An Analysis of Speech Act Theory in Sesotho Proverbs

Pule Phindane
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6459-1642
Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa
pphindane@cut.ac.za

Abstract

This study is based on an investigation of the pragmatics in Sesotho proverbs. The study is informed by Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory. To be exact, it attempts to examine the illocutionary acts and forces in the chosen proverbial and idiomatic expressions. It also aimed at assessing the relevancy of finding probable perlocutionary acts of those expressions. This is a qualitative study that utilised interviews to collect data. The findings of the study show that the illocutionary acts performed by using Sesotho proverbs are directive, representative, commissive and expressive; on the other hand, illocutionary acts are used to ask, scold, threaten, criticise, make requests and advise. It also revealed that the perlocutionary acts are classified according to their psychological significance or whether they make the hearer aware of something.

Keywords: speech acts theory; proverbs; illocutionary; perlocutionary

Introduction

In a normal situation, when people communicate with each other, they usually use proverbial and idiomatic expressions in their daily speech in order to achieve a wide variety of functions; they use proverbs to advise, to criticise, to threaten, to request and to perform many other communicative functions (Alshorafat 2019). Adegoju (2009, 59) asserts that proverbs outline a rule of conduct. They state what should or should not be done and provide conditions for certain actions and behaviours. They often serve as social guidelines condemning some practices and recommending others. According to Ashipu and Amende (2013, 12), African proverbs as indirect speech acts are characterised by figures of speech because the speakers continually refer to "things of their natural habitat in various speech situations." These expressions can either be negative, positive or provisional. The negative statements usually state prohibited things. They often exemplify a moral or practical guideline or a rule of conduct.

Proverbs are regarded as utterances with communicative purposes depending on the speech context. Traugott and Pratt (1980 cited in Ashipu and Amende 2013) observed that proverbs are governed by a wide range of contextual factors, including social and physical circumstances, identities, attitudes, abilities, and beliefs or participants and relations holding between participants.

This study investigated several identified Sesotho proverbs as per the speech act theory to examine the illocutionary acts and forces of Sesotho proverbs as well as the perlocutionary effect of those proverbs. Hence, the study intends to address the following research questions:

1. What are the types of illocutionary acts of Sesotho proverbs?

2. What are the expected illocutionary forces of Sesotho proverbs?

3. What are the probable perlocutionary acts of Sesotho proverbs?

To the researcher's knowledge, not much research has been done regarding the perlocutionary acts of proverbs in Sesotho studies. Therefore, this study will close this research gap and open new areas of concern in the field. The study examines only Sesotho proverbs. Furthermore, Searle's classification of speech acts was applied to the collected data. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalised beyond the study.

Mohoanyane (1995) conducted a study on the semantic interpretation of Sesotho idiomatic expressions. Her study revealed that context is of great importance in comprehending what the interlocutor uttered. Her study also established that the utilisation of idiomatic expressions gave rise to ambiguous expressions where two pictures were reflected in the listener's mind.

Gqwede (2005) carried out a pragmatic analysis of persuasion in isiXhosa. The purpose of the study was to examine persuasive speech acts in isiXhosa. The study was concerned with the strategies people use when persuading targets, how targets resist or comply and how such influential interactions are structured. The framework of persuasion theory and the politeness principles were used.

Shezi (2005) in his study attempted to investigate speech acts of compliments in Zulu. The researcher showed that speech acts which convey compliments can be used differently in various social situations.

Moorosi (2009) explored persuasion in selected Sesotho drama texts from the literary period 1981 to 2006. The study also examined whether additional persuasive interactions were employed to motivate change in others and whether counter-persuasive actions were employed to resist the proposed change. The main focus of this study was to explore the persuasive strategies or techniques that might be used by literary characters in an attempt to arouse change in other literary characters.

Mukonde (2009) conducted a pragmatic analysis of requests in Bemba. The study investigated the nature of making requests in Bemba from a pragmatic perspective. It deliberated the various strategies utilised for making requests in Bemba. Mukonde (2009) placed emphasis on the politeness principle or notion of "face." The researcher clarified how people conjecture meanings that are not expressly stated. Mukonde also investigated four major aspects involved in the act of requesting in Bemba.

