Pragmatics of Sent and Unsent Messages Via Personal Messages and Group Chats

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Abstract

New features of communication technology are gaining much attention in computer-mediated communication in relation to speech acts and conversational implicatures which aim to transcend the conventional and nonconventional meaning of words, phrases, or sentences when an interlocutor conveys messages in varied contexts. By examining 30 exchanges and conducting survey interviews, this study concerns the illocutionary acts of sent and unsent messages both in personal messages and group chats via an online messaging application. The findings show that there are 7 identified meanings of unsent messages; moreover, although there are similarities, the meaning varies depending on the context. The study also shows that students use representatives more frequently than the other illocutionary acts in sending messages both in personal and group chats. It is also noteworthy to point out that students rarely use greeting speech acts in their messages.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Linguistics, Computer-mediated Communication, Conversational Implicatures, Illocutionary Acts, Speech Acts

Introduction

A language is indeed an indispensable tool among humans. Sweet (n.d. as cited in Crystal & Robins, 2021) furthered and defined language as “the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts”. Humans produce language either in written discourse or in spoken discourse. It is used in day-to-day communication to express and convey meanings specifically in conversations among peers, in the academe, and even in politics. In today’s context, the ins and outs of messages in varied gadgets and technologies are evident with the use of messaging apps and the internet amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. It is presumed that the most important function of communication technologies is to empower connection maintenance with those from whom they are distanced physically, especially in today’s context; it has been evidently observed through the interpersonal messaging capabilities that these technologies support. On a regular basis, individuals could use the phone to talk to friends and family, email colleagues about work and social activities, and use instant messaging to message people on their buddy lists; thus, the social uses of technology play an explicit role in maintaining relationships and presenting oneself to others (Baym, 1995; Lea & Spears, 1995; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Walther, 1997).

In line with this, as communication extends its domain in various social media platforms, studies concerning the use of language to meet communicative goals are also given significance, especially, in today’s context where information is just a tap away; communication technologies can also provide more implicit ways of maintaining social contact (Erickson & Kellogg, 2003). Grice (1968 as cited in Sison, 2011), one of the famous proponents in the field of pragmatics, has made a difference between what was said and what is implicated in his conversational implicatures. The field of discourse, primarily a field in linguistics, aims to define the conventions and rules encompassing language use in extended stretches of text (McCarthy and Carter, 1997). Discourse is considered a term in linguistics to refer to the spontaneous stretch of a language that is larger than a sentence which entails the communication of intention to another intention through which convenient meaning emerges. One approach to analyzing discourse studies that have been widely used in particularly the field of pragmatics is the speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle 1976; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992).

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the speakers’ use of specific words and expressions from a variety of English or the intended meaning of utterances that speakers speak depending on the context they are in (Kachru, 1998). There are certain aims beyond the words or phrases when a speaker says something; Austin (1976) furthers that speech acts are acts that refer to the action performed by produced utterances: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. Yule (1996) states that there are four areas which pragmatics is concerned with, namely: the study of speaker meaning; the study of
contextual meaning; the study of how to get more communicated than it is said; and the study of the expression of relative distance. In a broader sense, with pragmatics we are able to grasp the message of the utterance by being aware that there is more than what is being communicated through words, phrases, and sentences; in line with this, Richard and Schmidt (2002) argued that pragmatics is concerned with the use of language in communication-related to sentences and the context and situations in which they are used. Hidayat (2016) furthered that there are some factors that should be considered in the scope of pragmatics, which builds the very essence of pragmatics; these factors are: implicatures, speech acts, presupposition, context, adjacency pairs, and deixis and distance; to highlight implicatures, Grice (1968 as cited in Sioson, 2011), has made a difference between what was said and what is implicated in his conversational implicatures; he treated the utterance, itself, as artificial to some degree while considering implicature as something that is recommended or implied in an utterance; and further distinguished two kinds of implicature. The first one is conventional implicature which occurs from the meaning of some word or phrase used at the semantic level; secondly, the non-conventional implicature which roots on “outside the specification of the conventional meaning of the words used” as affected by the context (Grice, 1968 as cited in Sioson, 2011).

Literature Review

In recent years, researchers have begun to extend the investigation of pragmatic competence to new domains such as e-mail, online forums, blogs, and messaging apps; Cohen (2008) further noted that in email, pragmatic failure is often observed. De Felice and Deana (2012) argued that good knowledge of e-mail text is an essential skill for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to succeed in a global workplace because e-mail use lies at the heart of modern business communication; in their study, the main focus is a corpus and computational study of speech act data—and of the ways in which speech act data can best be represented and analyzed—one of its outcomes is a speech act–tagged corpus of learner e-mails that can be of use in research on second language acquisition (L2) speech act usage found. Furthermore, in the study of Nastri, et al. (2006), they investigated the extent to which these communicative goals are reflected in the language structure of away messages, by examining the speech acts performed through the production of 483 away messages crafted by 44 participants; it is in the sense that instant messaging is currently one of the most popular computer-mediated communication technologies. For instance, instant messaging appears to be the communication technology of choice for teenagers nowadays, who use instant messaging to make plans with friends, talk about homework, share jokes, check in with parents, and post away messages or notices about what they are doing when they are away from their computers; it was also furthered that instant messaging (IM), for example, allows users to create and display away messages, or customized text messages signifying users’ presence or absence in front of a computer (Baron, Squires, Tench, & Thompson, 2005).

