

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN INSTITUTIONAL SPEECH ACTS

Olga Dontcheva-Navratilova

Abstract

While there are numerous publications dealing with politeness phenomena in oral discourse, the study of politeness strategies in written discourse, notably in institutional and professional settings, is a relatively new field of research. This contribution is concerned with the language used in regulative institutional speech acts in the field of diplomatic discourse. The central object of study is the performative speech act in UNESCO resolutions with a particular view to relating the semantic analysis of directive and expressive speech act verbs to politeness strategies. The analysis suggests that the choice of directive and expressive speech act verbs and their co-occurrence with particular addressees are motivated by the socio-pragmatic situation.

1 Introduction

The study of politeness phenomena has traditionally been primarily concerned with individual choices in spoken face-to-face interaction. However, in recent years, the study of power relations and related politeness phenomena in written genres used in institutional and professional settings has been established as a challenging field of research (e.g. Trosborg 1995, Ng and Bradac 1993, Wilson 1990). Since in institutional settings, the situational context governs most of the linguistic choices made by the participants in the communication, language variation in institutional discourse is commonly considered to be register (Biber 1994, Halliday 1978) or genre-specific (Swales 1990, Bhatia 1993), i.e. it may be seen as a sociolinguistic or stylistic variation which has “little to do with politeness and little connection with pragmatics” (Thomas 1995: 154). The aim of this research is to show that “power is a significant determinant of strategic choice (or lack of choice)” (Harris 1995: 133) and that pragmatic choices in institutional discourse are related to the modulation of the size of imposition and of the social distance and relative power of participants, including relative rights and obligations between them.

The present study investigates some politeness strategies related to the use of directive and expressive speech acts in diplomatic discourse and concentrates on how language reflects and shapes social relations in cross-cultural interaction. The analysis is performed on the material of the ‘*Resolutions*’ volumes of the Records of the General Conference of UNESCO

adopted at the 30th session in 1999, which includes 114 resolutions; the total size of the text under investigation is 45,000 words.

2 Speech acts and politeness in resolutions

Resolutions are legal instruments used by international organizations for stating their decisions concerning the formation of future behaviour with regard to the internal administration of an organization and the ordering of relations between independent states. (For a detailed description of the situational characteristics of the genre see Dontcheva-Navratilova 2004.) UNESCO resolutions are typically group performatives (Hughes 1984: 379, Thomas 1995: 41) and commonly express directive and expressive speech acts and declarations. Since declarations are institutional speech acts, which do not have a specified addressee as the addressor uses language as an outward sign of the performance of an institutional action, they “can scarcely be said to involve politeness” (Leech 1983:106) and are outside the scope of the present study.

Directive and expressive speech acts in UNESCO resolutions are explicit performatives, which indicate explicitly the addressee and reflect the asymmetrical relationship between the participants in the institutional communication, where the conventionally defined relations between the organization and its executives, including relative rights and obligations, differ from the relations between the organization, with its advisory status, and the sovereign member states. The specificity of diplomatic communication often requires the mitigation of the inequality of power between the participants. This study focuses on speech-act strategies used in resolutions for the management of positive and negative face (Brown and Levinson 1978): negative politeness is associated primarily with directive speech acts and variation in the degree of imposition, while positive politeness is found in expressive speech acts and is motivated by the desire to maximize the praise of the addressee (Leech 1983). Thus, politeness strategies are associated with the degree of explicitness and directness of speech acts and the choice of speech act verb, which modulate the difference in social distance and relative power of the participants.

