

**The Role of Modal Verbs in
Spoken and Written Conversations**

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Abstract

This study deals with the role of the modal verbs in some situational conversational conditions. Due to its successful usage -especially in everyday conversations- it is widely used as a polite conversational strategy. The researcher tackles the conditions which have to be fulfilled to create a successful conversation according to some theories like:

- 1) **Theory of Felicity Conditions** by John Searle
- 2) **Cooperative Principle** by Paul Herbert Grice
- 3) **Inference Theory** by Gordon and Lakoff

The aims of the research have been outlined to highlight the fact that modal verbs are commonly used to reject proposals, to make requests or orders despite the literal meaning does not explicate any sort of rejection.

The results of this study show that successful conversation depends on the effective usage of modal verbs in an appropriate context of situation.

Keywords: *Conversation , Modal Verbs , Spoken and Written Conversation*

دور الأفعال المساعدة في المحادثات المنطوقة والمكتوبة

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة دور الأفعال المساعدة في بعض ظروف المحادثة الظرفية. نظراً لاستخدامها الناجح - خاصة في المحادثات اليومية - فهي تستخدم على نطاق واسع كاستراتيجية محادثة مهذبة. يتطرق الباحث إلى الشروط الواجب توافرها لإجراء محادثة ناجحة وفق بعض النظريات مثل:

(1) نظرية شروط السعادة لجون سيرل

(2) مبدأ التعاون لبول هربرت جريس

(3) نظرية الاستدلال لجوردون ولاكوف

تم تحديد أهداف البحث لتسليط الضوء على حقيقة أن الأفعال المساعدة تستخدم بشكل شائع لرفض المقترحات ، لتقديم الطلبات أو الأوامر على الرغم من أن المعنى الحرفي لا يفسر أي نوع من الرفض.

تظهر نتائج هذه الدراسة أن المحادثة الناجحة تعتمد على الاستخدام الفعال للأفعال المساعدة في سياق مناسب للموقف.

1.Introduction

We communicate the language to accomplish some functions such as arguing, persuading and promising. We carry out these functions with a social context. The term "communicative competence" was coined by (Hymes 1967, Paulston 1974) to highlight the difference between knowledge "about" language forms and knowledge that enables a person to communicate functionally.

Canale and Swain (1980: 30) have described strategic competence as "the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may need an action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence."

Swain (1984:189) has amended the earlier notion of strategic competence to include "communication strategies that may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for breakdowns." Similarly, Yule and Tarone (1990: 181) refer to strategic competence as "an ability to select an effective means of performing a communicative act that enables the listener/reader to identify the intended referent." The meaning of a conditional sentence in natural language normally involves the notion of what (WOULD BE), the case if some possibility were to become 'hypotheticality'. the present research paper is concerned with the linguistic form and pragmatic, function of indirect speech acts used by the interlocuters.

- *If we earn some money, we can go on holiday next summer.*
- *I 'll have some free time tomorrow. I can help her then.*
- *If you like the car , you will buy it*
- *I 'll kill him if he doesn't bring the money.*
- *If I were to answer the question, I would get into trouble.*
- *If I had had the time, I would have talked with him.*
- *If it is snowing , I maybe have to take the bus.*
- *We will not pleased if You lost our customer*
- *I bet you sixpence I 'll win the race .*
- *Does John , who could never learn the calculus.*

Bruner(1975) & Bates (1976) have suggested that the acquisition of speech act may be a prerequisite for the acquisition of language in general, Levin (1976) & Ohmann (1971) have seen potential applications to the status of ethical statement and linguists Austin (1962) & Searle (1969) have seen the notions of speech theory as explicating problems in

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syntax , speech act theory is directed to the excellent bibliographical listening in Gazdar , Klein and Pullum .

In Austin 's basic thesis; illocutionary force is more loosely speech act specification like promising , ordering , questioning , requesting and the like, it is not reducible to matters of truth and falsity ,illocutionary force constitutes an aspect of meaning that cannot be captured in a truth conditional semantics , illocutionary forces are to be described in terms of felicity conditions FCs interpreted as conditions for appropriate usage. Searle (1976) has claimed that the reduction of illocutionary aspects of meaning to usage conditions can be promoted to a general theory of semantics a claim that Austin seems to have been careful to avoid because the reduction of speech act theory is a matters of syntax not truth- conditional semantics. The varieties of indirect requests provide a good illustration. They differ mainly in their politeness e.g:

1.Open the window.