Online text-based conversations require users to master a number of coordination strategies in order to achieve understanding, such as managing turn-taking (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). Baron, et al. (2005) observed that teenagers reported signing on to IM not necessarily to talk, but rather to look at the away messages of their online buddies; he argued that users tend to post away messages with two communicative goals in mind: to entertain and to inform. Nastri, et al. (2006) further that messages used for entertainment were often examples of self-expression and included the use of humor, quotations, and links to different websites. Hanna and Richards (2019) also highlighted effective communication in task-oriented situations which requires high-level interactions; in their study, they focused on human-agent communication in a collaborative virtual environment (VE), where both the agent and human should collaborate together to complete a shared goal; they evaluated the agent’s verbal communication while collaborating with humans and the speech act theory was used to anatomize the structure of agent’s speech acts, the agent’s intention behind the speech acts, and the effects on the human’s mental state; lastly, Wulandari (2014) studied the Facebook statuses used by students in the university; the researcher utilized speech acts in analyzing the data and found five common types of speech acts that shape Facebook statuses.

Hence, the importance of understanding pragmatic failure not only in e-mail communication but also in the other domains of communication, especially in today’s context where face-to-face communication is very limited, should also be given emphasis. It is then hoped that the findings of this study could facilitate understanding of pragmatics and speech acts in instant messaging and would contribute to an effective communication process.
Methodology

This was made possible through discourse analysis and the speech act theory, specifically with the use of Searle’s (1976) classification of illocutionary acts; and Grice’s (1968) notion of conversational implicatures; through discourse analysis, it aims to identify and describe the pragmatics of sent and unsent messages. It will also use five core principles in analyzing a text according to Antaki (2008) such as (1) the talk or text is to be naturally found (in the sense of not invented, as it might be in psycholinguistics, pragmatics, or linguistic philosophy; (2) some analysts admit interview data into this natural category, while others do not; (3) the words are to be understood in their context at least, and their more distant context if doing so can be defended; (4) the analyst is to be sensitive to the words’ non-literal meaning or force; (5) the analyst is to reveal the social actions and consequences achieved by the words’ use - as enjoyed by those responsible for the words, and suffered by their addressees, or the world at large. The study requested the participation of senior high school students from a public secondary school with the approval and support of the school administration. The study utilized the entire population of students who specialized in humanities from grade 12, however, based on the research instruments, only half of the population participated in the study (n=51). In identifying the pragmatic meanings of unsent messages, the study employed survey interviews via google forms in soliciting the students’ pragmatic meaning of unsending messages; results of the survey interviews were collated and crafted into a checklist-type questionnaire via google forms, where students can choose and identify the meanings of unending messages; piloting was also done to ensure the reliability of the tool; moreover, in identifying the illocutionary acts of sent messages, a randomly-selected corpus of 30 exchanges was utilized (15 in personal messages; 15 in group chats). In analyzing the data of sent messages, the corpus was transcribed and further examined using Searle’s (1976) classification of illocutionary acts, namely: representatives, directives, commissive, expressive, and declarative. Grice’s (1968) notion of conversational implicatures was also used as the framework in identifying what was implicated in unsent messages via group chat and personal messages; the identification of speech acts was examined by the researcher and an intercoder to ensure the reliability of findings, while in identifying the pragmatic meaning of unsending messages both in PM and GC, counts and percentages were used to quantitatively qualify the data which will be further analyzed qualitatively through the description.

Results

Conversational implicatures of unsent messages via PM and GC

The analysis of unsent messages both in personal messages and in group messages revealed 7 meanings; the identified meanings of unsent messages are illustrated in this section.

![Figure 1. Pragmatic meaning of unsent messages in personal messages](image)

Figure 1 reports the identified meanings of unsent messages in personal messages. These meanings correspond to the students’ shared meanings of unsent messages which are: to avoid embarrassment; to get the attention of others or the recipient of the message; to avoid misunderstanding/ to edit the wrong message; to maintain privacy and confidentiality; to direct the message to the right person/ recipient; to avoid getting ridiculed for sending nonsensical or irrelevant messages and jokes. The figure revealed that most of the students unsent messages to avoid misunderstanding/ to edit the wrong message (78.4%); half of the sample (n=51) also identified the meaning to avoid embarrassment (51%), and least of the respondents indicated the meaning to get the attention of others or recipient of the message (19.6%).