The use of explicit performatives in UNESCO resolutions is motivated by an institutional context which requires a clear indication of the force of the utterance. According to Austin (1962) and Searle (1989), explicit performatives are direct speech acts which state unambiguously the force of the utterance by means of a performative speech act verb. However, it is the intention of this study to claim that performatives are not necessarily direct speech acts and may allow for some degree of ambiguity: firstly, drawing on Bach and

Harnish (1992: 103) they may be regarded as “a special case of indirect speech act, in which the audience identifies one communicative intention by way of identifying another”, though the explicit specification of the act type facilitates the audience’s inference process; secondly, the speech act verb used in the performative utterance may allow for some degree of ambivalence and thus, in the interest of politeness, allow the precise force of the utterance to remain unclear. This approach may be seen as similar to the problem-solving strategy suggested by Leech (1983: 36-40), which assesses the level of indirectness of performative utterances with regard to the lexical and syntactic means used in order to narrow the gap between sentence meaning and utterance meaning. Thus in the present research, politeness in resolutions is associated with the use of intentional indirectness and ambivalence achieved by the choice of speech act verb and of the linguistic form for performing the intended speech acts.

3 Semantic analysis of directive speech-act verbs

In the material, the performative verbs used in directive and expressive speech acts are illocutionary verbs and belong to the semantic domain of communication verbs. The directive verbs occurring in the material are: *appeal*, *authorize*, *call upon*, *invite*, *request* and *urge*, while the expressive verbs are: *congratulate*, *convey (gratitude)*, *express (gratitude)*, *pay (tribute)* and *thank*.

The semantic analysis of directive verbs draws on Leech’s framework for illocutionary verbs analysis (Leech 1983: 218), which uses a technique similar to componential analysis. Since the aim of this research is to compare the meaning of individual directive and expressive verbs rather than to distinguish between different types of speech-act verbs, Bach and Harnish’s analysis of directives (Bach & Harnish 1979: 47-49, 51-55) and Searle’s analysis of illocutionary acts (Searle 1969: 66-67, 1975: 344-350) were also taken in consideration.

Directive verbs generally express only future events and are addressee-oriented, as the addressee is the intended agent responsible for future events. An important criterion for delimitation between the meanings of the sub-types of directive verbs is the presence or absence of the requirement for agreement/ compliance of the addressee. While in ritualised orders and commands the requirement for compliance/ agreement is absent since the addressor believes that his utterance is sufficient reason for the addressor to act, the other types of directive require the collaboration of the addressee in order for the speech act to succeed. All the directive verbs in the material under investigation belong to the latter type of

directives. The meanings of individual verbs vary primarily in the desirability of the event for the addressor and addressee, in the implicated attitude of the addressee and the size of imposition, seen as a scale of weak – middle – strong imposition, which is related to differences in the status of participants in the communication. The analysis of verbs with regard to these variables is presented in Table 1.

Illocutionary verb	Desirability for addressor/ addressee	Implicated attitude of the addressor	Force of imposition
<i>appeal</i>	↓ Adee ↑ Ador*	Wish that Adee do X*	Weak imposition
<i>authorize</i>	↑ Adee (↓ Ador)	Granting permission to do X in virtue of the authority of Ador	Middle imposition
<i>call upon</i>	↓ Adee ↑ Ador	Wish that Adee do X	Weak imposition
<i>invite</i>	↑ Adee (↓ Ador)	Willingness for Adee to do X	No imposition
<i>request</i>	↓ Adee ↑ Ador	Desire that Adee do X	Middle imposition
<i>urge</i>	↓ Adee (↑ Ador)	Desire that Adee do X	Middle imposition

*↓ Ador marks undesirable for the addressor, ↑ Ador marks desirable for the addressor
 ↓ Adee marks undesirable for the addressee, ↑ Adee marks desirable for the addressee
 X marks the action that the Adee is to perform

Table 1: Semantic analysis of the directive verbs in resolutions

Semantic analysis of the directive verbs shows that their meaning varies in several respects. While the majority of the verbs suggest that doing the act is undesirable for the addressee, i.e. they state duties and obligations, the verbs *authorize* and *invite* are desirable for the addressee as they grant the right to act or the possibility of acting. Nevertheless, *authorize* and *invite* differ in the implied force of imposition, the former signalling unequal status of participants, the addressor being in the position of authority, while the latter does not imply unequal status of participants. The verbs *appeal* and *call upon* differ from *request* and *urge* both in the implied attitude of the addressor, the expression of desire suggesting stronger commitment than the expression of a wish, and in their force of imposition, the latter pair conveying stronger imposition than the former. The only verb which does not imply imposition is *invite*. It is to be stressed that none of the verbs imply strong imposition. This reflects the character of the relationship between the participants in diplomatic communication which demands a high level of formality and therefore politeness, and the advisory status of UNESCO with regard to its member states.

