

〈Paper〉

〈論文〉

Form and Function in Spoken Discourse

An analysis of inconsistencies in language form and function

談話における言語の形と機能

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Received 7 October 2002

受付 2002年10月7日

Abstract

A large number of language functions cannot readily be predicted simply by a consideration of their forms. There are a relatively limited number of language forms that are utilized by an infinite number of complex communicative functions involved in human linguistic interaction.

The gap that exists between language forms and functions is bridged by contextual factors including speaker/listener cooperation, shared knowledge, intonation, conventional social norms and others. These factors help speakers communicatively bridge the correspondence gap between form and function and help give otherwise ambiguous forms their functionally intended meaning.

In the first section of this article the author has made a summary of the arguments of the various approaches to the analysis of discourse on the issue of linguistic form and function. In the final sections the author has chosen a sample of spoken text and commented on examples, which demonstrate that the functions are not predictable from linguistic forms used by the interlocutors.

Key words and phrases: language form; language function; spoken discourse; phonology; speech acts

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1.0 Introduction

Individuals have unique personalities, thoughts, and emotions. Consequently, a person's understanding and perception of language and communicative behavior is also unique to the individual. Spoken forms of language are, however, limited in number considering the many complexities involved in different personalities and communicative situations. That is, there is a relatively limited number of language forms that represent the infinite number of complex communicative functions that characterize human linguistic interaction.

There are countless examples of language functions, which communicatively “get things done” yet are represented by grammatical form that does not fit the resulting function. A large number of language functions cannot readily be predicted simply by a consideration of their forms. Other factors, which I will refer to as “contextual factors”, help speakers communicatively bridge the correspondence gap between form and function giving these “unpredictable” forms their functionally intended meaning.

Most of us are able to successfully accomplish daily communicative purposes (given that it is in a language we have mastered) despite this gap between language forms, and the functions that realize them. This ability we have to communicate our ideas depends on various contextual factors working simultaneously to allow persons to communicatively interact. These contextual factors include speaker/listener cooperation, shared knowledge, personal relationship, cultural conventions, speaker intention and listener need, intonation factors and other considerations, which will be addressed in this article.

2.0 Analyzing discourse

A basic issue to be considered in analyzing discourse in light of the relationship between linguistic form and function are the two main approaches by which discourse can be analyzed. Traditional procedure would take language as an object in the form of a sentence or text “as already available in its entirety for us to work upon.” In this view “analysis is a matter of discovering the relationship among its parts” and can be displayed through tree-diagram illustrations (Brazil 1992:5). The opposite approach would claim that speech, is not only object, but an active living organism that is continually developing and changing and with a communicative purpose in mind. This approach maintains that language is not only a system of rules that guide the user psychologically in what to say but a social act of meeting the listener’s present needs.

If we see language as only a grammatical object to be analyzed and governed by rules we will often find a great unexplainable gap between language form and its function in daily conversation. However, language as an organic, living and developing act relies on its context to clarify functional meaning where form does not directly correspond. Brazil (1992:6) explains:

...from the user's point of view, ambiguity is far less significant than traditional linguistics makes it seem. This is not, of course, to say that things we hear are never ambiguous. But to draw attention to alternative meanings would, in nearly every case, be to withhold that element of co-operation on which successful communication depends. To put it bluntly, it would amount to quibbling when you knew perfectly well what the speaker's intentions were. When speaker and hearer are both working towards the accomplishment of a bit of communicative business, we can regard any misunderstandings that arise as resulting from a breakdown in the use of the system rather than as a crucial exemplification of how the system works.

One can acknowledge a form/function gap and at the same time understand how successful communication occurs without a constant breakdown in understanding. Language form is the visible representation of communication. Communicative context involves indirect forces that activate language function and give forms an identity and communicative value.

What language means and what language does is the crucial issue here. When we concern ourselves with only the meaning and not the doing we find many ambiguities as to what function the speaker wants to do. We must consider looking not only at the form as it appears, but look into the speaker's mind to understand what s/he hopes to accomplish with the language form.