![Figure 2. Pragmatic meaning of unsent messages in group chats](image)
Figure 2 reports the identified meanings of unsent messages in group chats; the figures revealed that most of the students unsent messages in group chats to avoid getting ridiculed for sending nonsensical or irrelevant messages and jokes (68.6%); over a half of the sample (n=51) also identified the meaning to avoid embarrassment (52.9%) and to avoid misunderstanding/to edit the wrong message (52.9%); an over a quarter of the sample identified the meaning to maintain privacy and confidentiality (33.3%) in unsending messages, and least of the respondents indicated the meaning to get the attention of others or recipient of the message (25.5%).

Illocutionary acts of sending messages via PM and GC

Figure 3. Speech acts of sent messages via personal message (PM)

Figure 3 presents the illocutionary acts found in sent messages via personal messages; the figures reveal that all classifications of illocutionary acts (Searle, 1976) were present in the corpus except for declarations. A majority of the students used representatives frequently in their exchanges; these representatives found in the exchanges are informing (f=15), agreeing (f=8), greeting (4), stating (3), and insisting (3). Expressives such as thanking (10), apologizing (5), and complaining (2) were also identified as well as directives, such as asking (9), commanding (2), and requesting (1); and a trace of commissives were also seen in the corpus, such as promising (f=1).

Figure 4. Speech acts of sent messages via group chat (GC)

Figure 4 reports illocutionary acts found in sent messages via group chat; the figures reveal the absence of declarations not only in group chats but also in personal messages (See figure 3.). A majority of the students used representatives (f=81) frequently in their exchanges and these are: informing (f=33), stating (13), agreeing (10), asserting, claiming, insisting, disagreeing, describing, and explaining. Directives like asking (19), requesting (12), suggesting (5), commanding, and clarifying were also noted in the findings as well as expressions such as thanking, apologizing, wishing, and complaining. Commisives like refusing, planning, and offering were also noted in the study.

Discussion

Conversational implicatures of unsent messages via PM and GC

Implications in-line with communicative competence are evidently seen in the findings; students unsent messages to avoid misunderstanding/confusion as well as communication breakdown; communicative competence is vital to the quality of life of individuals with great communication needs; it provides the means to attain personal, educational and social goals (Calculator, 2009; Lund & Light, 2007). Furthermore, to develop communicative competence, the integration of cultural and cross-cultural instruction in language teaching (Celce-Murcia, 2007 as cited in Lenchuck & Ahmed, 2013) as well as focusing on the micro levels of pragmatics like conversational implicatures (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012, as cited in Lenchuck & Ahmed, 2013) should also be considered in the teaching and learning process.

In contrast to maintaining the flow of communication,
students unsent messages to get the attention of others or the recipient of the message; this phenomenon might lead to communication breakdown, however, it is also a strategy of the sender to be noticed in a speech situation. Bayat (2013) posited that a variety of the strategies utilized is linked with specific conditions of the communication and qualities of the parties involved in communication; it is an intervention to build, re-build and sustain linguistic situations; however, individuals with great communication needs will inevitably encounter situations where they face significant limitations that will negatively impact their communicative competence which will require their strategic competence (Light & McNaughton, 2014).

A majority of the students indicated that they unsent messages in group chats to avoid getting ridiculed for sending nonsensical or irrelevant messages and jokes as well as to avoid being embarrassed and misunderstood (See figure 2). Implications, such as when receiving criticism and experiencing embarrassment, may lead students to low self-esteem in communicating; thus, fewer chance of connecting and building relationships with others. This finding is in-line with impression management which suggests that people may monitor the image that they provide of themselves to the audiences they address (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and when personally anonymous, people feel free to challenge external self-views, and attempt to communicate to others how they wish to be regarded (Barreto et. al., 2003; Spears & Leah, 1995). Language, most often than not, is used to present personalities online as well as to identify oneself in a particular group or society and it can also help in maintaining relationships (Hickey, 2001; Tom Tong et. al., 2019; Qiu et. al., 2012). It suggests that the way we use language in a specific context gives a clue of what we are and of who we are; thus, to be able to maintain a desirable identity in a particular group, students unsend messages which results in the non-conventional implication that stems beyond the specification of the conventional meaning of the words used, affected by the context.