Despite the above-stated differences in their meanings, all the directive verbs in UNESCO resolutions are used in utterances which state duties and obligations, as shown in the following examples:

- (1) *The General Conference, (...)*
 2. *Invites* the Director-General:
 (a) *to communicate without delay, in order to enhance the presentation, follow-up and evaluation of the projects submitted under the Participation Programme, to the National Commissions or, where there is no National Commission, through a designated government channel, the reasons for modifying or denying the requested amounts;* (R50. 85)
- (2) *The General Conference, (...)*
 2. *Authorizes* the Director-General to mobilize the extrabudgetary resources needed to implement the projects identified by the Joint Commission, and requests him to submit to the Executive Board a report on the progress achieved and to submit to the General Conference, at its 31st session, a report on the implementation of this resolution. (R55. 89)
- (3) *The General Conference, (...)*
 5. *Urgently appeals* to those Member States which are behind with the payment of their contributions to pay their arrears without delay and, where appropriate, to respect their payment plans;
 6. *Calls upon* Member States to take the necessary steps to ensure that their contributions are paid in full at as early a date as possible during the financial period 2000-2001; (R66. 100)

It is evident that the use of *invite* in Example 1 expresses a strong request reinforced by the use of the adverbial ‘*without delay*’, which may be seen as face threatening. The verbs *appeal* (Example 3), intensified by the adverbial ‘*urgently*’, and *call upon* strongly request the regular payment of contributions, which guarantee the right to vote at the sessions of the General Conference. The verb *authorize* (Example 2) imposes the responsibility on the Director-General to provide for the allowance of recourses for the implementation of projects followed by a request, establishing his obligation to report on the implementation of the resolution. Therefore, it seems reasonable to claim that the choice of speech-act verbs with lower or no imposition in directive speech acts in UNESCO resolutions reflects politeness considerations.

4 Negative politeness in directive speech acts

Directive speech acts, especially those with force of imposition, are commonly associated with negative politeness (Leech 1983: 107). The politeness strategies used in directives in UNESCO resolutions may be accounted drawing on the Tact and Generosity Maxims of Politeness suggested by Leech (ibid.: 130-135), the former requiring to ‘minimize cost to *other*’ and ‘maximize benefit to *other*’, the latter requiring to ‘minimize benefit to *self*’ and ‘maximize cost to *self*’. The degree of tact conveyed in an act of communication may be assessed on the basis of three scales: the cost-benefit scale, assessing the desirability of an action from the point of view of the addressor and the addressee, the optionality scale,

assessing the amount of choice offered to the addressee, and the indirectness scale, reflecting the amount of mediators of the illocutionary force of the utterance. The directive speech acts in UNESCO resolutions use performative declaratives and speech act verbs the meaning of which allows for some degree of ambivalence for conveying the illocutionary force of directives thus achieving politeness on the indirectness scale. The choice of illocutionary verbs with middle and weak force of imposition reflects a politeness strategy, which increases the degree of optionality for the addressee, as they mitigate the authority of the addressor and the strength of his commitment. On the cost-benefit scale, desirability of the action from the point of view of the addressee is suggested only by the verbs *authorize* and *invite*, while *appeal* and *call upon* partially conceal the benefit to the addressor.

The use of directive speech-act verbs with reduced or no imposition – *appeal*, *call upon*, *authorize* and *invite* – for stating duties and obligations may be tentatively interpreted as a genre-specific feature motivated by the institutional context. It may be considered similar to the use of *incite* to refer to the act of advocating illegal or criminal action in legal context, as discussed by Kurzon (1998), who claims that the decision whether a statement constitutes incitement or not depends on the context of situation. Thus, the use of the directive speech-act verbs *appeal*, *call upon*, *authorize* and *invite* for stating duties and obligations may be regarded as conventional in resolutions. However, it is not possible to claim that such use of the above-mentioned verbs is restricted to diplomatic discourse.