2. I would like you to open the window.

3.Can you open the window?

4.Would you mind opening the window?

5. May I ask you whether or not you would mind opening the window?

2. The theoretical features of Indirect speech acts

2.1. Speech acts :

Austin (1962:121) has proved that the utterances of some sentences must be treated as the performance of an act. Austin (in Levinson,1997:236) involves three basic senses in which in saying something, one is doing something and three kinds of acts. They are:

- 1) **Locutionary Act**; it is saying something with a certain meaning in traditional sense.
- 2) **Illocutionary Act**; is using a sentence to perform a function and making of statement, an offer, a promise, etc.
- 3) **Perlocutionary Act**; is the results or effects that are produced by means of saying something.

Leech (1983:61) focuses on the study of the meaning of utterances and distinguishes two intents or meanings in each utterance or communicative act of verbal communication. One is the informative intent or the

sentence meaning and the other is the communicative intent or speaker meaning.

Speech acts theory focuses on communication acts which are performed through speeches.

2.2 The Classification of Speech Acts

The classifications of speech acts based on the theory of Searle (Yule, 1996:53) Yule (ibid) defines that there are five types of general functions performed by speech acts, they are representatives such as statement of fact, *assertions, declarations, commissives* , future action such as *promise* and *refusal*, directives such as *commands, orders, requests, suggestions*, etc., and expressive such as *polite requests*.

2.3 Felicity Conditions of the Speech Acts

Lewis (1972:655) has stated the particular felicity conditions on different speech acts that are simply part of the meaning of the implicit or explicit performative verbs in terms of entailment or semantic presupposition , the basic result is that illocutionary force is garden variety semantics. The performative sentences implicit and explicit could be simply handled within a truth conditional framework , some of the basic intuition that underlay Austin 's work would still not have been accounted for the notion of illocutionary force which was specially directed to the action like properties of utterance. Sadock (1975: 22) has indicated indirect speech act as the syntactic mechanisms that are required to handle those phenomena powerful enough to entirely replicate the effects without actually having performative clauses, so the literal meaning is the major problem for Searle 's approach , the most usage are indirect , for example, there is long list of ways of requesting an addressee indirectly to shut the door , e.g:

- *Can you close the door.*
- *Would you close the door*
- *Won't you close the door.*
- *Would you mind closing the door.*
- *You ought to close the door.*
- *You may close the door.*
- *Hadn't you better close the door.*
- *I 'd like to ask you to please close the door*
- *May I remind you to please*

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A truth conditional cannot be applied pragmatically in a daily conversation, consequently, non-truth conditional sentence is applied. By using felicity condition, speakers can mean what they say and say what they mean. Searle (ibid) has only postulated the felicity condition for well-formed promises , for examples:

- ***I promise that I will pay your tuition next quarter .***
- ***I will pay your tuition next quarter***

Illocutionary clause contains the following conditions :

1. Sincerity condition
2. Essential condition
3. Futurity condition
4. Ability condition
5. Non-expectancy condition
6. Benefit condition

1. Sincerity rule :Speaker must be sincere, e.g:

- *I will help you with your physics homework.*

2. Essential rule :speaker has conveyed to the hearer that the speaker has made a commitment, e.g:

- *(I promise) I will help you with your physics homework.*

3. Futurity rule:The act that is to be performed must take place in the future, e.g:

- *I promise you that George will repair your car.*

4. Ability rule The speaker must have the necessary ability (mentally, physically, and/or financially) to perform the act promised, e.g:

- *I will help you with your calculus homework.*

5. Non-expectancy rule :The speaker would not be obligated to perform the act in the ordinary course of events, e.g:

- *(I promise) I will help you with your calculus homework.*

6. Benefit rule :the promised act will be of benefit to the promise, e.g:

- *I will take you to Disney Land tomorrow.*

Austin (cited in Searle, 1979:11) states that commissive is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action. Commissives are the kind of speech acts in which the speaker expresses his intention concerning some future actions. Sometimes, someone wants to do something in the future times by saying something such as promise. i.e. Promise is an utterance used to remind the speaker about something to be done in the future.