Lubasi Mwanambuyu (2011) conducted a socio-pragmatic analysis of Silozi euphemisms. Her study investigated Silozi euphemisms from a socio-pragmatic viewpoint using theories of sociolinguistics and pragmatics. The purpose of her study was to examine any existing relationship between the use of Silozi euphemisms and social factors such as gender, age, status, and career. Her study used speech act theory, politeness theory, face and conversational analysis theory.

Alshorafat (2016) investigated north-eastern Badia's proverbs using the speech act theory. The study's purpose was to establish and highlight the categories of illocutionary acts present in north-eastern Badia's proverbs and to indicate the pragmatic functions of these proverbs. The study discovered that there are three predominant types of speech acts that occur in the proverbs. These are expressives (45%), directives (30%) and representatives (25%). It also examined 10 pragmatic functions of these proverbs: advising, asserting, blaming, complaining, criticising, praising, ridiculing, scolding, scorning, and vilifying.

Abigail Chalwe (2016) in her study attempted to explore the pragmatics of persuasion in Bemba regarding bride price negotiations using the framework of the pragmatic theories. The outcomes of the study propose that there are indeed various linguistic

expressions that are used during bride price discussions that excite the emotions of the listener to the degree of changing their perception regarding what they initially believed.

Phindane (2017), in his comparative study of requests amongst second-language speakers of English, observed that Sesotho interlocutors use more grounders in the low imposition request than in the high imposition request; on the other hand, Afrikaans interlocutors' requests showed the reverse pattern. Sesotho interlocutors also used more alerts and more politeness markers than the Afrikaans interlocutors did.

Alshorafat (2019) investigated Bedouin proverbs in Jordan according to the theory of speech acts. To be more exact, he examined the illocutionary acts as well as the illocutionary forces in the chosen contextualised proverbs. The study discovered that the illocutionary acts performed by using Bedouin proverbs were representative, commissive, expressive and directive, while the illocutionary acts were used to scold, threaten, advise, criticise, ask and make requests.

The present study differs from all the above studies in that it explores specifically the perlocutionary acts of Sesotho proverbs in their real contexts, which is the vital concern of this study.

Theoretical Framework

This research study applied Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory. Speech act theory is one of the most vital theories that fall under a division of linguistics named pragmatics and has been well-defined by many academics and researchers. According to Alshorafat (2019, 236), speech act theory was initially proposed by John Austin (1962) and then expounded by John Searle (1969, 1979). Both Austin and Searle presumed that language can be used not only to say things but also to perform actions.

Austin (1962, 94–108) proposed the locutionary act, which is the actual words uttered, the illocutionary act, which is the intended meaning, and the perlocutionary act, which is the effect of the utterance on the listener. According to Alshorafat (2019, 236), Austin made a distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. Yule (1996 cited in Alshorafat 2019, 236) avers that direct speech act refers to the direct relationship between form and function, and indirect speech act means the indirect relationship between form and function. Moreover, Searle (1969) states that perlocutionary acts include acts of persuading, amusing, embarrassing, boring, intimating, or inspiring the addressee. Searle (1979, 22) also proposes five illocutionary acts that can be performed in speaking. These types of acts are assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations.

a. Assertives (representatives) are acts that commit the speaker to the truth of the proposition, such as claiming and reporting.

b. Directives are acts in which the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something, such as asking, requesting and advising.

c. Commissives refer to acts that commit the speaker to some future act, such as promising and offering.

d. Expressives are acts that reveal the speaker's attitude to a proposition, such as thanking, apologising, and congratulating.

e. Declarations are acts that bring about correspondence between the propositional content and reality, such as naming and appointing (Searle 1979).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study in which the data was collected by interviewing 10 Sesotho native speakers who reside in Motheo and Thabo Mofutsanyane districts, Free State province. The participants were assured that the research is confidential, and that their participation is voluntary and anonymous. The researcher requested and obtained permission from the Ethical Clearance Committee of Central University of Technology, Free State before conducting the research. The participants were issued informed consent forms (letters) that explained in detail the objectives of the study and the duration of the study. The participants who were selected were 40 years of age and above, and they were selected irrespective of gender. They were all literate and sufficiently familiar with Sesotho proverbs and their usage. During the interviews, the researcher requested that the participants provide a proverb and a real situation in which it can be used. The researcher recorded and took notes during the interviews.