The impact of status and social distance between participants in the communication on the choice of performative speech-act verb is shown in Table 2 on the basis of co-occurrences of the directive verbs with addressees.

Addressee	Member states (Governments of MS)	Director-General	Others
Verb			
<i>appeal</i>	9	0	0
<i>authorize</i>	0	59	2
<i>call upon</i>	18	0	4
<i>invite</i>	19	66	11
<i>request</i>	1	35	6
<i>urge</i>	6	2	0
Total No	53	162	21
Total %	22.5	68.6	8.9

Table 2: Co-occurrence of directive verbs with addressees in resolutions

Directive speech acts typically address the Director-General, an executive of the organization, who is organization, and whose duties and obligations are to implement the

decisions of the General appointed by the General Conference and acts in the name of the Conference, i.e. the General Conference is in a clear position of authority with regard to the Director-General. The directive verbs used to address the Director-General in the corpus are primarily *authorize*, *invite* and *request*. The position of authority of the General Conference motivates the choice of *authorize* and *request*, which are verbs with middle imposition, i.e. the highest force of imposition used in the corpus. It should be noted that the verbs *authorize* and *request* typically appear in resolutions requesting a limited set of actions, using recurring syntactic structures, thus serving as a basis for matching parallelism in the ‘*Resolutions*’ volume (Hoey 2001). The Director-General is typically requested to report to the General Conference (Example 4), while the spectrum of actions which he is authorized to perform is more varied, the most frequent being to implement a plan for action (Example 5).

- (4) *The General Conference, (...)*
 5. *Requests* the Director-General to report to it at each forthcoming ordinary session on the implementation of this resolution, until all six instalments have been received; (R66. 101)
- (5) *The General Conference, (...)*
 4. *Authorizes* the Director-General:
 (a) to implement the corresponding plan of action in order to: (...) (R2. 26)

The verb *invite*, implying no degree of imposition, is used to request a variety of actions, including promoting relations with other organizations, preparing documents, submitting information etc., as illustrated in the following example:

- (6) *The General Conference, (...)*
 1. *Invites* the Director-General to submit additional information on the proposal contained in these documents at the 159th session of the Executive Board, in particular, regarding the repercussions of such a proposal on the current system of split-level assessment of contributions of Member States; (R69. 107)

All directive speech verbs, excepting *authorize*, are used to address member states or their governments, preference being given to verbs with weak or no imposition, i.e. *call upon* and *invite* (Example 7). *Authorize* is excluded from the set as it implies authority of the addressee and according to the Constitution of UNESCO the organization is in a position to advise and assist the member states, but not in a position to exercise authority over them.

- (7) *The General Conference, (...)*
Calls upon the Member States and the international community to provide all possible support for the implementation of this project. (R38. 74)

Addressees other than the Director-General and the member states, e.g. organizations, local authorities, national commissions, the Executive Board, are addressed preferably using the non-impositive verb *invite*, as in:

- (8) *The General Conference, (...)*
 1. *Invites professional associations of journalists and the media, as well as media entertainment industries, to exercise self-discipline and self-regulation so as to reduce violence in the electronic media, electronic games and on the Internet, with the particular objective of protecting the very young; (R40. 75)*

5 Semantic analysis of expressive speech-act verbs

Expressive speech-act verbs refer typically to past or present but not future events and satisfy social expectations. In the material under investigation there is a restricted set of expressive verbs which refer to past events. The phrases *convey one’s gratitude*, *express one’s gratitude* may be regarded as formal paraphrases of the unmarked form *thank* often used as a set phrase without implying genuine gratitude. The very formal phrase *pay tribute to* is used exclusively in tributes to high executives whose terms of office have come to an end, the act performed having an institutionalized and ritual character. The meanings of the individual verbs vary in the desirability of the event for the addressor and addressee and in the implicated attitude of the addressor. An analysis of the verbs with regard to these variables is presented in Table 3.