3.0 Context

It was mentioned earlier that the communicative context or situation in

which language is used, gives an ambiguous form a functional meaning. The context also prepares the listener for what the speaker hopes s/he will understand and provides the recipient the background information that is necessary to help interpret it (Brazil & Sinclair 1982). Again, considering the relationship between language form and function we must ask what the speaker wants done. Absent of the context an utterance often remains ambiguous in its function. Based on the Sinclair et al (1975) approach in dealing with this form/function gap he suggests

a two-stage interpretive process involving information first about situation and then about tactics. Situation refers to all relevant factors in the environment, social conventions, and the shared experience of the participants, while tactics handles the syntagmatic patterns of discourse, the way in which items precede, follow and are related to each other.

(Sinclair & Coulthard 1975 in Coulthard 1985:129)

Thus, emphasizing the influence of the circumstances of the situation or the context in which a language item is used.

Yule (1996) identifies two types of context: linguistic context, and physical context. Linguistic context refers to the "set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence." Since the word "bank" is a homonym how does one know which is the intended meaning in a given sentence?

If the word bank is used in a sentence together with words like steep or overgrown, we have no problem deciding which type of 'bank' is meant. In a similar way, when we hear someone say that she has to get to the bank to cash a check, we know from the linguistic context which type of 'bank' is intended.

An example of physical context would be:

if you see the word BANK on the wall of a building in a city, the 'physical' location will influence your interpretation (Yule 1996:129).

Context is the communicative framework that allows people to interact. It is the foundation on which speaker shared knowledge, cooperation and other contextual factors can take part in bridging the gap between form and function. It gives words the necessary power to become speech acts.

When otherwise perfectly understandable language is striped from its context it is often impossible to predict what kind of function is intended. Consider the following from McCarthy (1991:18)

A: What time is it?

B: Five past six.

A:

What could fill the third segment of this exchange in order to realize the context and what is being accomplished? Here are some possibilities:

1. A: Thanks.
2. A: Good! Clever girl!
3. A: No it isn't, and you know it isn't; it's half past and you're late again!

By observing the three possible utterances one can immediately visualize the respective situations. Notice the difficulty interpreting the following function:

A: I have a fourteen year old son

B: Well that's all right

A: I also have a dog

B: I'm sorry (Sacks 1992 in Yule 1996:127)

However, when the context is identified -A is trying to rent an apartment from B -each utterance is appropriately understood.

3.1 Speech acts

Speech Act Theory “initiated by Austin and developed by Searle, is an important attempt to give a systematic account of language activity” (Brazil 1995:12). It paints a picture of the gap that exists between language form and function and offers some interesting insights as to how to deal with it. Discourse analysts are interested most in how speakers use language to get things done or “do things with words” (Coulthard 1985:120). The focus is not on what words mean propositionally, but what the language user is trying to do with the language. This notion of getting things done with language, viewing utterances as functional units, has been termed speech acts. There are two kinds of meaning that represent speech act theory: locutionary meaning, “the basic literal meaning of the utterance which is conveyed by the particular words and structures which the utterance contains” and illocutionary meaning: “the effect the utterance or written text has on the reader or listener” (Richards 1997:343).

There are words that, by their form alone, indicate the acts that will be performed. These words including asking, telling, promising, commanding, etc. (Brazil 1995) and are referred to as explicit performatives containing a “performative verb” (Richards 1997) as in

I promise I'll do what I can -a promise

I command you to advance -a command (Brazil 1995:87).

Performatives exist when words are spoken and the resulting action done brings some change about in the world of those involved. These are contrasted with constatives, which “asserts something that is either true or false” (Richards 1997:270). Austin presents four felicity conditions that must be met in order for performatives to be successful or “happy” and are described below (Levinson 1983:229):

1. There must exist an accepted conventional procedure, having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by persons in certain circumstances.
2. The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
3. The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly
4. and completely.

By meeting the requirements of these conditions the performative does not “misfire” (Coulthard 1985:14).

We can normally realize the act being done by the speaker without an explicit performative present. More typically we find functions taking place absent of an explicit verb.