2.4 Inference theory was proposed by Gordon and Lakoff (1975:61) and indirect speech act was provided whenever the literal force of an utterance was blocked by the context, there must be pragmatically sensitive linguistic rules that allow for example, please –insertion to be governed by indirect force. e.g:

- *Can you lift that suitcase, please?*
- *He should get some rest.*
- *She can play the piano.*
- *I couldn't swim very fast.*
- *He can drive a tractor.*
- *She must go now.*
- *You ought to be able to read the road sign from here.*
- *We used to cross that river by ferry.*
- *The repair would take one hour.*
- *Will you help take out the garbage.*
- *People could have been injured by falling branches.*
- *We could see the village in the distance.*
- *It was foggy , so the plane couldn't take off.*
- *Should I lend him the money.*

The first one is normally polite and authoritarian whereas the last one is usually rude. Lakoff (1973) has argued that this variation comes about from two rules of politeness: avoid imposition, and give options. The first utterance is the most imposing and therefore, the least polite. Because it does not give options, it assumes the speaker has considerable authority over the listener. The last utterance gives the listener the option of whether or not to please the speaker. However, that is not very much of an option and so it also imposes, though not as much as the first utterance

Perhaps the most striking thing about the treatment of mixed messages in Brown and Levinson (1987) is that it is so minimal. There is, of course, discussion of multiple messages underpinning the indirectness of negative politeness (e.g. conventionally indirect requests such as “Could you help?”) and off-record strategies (e.g. “I’m thirsty” as an off-record politeness hint that you would like somebody to make you a drink). However, this is generally not a matter of *interpersonal* mixing. Grice involves opposites and the breaking of the maxim of quality, mixed messages fare much better in Leech (1983: 82) , but allow the hearer to

arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of an implicature. So far, this seems similar to Brown and Levinson's notion of off-record politeness. However, Leech (1983:142) later expands scoring off others by politeness that is obviously insincere, as a substitute for impoliteness.

This is the opposite of the politeness supposedly promoted through Brown and Levinson's off-record politeness. A brief illustration from Leech is 'DØ help yourself (won't you?)', said to someone who is greedily helping themselves already. The polite assumption that the addressee is holding back from the feast until invited to tuck in is obviously "insincere", and so an opposite impolite assumption is implicated. Thus, mock politeness is used to implicate impoliteness. Generally, although the idea of a flout of the Maxim of Quality is echoed here, what is of particular note in Leech's proposals is the centrality of interpersonal issues. "what s says is impolite to h and is clearly untrue.

The complexity of these communicative activities has raised a dyadic debate between those – such as Searle's (1969, 1975) - who hold a rather monolithic interpretation of speech acts by only dealing with speech acts from the speaker's utterance (e.g. the illocutionary force) alone, while ignoring the reaction on the hearer's part (e.g., the perlocutionary force), and those – such as Weigand (2010) – who counteracts Searles' view by opting for a more dialogic understanding which focuses on how the speaker's and hearer's parts equally intervene in the process of producing and understanding an utterance.

Concretely, this later approach to speech acts is somewhat thought provoking in that, for example, expressive speech acts (e.g., wishes) have to be understood as having two indispensable and inseparable sides among which one cannot exist without the other; as such, both sides need to be equally considered. In other words, if A utters: *I wish you a speedy recovery*, such an utterance could be seen

as an incomplete act as long as B does not react to this illocutionary act, with one potential response being: *Thank you*

a consequence, a promise cannot be made in the past time. "I would come to your house' is not a promise since it is produced in the past time; therefore, the right utterance for a promise is "I will come to your house'. The use of verb 'would' instead of 'will' does not meet the condition of a promise because the propositional content in which a speaker predicates a

future act is not fulfilled. Considering some conditions of an utterance will lead speaker and hearer to produce felicitous utterances.

Felicity condition becomes essential in conversation because whether or not speakers mean what they say and say what they mean can be pragmatically inferred through it.

Thomas (1995) explains that in line with truth conditional semantics, an utterance will be meaningful if it fits with the world.

Austin proposes felicity condition. He elaborates that an utterance cannot be said as true or false, it can only be measured by using some conditions, if an utterance meets those conditions, it must be felicitous.

A promise cannot be made for the sake of past time due to the fact that a promise can only be made for the future time.