Illocutionary verb	Desirability for addressor/ addressee	Implicated attitude of the addressor
<i>congratulate</i>	↑ Adee *	Pleasure at X*
<i>convey (gratitude)</i>	↑ Ador	Gratitude for X
<i>express (gratitude)</i>	↑ Ador	Gratitude for X
<i>pay (tribute)</i>	↑ Adee ↑ Ador	Pleasure at X + Gratitude for X
<i>thank</i>	↑ Ador	Gratitude for X

*↓ Ador marks undesirable for the addressor, ↑ Ador marks desirable for the addressor
 ↓ Adee marks undesirable for the addressee, ↑ Adee marks desirable for the addressee
 X the marks the action performed by the Adee

Table 3: Semantic analysis of the expressive verbs used with the SVOO clause type

Semantic analysis of the expressive verbs shows that their meaning varies in two respects, i.e. desirability of the action for the participants and the variable implicated attitude of the addressor, according to which the verbs may be divided into three groups. The first and most numerous group includes *thank* and its paraphrases, which refer to an action favourable to the addressor; the attitude expressed is gratitude for being benefited, signalled by the utterance which satisfies the social expectations of expressing such an attitude. The second group consists of a single occurrence of the verb *congratulate* referring to an action favourable to the addressee, on whose achievement he is congratulated; the attitude of the addressor is pleasure at the achievement of the addressee, the utterance satisfying the social

expectations of expressing such an attitude. The last group includes the occurrences of the phrase *pay tribute*, which combines the meanings of *thank* and *congratulate*, as the action it refers to is an achievement of the addressee made in favour of the addressor, thus implying attitudes of gratitude for being benefited and pleasure at the achievement of the addressor. The expressions *express/convey one's gratitude* and *pay tribute* are marked for a higher degree of formality and therefore politeness.

6 Positive politeness in expressive speech acts

Expressive speech acts are associated with positive politeness, which may be explained referring to the approbation and modesty maxims of politeness (Leech 1983: 132). The approbation maxim requires 'minimizing dispraise of *other*' and 'maximizing praise of *other*'; the modesty maxims requires 'minimizing praise of *self*' and 'maximizing dispraise of *self*'. It seems reasonable to claim that in the material under investigation the positive politeness markers include the use of the paraphrases of the verb *thank*, which require greater effort from the part of the addressor and state explicitly his attitude of expressing gratitude. The function of stance adverbials as boosters is taken over by adjective pre-modifiers, as in:

- (9) *The General Conference, (...)*
 6. *Expresses its profound gratitude to the President of the General Conference and the Chairperson of the Administrative Commission for all the efforts they have made, in particularly difficult circumstances, to find solutions acceptable to all.* (R71. 110)

The use of the formal paraphrases of the verb *thank* and pre-modifying adjectives maximizes the praise of '*other*', thus assuming a position of indebtedness of the organization with regard to the addressee.

The impact of the status of the participants in the communication on the choice of performative expressive speech-act verbs is shown in Table 4 on the basis of co-occurrences of the expressive verbs with addressees.

Addressee	Member states (Governments of MS)	High executive	Others
Verb			
<i>congratulate</i>	0	1	0
<i>convey (gratitude)</i>	0	1	0
<i>express (gratitude)</i>	7	3	0
<i>pay (tribute)</i>	0	2	0
<i>thank</i>	0	4	1
Total No	7	11	1
Total %	36.8	57.9	5.3

Table 4: Co-occurrence of expressive verbs with addressees

The findings summarized in Table 4 show that the expressive speech acts address primarily executives of the organization. The expressive verbs used with the highest frequency are the neutral *thank*, addressing the Director-General (Example 10), and the formal phrase *express one's gratitude*, which addresses primarily member states (Example 11). The formal phrases *express/ convey one's gratitude* and *pay tribute* typically address executives in tributes, which as stated above are ritualized institutional acts (Example 12).