Data Analysis and Results

The results of the data analysis were characterised according to whether the speech act is formed to have psychological significance (as in expressions 1–6) or make the listener do something (as in expressions 7–10).

Psychological Significance

1. *O aha serobe Phiri e se e jele*

Mr Lenka was busy constructing a new kraal for his sheep and goats when old man Ndaba uttered this expression to him: "You are building a kraal after the wolf has already eaten."

Meaning: "You are too late in taking precautions"

The above metaphorical expression is said to someone who is too late in doing or finishing an activity. Hence, when this proverb is utilised in different social contexts, it can perform various communicative functions such as advising, laughing off, criticising

and many others. After considering the contextual clues, the proverb user employed this locution (the proverb) in this condition to implement the illocutionary force of reproach, which is characterised as an expressive speech act as the interlocutor reveals his attitude toward a proposition. It should be noted that the possible perlocutionary act (the effect of the utterance on the hearer) could be offensive to the hearer. This is the overall meaning of the proverb above.

2. *Ha o nyatse morwa, o nyatsa moqheme*

A security officer was controlling the people at the entrance of the mall and ordered them to put on their masks when one of the customers started to misbehave by tossing around cans of cold drink and yelling at the officer. The officer said to him: "You do not despise bushman; you despise his hut."

Meaning: "It is not the ideas you despise, but the person uttering them"

The above proverb is said in Sesotho mostly to threaten the hearer. Likewise, in the context at hand, the interlocutor used this proverb to threaten the addressee about his behaviour. In terms of pragmatics, the illocutionary force that is achieved just by uttering this proverb is threatening, which falls under commissive illocutionary acts as the speaker commits himself to some future act. In this case, the utterance can be seen as a perlocutionary act of petrifying the addressee.

3. *Mohlohlwa o rapame mokotla o mahlo*

Once Mr Motebang Molebatsi completed the tender deal, he requested that his son, Motsamai, manage the car wash entity. One of his responsibilities was to record each day's events at the car wash. After two weeks, Mr Molebatsi discovered that his son did nothing to impress him. He then said to him: "An old type of a gun leaned against a sack."

Meaning: "Referring to a useless person"

Basotho utilise this proverbial expression to describe an individual who is not doing what was requested or needed. Consequently, when it is contextualised, it can bear several pragmatic functions such as scolding, blaming, criticising, and many others. According to the context at hand, the interlocutor (Mr Molebatsi) used the locution (the proverb) to perform the illocutionary force of reprimand, which falls within the speech acts of expressives. Undoubtedly, the perlocutionary act related to that illocution might be encouraging the addressee (Motsamai) to improve his work ethics.

4. *Mpho ha e phetlwe meno*

The deputy chairperson of Matlama Social Club requested members of the club to donate food parcels as gifts for the needy people of the Mangaung community. He said: "A gift must not be questioned at its core."

Meaning: "Do not underestimate the essence of gifts"

It is a custom that Basotho do not scrutinise gifts to see how good, worn out or genuine they are. This is because it is believed that gifts, irrespective of their value, are given out of love to assist needy people. Hence, it is morally good to accept gifts as they are. Therefore, the interlocutor uttered this proverb in this context to implement the illocutionary meaning of advising, which falls within the speech acts of directives as the interlocutor tries to get the listener to do something and to persuade the listener not to question the food parcels as gifts. This is the most probable perlocutionary outcome of the expression.

5. *Mohlanka wa moreneng, Morena*

Mr Motshweneng, a supervisor in a local supermarket, told the workers that they are all expected to work on Sundays to catch up with the work lost as a result of COVID-19. Most of the employees were not happy at all. That is when Mr Likotsi explained the situation to his fellow colleagues by saying: "The king's messenger is as good as his master."

Meaning: "Like king, like messenger"

The above proverb is said by Basotho to describe an individual who is an acquaintance of a powerful person; the person who is associated with the one with authority is accorded the high value of that person (the boss) even though he/she does not have those powers. The owner of the supermarket was not there to give out the instruction to work on Sundays, but he ordered Mr Motshweneng to do so on his behalf. In this case, he was given the powers of the owner. Regarding the situation above, the interlocutor indirectly wanted to criticise the hearer. Realistically speaking, the proverb user achieved the pragmatic function of criticising, which falls within the category of expressive illocutionary acts. It is also possible that enraging the addressee can be counted as a possible perlocutionary effect.