Commissives are speech acts which commit the speaker to some future course of action. They include promises and their converse,

- Speaker : (I will deliver the goods at four o'clock tomorrow's afternoon)
- Hearer: (OK, anytime will be convenience)

it describes speaker's future course of action. Speaker ties himself to hearer of certain kind of act in the future as it is mentioned in the utterances.

Declarations are unique forms of speech act, in that their successful performance depends upon the status of the speaker, and the precise circumstances surrounding the event. They are institutionalized in a society. Declarations include sacking a worker, performing a marriage, and sentencing a criminal. In daily conversation, declaration can still be found as it is described in the following conversation. (Oh Ok, it is paid then).

Speech acts carry either referential or affective meaning and to be able to measure whether the speech act is felicitous or infelicitous, felicity condition is worth considering. Felicity condition includes preparatory condition,

2.5 Conversational implicatures theory : is attributed to Paul Herbert Grice, who observed that in conversations *what is meant* often goes beyond *what is said* and that this additional meaning is inferred and predictable. As an illustration of what Grice was talking about, consider the sentence in (1) and (2) e.g:

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(1) John ate some of the cookies

(2) I figured he would. How many are left?

It is other kind of inference called a *conversational implicature* (or simply an *implicature*). This inference is also an implicational relation but it is distinct from entailments and presuppositions and important in our understanding of meaning. Conversational implicatures are pragmatic inferences: unlike entailments and presuppositions, they are not tied to the particular words and phrases in an utterance but arise instead from contextual factors and the understanding that conventions are observed in conversation.

The sentence in (1) expresses the proposition that John ate a portion of the cookies and is true just in case it corresponds to the outside world. Intuitively, all of the cookies still constitutes a portion of the cookies. So the sentence in (1) is true even if in the outside world John ate all of the cookies. However, something interesting happens when this sentence is uttered in a conversation like (2).

Hedges or Flouting is a way for the speaker to tactfully opt out of a maxim using a special word or phrase called a *hedge*. These hedges are used to signal the addressee not to read anything into the speaker's disregard of one of the maxims. Using a hedge, the speaker effectively says he is not implicating *q*. Hedge — a phrase that eliminates or at least mitigates one of the maxims. e.g:

a. Quantity: *As far as I know; I'm not sure if this is true, but...; I may be wrong, but... .*

b. Quality *As you probably already know; I can't say any more; I probably don't need to say this, but... .*

2.6 Indirect speech act in conversation

In speech act theory Stelmann (1982:279) puts indirect speech act as Linguistic communication is more than merely saying something; it is saying something in a certain context, with certain intentions, and with the listener's recognition of what is said and of these intentions. Clark and Carlson (1982:35) point out

There are direct speech acts as well as indirect ones. Misapplication of the indirectness principle can lead to communication disruption or even social corruption by people who over-anticipate the unexpressed needs of their superiors e.g :

- *I 'd like to check out these books if I may*
- *May I see your library card.*
- *these will be due the 31st of the month.*
- *Could you please speak slowly.*
- *Can I show my appreciation*
- *Could you please turn down the radio a little.*
- *May I please have a glass of water.*
- *May I ask you to mail this message.*
- *I must call my office.*
- *Would you please give me your attention .*
- *Can I have a raincheck on that.*
- *I will be with you in half of minutes.*
- *would you mind working a little faster?*
- *Can I go out tonight?*
- *Could you please wait a minutes.*
- *Could you please not interrupt.*
- *Would you mind writing this letter for me.*
- *I will do that for you.*
- *I shall call him for you.*
- *I will take care of it for you.*
- *Could you drop this off at Tom's office.*
- *I 'll finish it later.*
- *I 'll call you tomorrow.*
- *I 'd like to compliment you on your report.*
- *Flattery will get you nowhere.*
- *I want to get a driver license.*
- *I must compliment you on your good taste.*
- *I want to acknowledge Linda's contributions to this bazaar's success.*
- *I would like to announce that our recruitment drive is a success*
- *I 'd like to make an announcement.*
- *You shouldn't have hit your little brother.*
- *I want to illustrate this point with an example.*
- *I can give you an example .*
- *I should tell dad the truth.*
- *I hope to sail around the world .*
- *I wish to see Mr.Smith*

