

## **UC Merced**

### **Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society**

#### **Title**

Applied Speech Acts Analysis: Speaker Intentions as Motivational Factors in Substance Abuse Therapy

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7xh3f01n>

#### **Journal**

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 20(0)

#### **Authors**

Amrhein, Paul C.

Fulcher, Laura

Palmer, Michael

et al.

#### **Publication Date**

1998

Peer reviewed

# Applied Speech Acts Analysis: Speaker Intentions as Motivational Factors in Substance Abuse Therapy

Paul C. Amrhein  
(amrhein@unm.edu)

Laura Fulcher

Michaël Palmer

William R. Miller

Department of Psychology and the Center on Alcoholism, Substance Abuse,  
and Addictions (CASAA), University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, NM 87131

Speech acts such as requests, verbal commitments, warnings, and threats are a ubiquitous aspect of everyday language use. They provide a means to share mental models of our knowledge in social interactions. With them we can direct the assignment of future actions for ourselves and others by simply uttering certain words arranged in a particular way. The purpose of the present study was to determine whether a theory of speech act comprehension concerning the sharing of speakers' intentions in request-to-commit dialogs can be used to isolate motivational factors in a therapy context in which the therapist's goal is to obtain a verbal commitment from the client to change his or her drug habit (see Miller & Rollnick, 1991). According to speech act theorists (e.g., Searle, 1969, 1977), for each speech act type, different intentions (e.g., desire, ability, need) are assigned to the speaker of an utterance and the listener who receives it. When these intentions are not actually present in a discourse situation, yet a speech act has been uttered, its performance is unsuccessful to varying extents. The intentions of desire and ability have received the most attention in the empirical literature (e.g., Amrhein, 1992; Gibbs, 1986; Holtgraves, 1994; Francik & Clark, 1985). For example, in the case of a successful request, the speaker wants a specified act to be carried out by the listener, and the speaker believes that the listener wants and is able to carry out that act. With these intentions in place, it is likely that the act will indeed be carried out. Not so coincidentally, verbal commitments can also be characterized in terms of these intentions. That is, for a successful commitment, the speaker believes that the listener wants a specified act to be carried out by the speaker, and the speaker both wants and is able to carry out that act. Data will be presented from experiments which illustrate the basic pattern of the contribution of speaker intentions to the strength of verbal commitments as well as from therapist (qua requester)-client (qua committer) protocols which

replicate this pattern. Collectively, these data will demonstrate how speaker intentions influence the frequency, form and strength of speech acts in discourse.

## Acknowledgment

This research is supported in part from a grant from NIDA (DA 09864).

## References

- Amrhein, P.C. (1992). The comprehension of quasi-performative verbs in verbal commitments: New evidence for componential theories of lexical meaning. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 31, 756-784.
- Francik, E.P., & Clark, H.H. (1985). How to make requests that overcome obstacles to compliance. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 24, 560-568.
- Gibbs, R. (1986). What makes some indirect speech acts conventional? *Journal of Memory and Language*, 25, 181-196.
- Holtgraves, (1994). Communication in context: Effects of speaker status on the comprehension of indirect requests. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 20, 1205-1218.
- Miller, W.R., & Rollnick, S. (1991). *Motivational Interviewing*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. (1977). A classification of illocutionary acts. In A. Rogers, B. Wall, & J. Murphy (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Texas conference on performatives, presuppositions and implicatures*. (pp. 27-46). Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.