6. *Motsamai o ja noha*

Mr Mabe encouraged his friend, Dr Modise, to stop worrying about his financial status and to concentrate on the casual job he offered him as a temporary means. He said to him: "A traveller eats a snake."

Meaning: "Beggars are not choosers"

Basotho use this expression to indicate that they should accept and become accustomed to unbecoming situations. Generally, they say this proverb when they encourage people to humble themselves when things are not good on their side and to be grateful for what they have. In the above situation, the illocutionary force of the proverb serves to advise, and it falls within the commissive speech acts, but can also in some instances be seen as representative. As noted, the effect the interlocutor has upon a hearer by means of this proverb is to persuade him/her. Put differently, uttering this proverb is a means of convincing the hearer to adopt a specific attitude.

Making the Listener Aware of Something

7. *Sediba ke sa mofihla pele*

To claim these free Music Festival tickets, listeners should present this page at the Festival Central Box Office at the Civic Theatre, Charlotte Maxeke Street from 10am this morning. For more details, telephone 051 5073832: "A well to drink is for the one who arrives first."

Meaning: "First come, first served"

Basotho utilise this proverbial expression to describe the importance of coming early when there are free offers at stake. To ensure that these offers are available to everybody, there should be a measuring tool to guarantee that the opportunity is fair and open to all. That tool should be based on two criteria: being early and following the given instructions. Contextually, the interlocutor (advertiser) used the locution (the proverb) to perform the illocutionary force of offering advice and instruction, which places it within the category of expressive speech acts. In terms of pragmatics, the illocutionary force is advising, which falls under the illocutionary act of directives.

8. *Phunya seso se tswe boladu*

Thabang Mosifana could not voice that he is having a marital problem at home. He invited both his parents and his in-laws. He kept on crying until his father said: "Pierce the sore to release pus."

Meaning: "Get straight to the point"

Basotho will often use the above-mentioned expression when requesting the speaker to stop beating around the bush and get straight to the point. Therefore, when this expression is uttered, it can accommodate numerous pragmatic meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Pragmatically, the interlocutor cited this proverb to attain the illocutionary force of requesting, which belongs to the speech acts of directives. In this scenario, the perlocutionary effect might cause the listener to get straight to the point and stop beating about the bush. This is the overall meaning of the expression.

9.   *Ntshabe le nna ke o tshabe*

Madiketso and her neighbour Puseletso were arguing about Puseletso's dog, which is always loitering around anybody's yard. At the end, Madiketso said to her: "Fear me so that I in turn fear you."

Meaning: "Let's have mutual respect"

The above proverb suggests that respect should be mutual, so that there will be peace between neighbours. As time went by, people started quoting this linguistic expression to accomplish some pragmatic functions. Concerning the above context, the interlocutor sought to give a piece of advice to her neighbour: to respect her so that she can also in turn respect her neighbour. Pragmatically, the illocutionary force is advising, which makes this illocutionary act a directive, although the perlocutionary effect that the interlocutor may produce in the hearer is to get her to respect her.

10.   *Le ore le sa o tjhabetse hobane hosane e tla be e le ba bang*

Things were working quite well for Motlatsi in his business. His friend Masiu then said to him: "Face the sun while you still can because tomorrow it might be someone else."

Meaning: "Take advantage of the situation now"

The above idiomatic expression indicates that while the conditions are still suitable, you should take advantage because they might change for the worse the next day. This is your time to make use of it. Over the years, people began reciting this idiomatic expression to accomplish numerous pragmatic functions. Regarding the above context, the interlocutor wanted to advise his friend to take advantage of the current situation as tomorrow might present a different scenario. Pragmatically, the illocutionary force is to advise, which places this proverb in the illocutionary acts category of directives. Though the perlocutionary act that the interlocutor may produce in the hearer is to get him or her to make use of the current situation.

