientation. Bright and Ramanujan (1964) discuss the relationship between linguistic diversity and innovation and such factors as caste, formality and literacy in South Asia. All these studies have made significant contribution to linguistic studies in that they established a relationship between linguistic variables and social variables, especially at the level of sounds and some syntactic phenomena. No study, to my knowledge, has discussed the relationship between the illocutionary force of an utterance and social variables such as age, sex and profession. The present researcher noticed that interlocutors having the same cultural background sometimes fail to understand each other because they have different sub-cultural assumptions about a particular utterance. The difference in sub-cultural assumptions is attributable to the interlocutors' age, sex and profession. In the present paper an attempt will be made to show that the participants in a speech event sometimes fail to understand the illocutionary force of an utterance because there are differences in their age, profession and sex. These differences, entail different assumptions about a particular utterance involved and lead to failure in intra-lingual communication. This paper will break new ice in discussing the social factors affecting the illocutionary force of an utterance by providing examples from Hindi and Arabic.

Since the paper discusses the illocutionary force of an utterance, it will not be out of place to point out the difference among locution, illocution and perlocution and the importance of illocutionary force in everyday communication in the next sections.

1.1 Locution, Illocution and Perlocution

Language is used not only for description but also for interpersonal or social function i.e. for interacting with other human beings, for influencing their beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, etc. (paraphrasing, Lyons: 1978, 725). We perform various acts with the help of speech or language. These acts will include promising, requesting, thanking, naming etc. Austin (1962) presented a theory of speech acts in which he makes a distinction

between locution, illocution and perlocution, out of which his notion of illocution is important for our purpose.² Austin (1962: 97-98) defines locution as the act of saying something. When we say something, we perform an act of 'uttering certain noises' (Austin, 1962: 97-98); also perform an act of "uttering words conforming to grammar and intonation" (Austin 1962: 97-98); also perform an act of using these words with a certain more or less definite sense and reference" (Austin 1962: 97-98). According to Austin (1962: 97-100) illocution means an act in saying something. We perform "illocutionary acts such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc, i.e. utterances which have a certain (conventional) force" (Austin 1962: 108-109). We also perform perlocutionary acts by means of saying something such as convincing, persuading, determining and even say, surprising or misleading" (Austin 1962: 108-109).

Thus, we see that a locutionary act involves a grammatical utterance in which words have sense and reference. A locutionary act does not have any illocutionary force or perlocutionary effect when performed with normal intonation.³ For example consider the following:

- (1) He said, "He's a doctor."
- (2) Open the door.

Both (1) and (2) are locutions, but only (2) is illocution. (2) is the direct illocutionary act of command and if the speaker succeeds in having the door opened by the listener, it has the perlocutionary effect of getting something done by means of language.

Illocutionary force of an utterance means the communicative intention of utterance or the social function it serves. (Lyons: 1978, 731). The illocutionary force may be expressed by a direct illocutionary act or an indirect illocutionary act.⁴ The illocutionary force of request can be expressed directly as in (2) or indirectly through a question and a statement as in (3) and (4) respectively:

- (3) Can you open the door?
- (4) It's hot in here.

The above examples show that there is no one to one correspondence between the grammatical form of the utterance and its meaning in terms of illocutionary force. An utterance may have the form of a question but can express among other things a request as illustrated in (3) above. On the one hand, it questions the ability of the listener to open the door, and on the other, it makes a request to the listener to open the door. The question arises which interpretation the listener should take in a given

situation. It seems the listener first tries to take the literal meaning of the utterance and when the literal meaning of the utterance sounds implausible to him in a given situation, he tries to figure out the 'conveyed meaning' (Gordon and Lakoff: 1975) of the utterance. A further question which one derives or 'conversationally implicates' (Grice; 1975) the request meaning from a question⁵.

The answer is that the 'conversational implicature' or illocutionary force of an utterance depends upon several factors. First, it depends upon background knowledge or shared assumptions between the speaker and listener. These shared assumptions are due to the fact that the interlocutors operate in the same culture. Second, there are certain sincerity conditions (Austin: 1962; Searle; 1969; Lyons 1977, 785) that operate upon the successful performance of an illocutionary act, say a request⁶. These sincerity conditions can be speaker-based or listener-based. Consider, for example, (5) below which illustrates an illocutionary act of request in which the speaker-based sincerity condition has been asserted:

(5) I request you to open the door.

Further, an illocutionary act of request can be performed by questioning the listener based sincerity condition as in (6):

(6) Can you open the door?

According to Heringer (1972), an indirect illocutionary act of request can be performed by asserting a listener - based sincerity condition as illustrated in (7):

(7) You can open the door.