It is also noteworthy to point out that the findings on unsent messages via group chat and personal messages overlap and diverge in a variety of ways; the findings report that a majority of students unsent messages in personal messages to avoid misunderstanding and confusion (See figure 1); similarly, half of the sample also unsent messages in group chats to avoid misunderstanding (See figure 2). In contrast with the findings of unsent messages in personal messages, almost all of the students indicated that they unsent messages to avoid getting ridiculed as well as to avoid embarrassment in group chat; there is a difference in meaning or intention in terms of unsending messages in both context (personal and group chats). Grice (1968, as cited in Sioson, 2011) further posited that meanings and implicatures may stem beyond what is expected, and what is meant that is based on context; thus, unsending messages yield non-conventional meanings depending on the context. Finally, it is also pointed out that unsending messages are one of the strategies used with specific conditions of the communication and qualities of the parties involved in a communication to repair, rebuild, and maintain conversations both in personal messages and group chats.

**Illocutionary acts of sending messages via PM and GC**

The findings revealed that students use illocutionary acts primarily to provide and gather information as well as to state a fact or opinion; to express a psychological state; and lastly, to get someone to do something; similar to the findings of Baron, et. al (2005) and Nastri, et. al. (2006), teenagers used communication technologies to inform and to entertain (self-expression which includes the use of humor, memes, and links to various websites). Furthermore, this finding is in contrast with Bahing, Emzir, and Rafli’s (2018) study of illocutionary force in the classroom, where directives dominated the class interactions; and second by representatives.

Although representatives numbered the data, speech acts like greeting (4 occurrences out of 35 identified representatives) were seldom used by the students; and the absence of greeting acts was also noted in group chats (See figure 4).

**Example:**

Student 1: Sir bakit po ako naremove sa GC?

Student 2: Sir 1week po ba yung quiz?

Based on the given extracts, directives were used to open conversations; students convey their intentions right away through a question; and opening a conversation through greetings is rare where it could have been automatic, especially with regard to the social distance (student-teacher). In the study of Kurdgelashivili (2015), teachers attempt to establish a friendly relationship with the students, they also maintain some kind of distance that in some respect is necessary from the perspective of maintaining discipline and classroom management; in his study, the survey shows that the students know some pragmatic
rules, such as how to request politely; however, from the observation findings, they practice none of these acts; this gives ground to assume that students may also fail to use the proper linguistic units in real life situations. Ryobova (2015) also furthered that speech etiquette is a crucial component of culture, behavior, and human communication. Social relationships and norm behavior are constant in speech etiquette formulae. Nowadays, it has been a common observation that students have been wandering away with greetings as a part of politeness in speech, especially where communication is mediated by computers and other electronic platforms, thus, politeness and speech etiquette is still relevant in teaching approaches and methods. Although politeness and speech etiquettes can be seen in different levels such as lexical level marked with special expressions or phrases, special forms of address; grammar level marked with polite form of languages such as a plural form of pronouns, use of interrogative sentences instead of imperative ones; and at the stylistic level, the use of figures of speech and literary devices such as euphemism instead of obscene terminologies, its implications to the teaching and learning suggest crafting an integrated approach that addresses pragmatic competence which includes speech acts and politeness strategies.

Similar to the findings in personal messages (See figure 3.), representatives dominated the exchanges both in personal and group messages; differences were also noted such as directives which second illocutionary acts classified under representatives in group chats, while expressive ranks third. Implications such as managing turn-taking maintain the interaction of students by providing and gathering information as well as stating a fact or opinion. It can be also implicated that the findings might have been influenced by other factors such as the topic of the exchanges where students are free to pitch ideas and information. Although Bahing et. al. (2018) posited that an interactive class is dominated by the illocutionary speech acts of directives, which drive the students to use language to perform actions, the exchanges were also interactive since students were able to take turns; this finding also expressed that teacher-students and student-students could carry out interactions through the exchange of providing information as well as stating a fact or opinion with minimal questions or directives that are used for opening conversations and expressions to close conversations.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and results of the study, the following conclusions are to be indicated: firstly, students unsent messages both in personal messages and group chats; secondly, the pragmatic meaning of unsent messages depends on the context in which the occurrence of unsent messages can be observed; unsending messages could also be a strategy to repair, to build and maintain discourse, which gives emphasis on the strategic competence of the interlocutors in conversations; a majority of the students use representatives frequently in class interactions outside actual class discussions in the virtual environment; however, it can also be attributed to the topics and the existing situation where students give and provide information to pitch and to develop the topic of exchange, primarily with the purpose of informing and entertaining the audience; and greeting speech act was seldom used by students in personal messages and was non-existent in group chats.

For future directions of the study, since unsending messages is a new feature of various social media platforms, it is suggested to investigate other possible meanings of unsending messages; it is also proposed to examine the politeness of unsending messages both in personal messages and in a group chat to identify whether unsending messages entails politeness or rudeness/ being impolite. It can also be furthered by studying the politeness strategies of students in computer-mediated communication. Finally, it is also recommended that the study’s corpus be expanded to a great extent to be able to verify the findings on illocutionary acts of sent and unsent messages, especially, longer stretch of exchanges.

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