- (10) *The General Conference, (...)*
 1. *Thanks the Director-General for the measures taken to organize the two meetings of governmental experts during the 1998-1999 biennium; (R26. 64)*
- (11) *The General Conference, (...)*
 3. *Expresses its gratitude to the Member States and organizations that have supported the Institute's programme through voluntary contributions or contractual agreements, (R4. 29)*
- (12) *The General Conference, (...)*
 2. *Pays tribute to Mr Federico Mayor and expresses its deep gratitude to him on the occasion of this plenary meeting of 5 November 1999. (R08. 9)*

7 Conclusion

The analysis of UNESCO resolutions as a specimen of formal written institutional discourse has evidenced the presence of politeness strategies reflected in lexical and syntactic choices in resolutions. Negative politeness is expressed by the use of indirect directive speech acts with a speech act verb mitigating the illocutionary force of the utterance and allowing for some ambivalence in its interpretation, while positive politeness markers are used in expressive speech acts and are confined to the choice of speech act verbs marked for high degree of formality and the use of pre-modifying adjectives for intensifying positive stance. Variation in the choice of speech act verbs and their co-occurrence with addressees could be ascribed to strategic choices in discourse for expressing a communicative intention and to the external factors of the institutional situation, in particular the power relations between participants.

However, given the specificity of the language of international governmental organizations, which is characterised by a conventionalized interpretation of the linguistic expression of the intentions of the participants, it is necessary to stress that the strategic choices available are restricted to a limited set of options. Therefore, the delimitation of pragmatic choices and register- and genre-motivated choices suggested in the present study must be seen as tentative.

References

- Austin, J. (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bach, K. and R. M. Harnish (1992) "How performatives really work: a reply to Searle." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 15, 93-10.
- Bach, K. and R. M. Harnish (1979) *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Bhatia, V. A. (1993) *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. London: Longman.
- Biber, D. (1994) "An Analytical Framework for Register Studies." In: Biber D. and Finegan E. (eds) *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Register*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 31-56.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1978) "Universals in language use: politeness phenomena." In: Goody E. N. (ed.) *Questions and politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 56-311.
- Dontcheva-Navratilova, O. (2004) "Situational characteristics of the discourse of international governmental organizations: UNESCO resolutions and declarations." *Acta Academia Karviniensia* 1/2004, 25-41.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic. The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Harris, S. (1995) "Pragmatics and Power." *Journal of Pragmatics* 29, 117-135.
- Hoey, M. (2001) *Textual Interaction: An Introduction to Written Discourse Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hughes, J. (1984) "Group Speech Acts". *Linguistics and Philosophy* 7, 379-375.
- Kurzon, D. (1998) "The Speech Act Status of Incitement: Perlocutionary Acts Revisited." *Journal of Pragmatics* 29, 571-596.
- Leech, G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*. London and New York: Longman.
- Ng, S. H. and Bradac, J. J. (1993) *Power in Language*. Newbury Park/ London/ New Delhi: Sage.
- Searle, J. (1991) "Indirect Speech Acts." In: Davis, S. (ed.) *Pragmatics. A Reader*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. 265-277.
- Searle, J. (1989) "How Performatives Work." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12, 535-558.
- Searle, J. (1975) "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts." In: Gunderson K. (ed.) *Language, Mind and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 344-369.
- Searle, J. (1969) *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J. M. (1990) *Genre Analysis. English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, J. (1995) *Meaning in Interaction. An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London and New York: Longman.
- Trosborg, A. (1995) "Statutes and Contracts: An analysis of legal speech acts in the English language of law." *Journal of Pragmatics* 23, 31-53.
- Wilson, J. (1990) *Politically Speaking*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Sources

Records of the General Conference. 30th Session. Paris, 26 October to 17 November 1999. Vol. 1 Resolutions (2000) Paris: UNESCO. Online document: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001185/118514e.pdf>, retrieved in 2003.