To sum up so far, one can say that a question can denote a request if it satisfies the sincerity conditions for a request. The speaker believes that the listener will do the act and the listener is able to do the act and furthermore the speaker and the listener are co-operating with each other (Grice: 1975). All these sincerity conditions are not stated with every utterance but they are part of the background assumptions which the interlocutors share when they engage themselves in conversation.

1.2 Importance of Illocutionary Force

One would be surprised to know that a lot of our conversation is indirect. The reason is that the moment we open our lips, it is threatening.

We try to lessen this threat by hedging or qualifying our utterances. One of the ways of hedging is to resort to indirect illocutionary acts. It would be worthwhile to give an example at this point from Hindi. The situation is the following. An aged father wants his grown-up son to help him. He does not have any power over the son. He therefore, requests him indirectly by asking a question in (8a)⁷:

- (8) a: kya: kar rahe ho
 Q do CONT are
 'What are you doing?'
 b: kyon kya: karu:n
 why Q do-FUT
 'Why, what do you want me to do?'

The question in (8a) asks what the son is doing. The old man is not interested in the present activities of his son but wants to know whether he is free. If he is, then by implicature, he should help him. The son understands the illocutionary force of the utterance and offers his help by uttering (8b), which means why you are asking; what I should do for you.

2.0 Failure to Understand Illocutionary Force of an Utterance

This world would, perhaps, be a happier place to live in if the speaker could always understand the illocutionary force of an utterance. It is common knowledge that there are breakdowns in communication. Before we consider a reason for such breakdowns, it would be worth while to illustrate failure in every day communication from Hindi and Arabic. Two examples will be provided from Hindi and two from Arabic. The Hindi examples were actually heard by me and recorded in a diary. The Arabic examples were gotten from two Adenese students of mine. See footnotes 10-11 for the source.

2.1 Hindi Examples

The situation for the first example in Hindi is as follows. A number of people are travelling in a bus. The bus is packed to its capacity. So much so that quite a few persons are standing in the front and the rear part of the bus. An old man is standing in the front part of the bus. Quite a few young people are sitting as well as standing in the rear part of the bus. After a while the following conversation takes place between the old person and the young people:

- (9) a. pi:che jagah milegi: kya:
 rear room meet-T Q

Will room be available in the rear of the bus?

b.	dikhta:	nahi:n	hai	kya: ?	jagah	hoti:
	see-IMPER	not	is	Q	room	be-SUBJ
	to	ham	nahi:n	baiTh	ja:te	
	then	we	not	sit	go-SUBJ	

'Can't you see? If there had been room, we ourselves would have sat down.'

The gist of the conversation is that the old man asks the young men whether there is room in the rear part of the bus. The young persons snub him by saying that he was presumably blind. If there had been room, they would not have kept standing. The old man is non-plussed by the answer. Obviously, the young fellows fail to understand the illocutionary force of his utterance. The question arises as to what the illocutionary force of the utterance is. (9a) above is an ambiguous utterance in its request for information interpretation and its request for service interpretation. The old man makes a request to the young persons whether they could vacate a seat for him. This, of course, he couldn't say directly. therefore, he resorted to an indirect request by asking a question whether there was room in the back part of the bus. The young person in the rear part of the bus took the literal meaning of the utterance which sounded implausible in the given context as is clear from their rebuke in (9b) but unfortunately they didn't try to figure out the 'conveyed meaning' of the utterance. Recall our statement in the earlier part to the effect that the listener figures out the conveyed meaning of an utterance when the literal meaning fails to make any sense to him in a given context. In this instance, what could be the reasons for such a failure? The sociological variable here between the interlocutors is that of age. The speaker is an old person; the listeners are young. The interlocutors in the present instance belong to two different generations and thereby represent two different subcultures. This difference in age is responsible for their sub-cultural assumptions that are necessary to understand the conveyed meaning of an utterance. If they both had shared the same assumptions that are necessary for the interpretation of the utterance (9a), there would not have been any breakdown in communication. The listeners in this instance didn't go beyond the literal meaning because the sub-cultural assumptions, under which the old man asked the question, were not shared by the young men. The old man has the assumption that whenever an old man makes a request directly or indirectly to a young man for a seat in a crowded bus or a train, the young man must yield and make room for him. This linguistic variable involving sub-cultural assumptions is not shared by the young

persons with whom the old man is interacting. That is why the young people failed to understand the illocutionary force of the old man's utterance.

The utterance of the old man in (9a) had the illocutionary force of request was later testified by the fact that he was heard by the researcher saying:

- (10) a:jkal ke chhore baRe: ke liye koi ijjat
 present day GEN boys elders GEN for any respect
 nahi:n rakhte
 not live-IMPER

'The boys of these days donnot have any respect for their elders.'