Discussion

Regarding the objectives of this study, there are three parts of discussion concerning speech acts provided by Sesotho native speakers (i.e., the type of illocutionary acts of Sesotho proverbs, the expected illocutionary forces of Sesotho proverbs, and the probable perlocutionary acts of Sesotho proverbs). Searle (1979) mentions five types of illocutionary speech acts: requests, permissions, prohibitions, commands and questions. From the above-mentioned utterances provided by Sesotho linguists, the dominant illocutionary acts performed by using Sesotho idiomatic expressions were expressive, directive and commisive speech acts and the least used were assertive speech acts. This result is supported by Alshorafat's study (2019), which found that illocutionary acts were used to scold, threaten, advise, criticise, request and ask. This point is taken further

by Chalwe (2016), who observed in her study that various linguistic expressions used during bride price discussions excite the emotions of the listener to the degree of changing their perception of what they initially believed in.

Regarding pragmatics, the illocutionary forces that are exercised in all the uttered expressions range from reproaching, threatening, reprimanding, and encouraging to persuading, which fall within the speech acts of expressives. This outcome is supported by Gqwede (2005) and Moorosi (2009) whose studies carried out pragmatic analyses of persuasion in Isixhosa and persuasion in selected Sesotho drama texts respectively. They both agreed that speech acts of compliments can be used differently in various situations.

In some instances, the interlocutors performed the illocutionary force of advising and requesting, which falls under the illocutionary acts of directives. This outcome is supported by Alshorafat (2019) who investigated contextualised illocutionary acts and illocutionary forces.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate proverbs in Sesotho as speech acts. It attempted to examine the illocutionary acts and illocutionary forces of the chosen expressions. Importantly, it intended to assess the relevancy of finding probable perlocutionary acts of those expressions. According to the analysis of 10 contextualised proverbs, numerous conclusions can be drawn.

a. The illocutionary acts used are directives, expressives, commissives and representatives.

b. The illocutionary acts achieved are advising, criticising, asking, threatening and requesting.

c. The effects the proverbs produced in the hearer have psychological significance (reprimanding, angering, motivating, and convincing) or make the listener aware of something.

This study also attests that the speech act theory is appropriate for an analysis of conversation that occurs in social contexts in Sesotho. The study demonstrated that proverbial and idiomatic expressions are comprehensible only to those individuals who share the same sociocultural background.

References

Adegoju, A. 2009. "Rhetoric of Conflict-Related Yoruba Proverbs: Guide to Constructive Conflict Resolution in Africa." *African Study Monographs* 30 (2): 55–69.

Alshorafat, O. 2016. "Speech Acts of North-Eastern Badia's Proverbs." MA diss., Al-alBayt University.

Alshorafat, O. 2019. "A Speech Act Analysis of Bedouin Proverbs in Jordan." *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation (IJLLT)* 2 (6): 235–41.

Ashipu, K. B. C., and C. Amende. 2013. "Proverbs as Circumstantial Speech Acts." *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 3 (7): 10–15.

Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Chalwe, A. N. 2016. "The Pragmatics of Persuasion in Bemba with Special References to Bride Negotiations." MA diss., University of Zambia. http://dspace.unza.zm/handle/123456789/4743.

Gqwede, N. 2005. "A Pragmatic Analysis of Persuasion in IsiXhosa." MA diss., Stellenbosch University. https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/3069.

Mohoanyane, M. 1995. "The Semantic Interpretation of Sesotho Idiomatic Expressions." MA diss., National University of Lesotho.

Moorosi, M. 2009. "Persuasion in Selected Sesotho Drama Texts." PhD diss., Stellenbosch University. http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/1456.

Mukonde, E. 2009. "A Pragmatic Analysis of Requests in Bemba." MA diss., University of Zambia. http://dspace.unza.zm/handle/123456789/1129.

Mwanambuyu, C. L. 2011. "A Sociopragmatic Analysis of Silozi Euphemisms." MA diss., University of Zambia. http://dspace.unza.zm/handle/123456789/782.

Phindane, P. 2017. "A Comparative Study of Requests amongst Second Language Speakers of English." *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* 8 (1): 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/09766634.2017.1311712.

Searle, J. R. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173438.

Searle, J. R. 1979. *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511609213.

Shezi, V. A. 2005. "A Pragmatic Analysis of Compliments in Zulu Educational Contexts." MA diss., Stellenbosch University. http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/3329.

Yule, G. 1996. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.