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- *I 'd like to have this camera repaired .*
- *I want to go to Boston .*
- *He may visit here soon.*
- *I might finish this today.*
- *I ought to find out her name .*
- *I have to wash the dishes.*
- *We need to talk about this.*
- *I should tell you his name.*
- *You 'd better do it today.*
- *Everyone must leave now.*
- *I 'll write it down.*
- *this letter A has to be the correct answer.*
- *you must not talk loudly in the library.*
- *I may sit in this section of the train.*
- *We 'll find another place.*
- *She couldn't climb onto the roof*
- *I couldn't run a marathon .*
- *You could win a million pounds*
- *The story could be true.*
- *She must be out.*
- *Luggage must not be left unattended .*
- *You mustn't drop those glasses.*
- *I mustn't forget my keys .*
- *You should see a doctor*
- *I ought to write him a letter*
- *You shouldn't break their promises.*

2.7 Indirect speech act in written conversation

This theory is constituted by the phenomenon known as indirect speech act with the view that illocutionary force is built into sentence form.

- *We would like to inform you that the company has choose you to handle the job.*
- *We would be glad if you occupy the job you have applied for in request number.*
- *We would like to inform you that this is the second and last caution.*
- *I hope that you would like to inform me the monthly extras.*

- *I hope that you would be generous to accept my request for a loan.*
- *I hope to cancel paying the chick numbered and dated.*
- *I hope that you would send me a detailed letter.*
- *I hope nothing but if you would add the attached chick.*
- *I would like to inform your excellency .*
- *You could put in my account this attached chick.*
- *I hope that you could transfer a sum of money .*
- *I hope that you would approve my request .*
- *I am asking you if you would give me a visa.*
- *I should celebrated today with your birthday.*
- *They should have made a feast for your mother.*
- *I could imagine that I will ask god to make all people black.*
- *I could not dare saying I accuse you on time.*
- *God may never prevent me your satisfaction .*
- *If would get all life with its power or money.*
- *I would be pleased if you would accept my invitation .*
- *I can't hide on you that I wish to write letter.*
- *We could hope that you would enrich our poetic feeling*
- *John didn't wish to miss the first lecture.*
- *He hope to arrive in time.*
- *He might have a haircut.*
- *He might not make an accident.*
- *She wished to avoid arriving late.*
- *I would like to have lunch with you.*
- *I wish I could but I have an examination .*
- *I shall switch on the light for you.*
- *We shall postpone the meeting.*
- *You could study hard.*
- *I would rather play football.*
- *It may rain .*
- *He might be ill.*
- *He may be in the office .*
- *It may have taken off late.*
- *Can you show me the way to the National theatre.*
- *Can you play chess.*
- *The speed limit should be 50 kph on motorways.*

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- *You must do your homework.*
- *He should go to the dentist.*
- *She ought to go on a diet.*
- *You must arrive at work early.*
- *You don't have to do the work alone.*
- *He should have kept his promise .*
- *She should have had her breakfast.*
- *You shouldn't go too close to the loose wire.*
- *You had better not drive very fast.*
- *You may have an accident.*
- *Could you open the door for me ?*
- *Would you mind lending me your dictionary for two days.*
- *May I use your phone.*
- *May I take tomorrow off?*
- *He must be ill.*

3. Conclusions

This study comes up with following results :

- 1) Indirect speech act is an indirect relationship between a structure and a function , the declarative used to make a request and paraphrase sentence in a statement. The function it serves is critical to communication. Speakers expect listeners to recognise the functions of the sentences they speak and to act accordingly. Whenever they ask a question, for example, they expect their listeners to realize that it is a request for some information. arguing, persuading, ordering, questioning, requesting, promising , and hedges.
- 2) Different structures can be used to accomplish the same basic function. There is a typical pattern in English whereby asking a question about the hearer's assumed ability (**Can you? Could you?**) or future likelihood with regard to doing something (**Will you ? would you ?**) .
- 3) Speech acts fulfills the preparatory condition of creating a new condition. Commissives are, for instance, speech acts which commit the speaker to some future course of action.
- 4) Modal verbs have different functions, **could** is more polite than **can** and **may** is rather formal. We can use (**can't, may not**) but

not (**couldn't**) only when it is impossible. While **could** can be used in probability, **must** and **must not** can be used in something true. We use (**should , ought to**) or (**shouldn't , oughtn't to**) to say what is the best thing or the right thing to do and in question to ask for advice.

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