This could not have been said by the old man if he didn't want his utterance to be interpreted as a request.⁸

The situation for the second example from Hindi is the following. A person is sitting in the front part of the bus, very close to the driver's seat. The driver has a folded newspaper thrown in on the seat. The following conversation takes place between the person and the driver:

- (11) a. akhba:r a:j ka: hai kya:
 newspaper today GEN is Q

'Is it today's newspaper?'

- b. nahi:n
 not
 'No'

This gist of the conversation is that the person asks the driver whether that was that day's newspaper. This illocutionary force of the utterance being that the driver should give him the newspaper to read if it was that day's. The driver gives out to miss the illocutionary force of the utterance and denies that it was that day's newspaper. Later, when the researcher checks the newspaper finds that it was that day's newspaper.

Then the researcher asked the driver why he refused to give him the newspaper. This is what the driver said:

- (12) paata: nahi:n ye log apne a:pke kya:

knowledge not these people themselves what
 samjhate hain
 know-IMPERare

'(I) don't know what they think they are.'

This reply could not have come from the driver had he not interpreted the question in the following light.

This question arises why the driver refused to admit that it was that day's newspaper. Did he or did he not understand the illocutionary force of the utterance (11a)? This Hindi example is subtler than the first. Here, the listener understands the illocutionary force of the utterance, as clear from the response in (11b); but he gives the impression to the speaker that he did not understand the illocutionary force of the utterance. The question arises why the listener was hostile to the speaker and refused to cooperate with him. The answer lies in the sociolinguistic factors. The bus drivers in India are, mostly, illiterate or educated, at most, in primary schools. The stereotypical notion about the drivers in India is that they have nothing to do with refined things of life such as reading or writing etc. The driver when asked by the interlocutor whether it was that day's newspaper was conscious of this stock concept and tried to interpret the questioner's question against this background. The questioner, on the other hand, did not ask the question with the stereotypical notion in his mind, though he comes from the same cultural background as the driver's. They have different assumptions about the utterance under study. These differences in the background assumptions are because of the difference in their profession. The questioner is a teacher and the respondent is a bus driver. As a result of this, the illocutionary force of the utterance is given to miss by the driver.⁹

2.2. Arabic Examples

In Arab countries if there is a knock at the door it is customary that if the man is present at home, he opens the door. If the man is not there, then the child will open the door. If both are not present, the lady will open the door. Then it is also customary that if the man, whom the caller has come to see, is not present, the caller will not be invited in. The situation for Arabic examples is the following. A person knocks at his friend's house. The lady opens the door and the following conversation takes place:¹⁰

(13) a. ? anti wa'hi:da
 you alone

-
- b. 'Are you alone?'
 '? ajwa kama:l barra
 yes Kamal outside

'Yes. Kamal is away.'

The caller came to see his friend, Kamal. As the lady opened the door, he concluded that his friend was away. Since he had to say something to the lady, he asked her whether she was alone. The illocutionary force of his utterance being that since the lady opened the door, the speaker concluded that her husband was not at home. Since he was not at home, there was no point in his staying. But instead of asking whether Kamal was not at home he asked whether she was alone. This question was misunderstood by the lady, who later on told her husband that his friend had the cheek of asking her whether she was alone. His question suggested sexual insinuation. The speaker had no such intention.

The question arises why this misunderstanding took place. The utterance (13a) has two meanings: (i) Since you are alone, I will come in. (ii) Since you are alone i.e. your husband is not with you, I will go away.

The lady took the first meaning because she had different sub-cultural assumptions from the man's. In man's world, utterance (13a) has the above-mentioned two meanings and could be used either way. In the lady's world, utterance (13a) has only one meaning, i.e. since the husband is not at home, the caller will come in. The lady would not have felt hurt, if (13a) had been asked from her by a lady friend of hers.

The above example shows that because of sexual differences, there can be differences in sub-cultural assumptions, which help us to interpret the utterances.

The Arabs are very religious people. They believe that the happening of something depends upon the will of God. The use of the word '?in Sa :lla' 'God willing' reflects this belief of theirs. The situation for the second Arabic example is as follows. A daughter requests her mother to buy her a dress, if God is willing. The following conversation takes place:¹¹

- a. D: batiji:bi li:
 FUT-bring to me
 fusta:n ja: ma:ma
 dress hey mother
-

'Hey mother, will you bring me a dress?'

