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Stephen C. Levinson and Asifa Majid

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Contact
Email us via http://fieldmanuals.mpi.nl/contact/
Language and Cognition Department
Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics
Postbox310, 6500AH, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

METALANGUAGE FOR SPEECH ACTS
N. J. Enfield & Stephen C. Levinson

Project	Multimodal Interaction and Categories Project
Task	Collection of vocabulary in the domain of 'speech acts' and related social actions, analysis of their semantics and grammar.
Goal	To establish a basis for cross-linguistic comparison of native metalanguages for social action.

People of all cultures have some degree of concern with categorizing types of communicative social action. All languages will have words with meanings like *speak, say, talk, complain, curse, promise, accuse, nod, wink*, *point* and *chant*. But the exact distinctions they make will differ in both quantity and quality. How is communicative social action categorised across languages and cultures?

Such vocabulary constitutes a native metalanguage for communication. In societies with a literary tradition, such a metalanguage will be highly developed. Even in cultures without written language, metalanguages can be quite highly developed, for example in the area of genres or affective qualities (see e.g. Stross 1974, on Tzeltal, or Senft, in press, on Kilivila).

Many social actions have common names: *complaint*, *request*, *offer*, *confirmation. promise*. Sometimes when we are analyzing social action we are in fact analyzing the semantics of words like these. But if we are looking for universals in social action formulation, we cannot presuppose that words from one language – like *complaint* or *offer* – will have exact equivalents in another language. As part of a general goal to tease apart what is universal and what is culture-specific in the design of social action, it is useful to have a comparative grip on the native terminology for social actions. The aim of this task is to inventory the native terminology for communicative or social actions, done by speaking, or by complementary or equivalent moves in gesture – speech acts in effect. Speech acts are by definition actions that are done just by speaking the words (there may be non-verbal alternatives too, like offering someone a cigarette by passing him one).

In investigating the domain of native terminology for acts of speaking, try to think as broadly as you can. A somewhat formally constrained set is 'explicit performatives' (Austin 1962), like *promise*, *bet*, *order*, which by virtue of their very usage (under the proper conditions) actually constitute the act they name. (E.g. *I hereby christen this ship The Queen Mary*, or *I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow*.) A broader category encompasses any kind of descriptive terminology for acts of speaking. Wierzbicka (1987) describes around 300 verbs in English: *command*, *contradict*, *swear*, *admit*, *greet*, *testify*, *lecture*, *retort*, among a few hundred more. Stross (1974) lists over 400 Tzeltal expressions relating to speech and speech events. This broader category of descriptive terms for speech acts constitutes a kind of native metalinguistics (or at least metapragmatics). Note that this includes everyday terms like *say*, *speak*, *tell*, and *ask*. Different languages carve up this space differently. For instance, while English uses *ask*

both for questions (*He asked me the time*) and requests *(He asked me to pass the salt)*, Lao distinguishes these lexically (*thaam3* 'ask (someone a question)' versus *khòò3* 'ask (someone **for** something)').

For those carrying out the 'Social action formulation 10-minutes task', you will anyway be discussing different social actions with your language consultants, in their own language. Note down these native terms, and spend time with consultants figuring out what these mean. Assume they are different in meaning to their apparent equivalents in English, and try to figure out what the differences are. For those who are not working with conversational data, you will anyway have textual materials, perhaps with quoted conversation, and you should be able to use the same procedure there.

Methods

1. Lexicon based

Search your lexicon of the language for speech-act related terms in the English glosses. Interview consultants about these terms and their exact application. For example, if you have a gloss 'to ask', make sure you know which sense of English *ask* is relevant – to ask a question, vs. to ask for a favour. You are bound to have several terms of the 'say', 'tell', 'narrate' family – make sure you understand the differences, their argument structure ('say' might be transitive, 'speak' intransitive, etc.), and have some good examples of use. Try to generate more such terms, and build as exhaustive a list as you can.

Notions, verbal or nominal, to check include:

- asking questions, asking permission, asking for favours
- requesting, demanding, begging
- promising, threatening to do something, swearing to do something, offering, warning
- blessing, cursing
- greeting, parting
- thanking, apologizing
- betting
- objecting
- asserting, telling, relaying, reporting
- gossiping, lying, joking, complaining, quarrelling
- chanting, incantations, divining
- proverbs, sayings, expressions
- etc.!

Add to this list according to local interests – perhaps there are special words (e.g. verbs) for uttering spells, using proverbs, damning trespassers, etc.

Also investigate terms for gestures and facial expressions:

- waving and other greeting forms (head toss, bow)
- beckoning
- smiling, frowning
- pointing
- nodding
- etc.!

Check whether these words can be used to (a) describe an action in e.g. a text you have collected, (b) whether they can be used in a 1st person, present indicative frame to *do* the action in question, just by virtue of what is said (cf. English *I hereby christen this ship Queen Mary* versus **I hereby say hello*).

2. Theory based

Searle suggests that there are just 5 major classes of actions that can be done just by speaking:

1. *Representatives* which commit the speaker to the truth of what is said (asserting, swearing, etc.)
2. *Directives* in which the speaker tries to get the addressee to do something (requesting, questioning, etc.)
3. *Commissives*, in which the speaker commits to a future course of action (promises, threats, offers)
4. *Expressives* which express a psychological state, like thanking, apologizing, congratulating
5. *Declarations* which effect changes in the social world thanks to an institution that gives them force, like declaring guilty, christening, cursing.

These categories may serve to guide your exploration of finer lexical distinctions discussed in section 1.

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