- | | | | | |
|----|----|-------------|-------------|--------|
| b. | M: | ʔinS a:lla | | |
| | | willing God | | |
| | | 'If God | is willing' | |
| c. | D: | quli: | naʔam | walla |
| | | say | yes | or |
| | | la: | ja: | ma:ma |
| | | no | hey | mother |

'Say yes or no mother:

In the above conversation the illocutionary force of the mother's reply is that she will buy her daughter a dress if God is willing. The daughter interprets this reply as non-committal as is clear from (14c). Mother had no such intention as the researcher verified from the informant's wife. Her reply was more on the positive side though some element of uncertainty was involved because of the mother's religious belief. The daughter interprets it purely as non-committal and evasive and therefore wants a clear cut positive or negative answer. The question arises why this breakdown in communication between the mother and the daughter. The present researcher was told that for the young generation the assumption associated with the word 'ʔin Sa:lla' are changing. They associate it more with non-committment. However, for the middle-aged and old people the assumptions associated with 'ʔin Sa:lla'¹² are that man is an agent of God. In doing something, there is always an element of uncertainty involved. Therefore, they want to avoid a direct positive or negative reply. As we see, because of the difference in age, young and old persons have different sub-cultural assumptions associated with the use of the word 'ʔin S a:lla' which leads to the breakdown of communication between the interlocutors. This is another example where age is responsible for different sub-cultural assumptions that are necessary for the interpretation of the conveyed meaning of an utterance. If the sub-cultural assumptions are different because of age, it may lead to the breakdown of communication between interlocutors as shown by (14).

3.0. Conclusion

The previous researches by Labov (1972), Trudgill (1971) and Shuy et al (1967) were only in the area of phonetic and syntactic variation. But the research reported in this paper has broken a new ground in the sense that it has convincingly shown that socio-linguistic factors do influence the illocutionary force of an utterance. Thus the research will pave a new path in the field of intra-language variation and speech acts. This will also be

very useful for communication scholars because it throws light on the breakdown of communication. The conclusion drawn in the paper is that breakdown in communication occurs due to failure in understanding the illocutionary force of an utterance. The misunderstanding of illocutionary force occurs due to differences in age, sex and profession of interlocutors. In an adequate theory of speech acts, such differences should be taken into account. However, more research in different languages is needed before we can conclusively establish a relationship between sociolinguistic factors and the illocutionary force of an utterance.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the paper prepared for presentation at the Tenth World Congress of the Institute of Sociological Association, held in Mexico City from August 16 through 21, 1982.
 2. Austin (1962) rejected the term meaning because it obscures the distinction between locution and illocution. He also rejected the term **use** because it obscures the difference between locution and perlocution. He maintained a three way distinction between locution, illocution and perlocution. His distinction between locution and illocution has been challenged by Searle (1969) on the ground that locution in the sense of phonetic, phatic and rhetic acts is included in illocution. Whether Austin's distinction between locution, illocution and perlocution is tenable or not does not concern us in this paper. However, his notion of illocutionary act and illocutionary force, which concern us here, was later adopted and refined by many scholars such as McCawley (1977), Ross (1977) and Searle (1977).
 3. Utterances which do not have illocutionary force are those that are generally quoted either in everyday communication or in the court of law. For example: He said, 'I'll kill him.'
Here **I'll kill him** has no illocutionary force.
 4. Different scholars have tried to account for indirect illocutionary acts in different ways. Grice (1975), though not directly, accounts for them in terms of Operative Principle, Gordon and Lakoff (1975) in terms of Conversational Postulates, Heringer (1972) in terms of abstract performative verbs and intrinsic felicity conditions, Sadock (1974) in terms, as per his claim, Meaning Meaning Theory, Searle (1977) accounts for them in terms of direction of fit, sincerity conditions and attitudes of the speaker and illocutionary point.
 5. Notice there are questions that 'conventionally implicate' (Grice: 1975) only a request interpretation:
Can you pass me the salt?

The above sentence has lost its literal meaning and is used only in its request meaning conventionally.
 6. As a matter of fact Searle (1969) discusses three types of conditions that are
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applicable to illocutionary acts. They are preparatory, sincerity and essential conditions. Preparatory conditions have got to do with the authority of the performer of the act. Sincerity conditions have got to do with the beliefs or feelings of the performer of the act whereas essential conditions have got to do with the intentions of the performer of the act. However, only sincerity conditions have become popular.

7. I have borrowed examples (8a & b) from Gupta (1980, P 85).
8. An objection may be raised to the effect that the different interpretation of (9a) could be due to individual differences and not necessarily due to age. Age, on the contrary, would produce respect, not violent reaction. But this objection is not tenable because of the saying muttered by the old man in (10).
9. Some readers may interpret (11b) by saying that the driver said "no" because he did not want to co-operate with the passenger thinking that once the newspaper was handed in it wouldn't come back. To my mind this interpretation is not tenable in the present case because of what the driver said in (12).
10. I am thankful to Kamal of Aden University for this example.
11. I am thankful to Mohsen Bin Shamlan of Aden University for this example.
12. Please see Gupta (1986) for other interpretation of 'ʔin S ailla'.

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