	Forms	Functions
Did you eat the food?	Interrogative	Question
Eat the food (please).	Imperative	Command (request)
You ate the food.	Declarative	Statement

When we observe a form such as Did he...?, Are they...? or Can you...? when a question is asked it can be identified as a direct speech act because the form indicates the function being performed (Yule 1996:133).

As we continue in the direction of implicit language we face situations where language function is difficult to predict as the “doing” of utterances is not so explicit when considering the form. As Brazil and Sinclair (1982:20) observe “often the action-value of the utterance is hidden, for tactical reasons. On the face of it, the utterance seems to do one thing, but when seen in its situation it actually does another.”

For example:

1. Who’s next (as a command).
2. Go and jump in the lake (as an insult).

3. I'm hungry (as a request).

As we encounter cases of a “lack of fit between grammar and discourse” we move into the approach known as indirect speech acts (Coulthard 1985:129).

The grammatical form of “Who’s next” in the above example clearly indicates a question when we observe the locutionary meaning and grammatical form. However, in the context of a group of military trainees waiting for a physical exam “Who’s next” would most likely result in the perlocutionary act of the next trainee preparing to be examined. As Brazil points out:

The presence of this discontinuity between form (accounted for in grammar) and function (accounted for in discourse) is related to, among other things, the fact that there is no predictable relationship between formal categories and functional categories: declarative sentences do not necessarily realize informing acts nor interrogative sentences eliciting ones. (1995:23)

Coulthard maintains that the situational categories of statement, question, and command typically represent the grammatical forms referred to as declarative, interrogative, and imperative respectively. However, we often violate of these labeled forms and the functions they grammatically require (1985).

Grammatical Categories	Situational Categories	
declarative	statement	
interrogative	question	
imperative	command	(Coulthard 1985:130)

Whenever one of the forms in the lists above is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it (on the same line), we have a form/function “violation” resulting in an indirect speech act (Yule 1996).

Consider the following forms from (Coulthard 1985:129):

Can you shut the door?
Would you mind shutting the door?
I wonder if you could shut the door?
The door is still open.
The door.

These items represent a variety of grammatical sentence forms. Yet the illocutionary force of all five utterances is a request to “shut the door.” Levinson claims most usages of this type are indirect as “the imperative is very rarely used to issue requests in English; instead we tend to employ sentences that only indirectly do requesting” (1983:264).

Let us now focus on a classroom situation dealing with indirect speech acts before continuing to address other arguments on this subject of discourse form/function analysis.

3.1.1 A classroom situation

In classroom situations teachers often ask questions in the course of a lesson. But though it is, formally speaking, a question, it does not necessarily carry out the function or elicit the response that a question would grammatically require. A question is a grammatical form one uses to elicit an answer, but is that what teachers use questions for in the context of a lesson? More likely, they use a question to introduce a topic, to draw student participation and elicit a response that is relevant to the teacher’s agenda (Brazil 1995). When a teacher asks a student “Can you come to the board?” it is grammatically identified as a question of ability eliciting a yes/no answer. However, this grammatical form, though a question, functions as a command to “Come to the board immediately.” In this context, a student’s answer of “yes” would correspond to the form yet it would ignore the intended function and be inappropriate. Moreover, “yes” absent of a physical response, might be interpreted as patronizing while

“no” would be disobedience.

Teachers and students cooperate in language to get classroom activities done often without a direct correspondence between language form and function. In cases such as the one shown in the previous paragraph students generally understand these expectations in the form of indirect speech acts based on past experience of conventional classroom communication.

3.2 Idioms

How does one know what is meant or how to interpret an utterance when it seems rather unrestricted by its surface form? Idioms are an issue to consider as we attempt to give an account of how language functions can be understood despite frequent lack of form/function correspondence. An idiom is “an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts” (Richards 1997:172).

Sadock (1974,1975) argues that in cases such as Coulthard’s “shut the door” example in 3.1.1

we are in fact dealing with language idioms, and the initial interrogative or declarative item should not be broken down but treated unanalyzed as one conventional way of conveying a request. (from Coulthard 1985:26)

Coulthard asserts:

In one important sense these performative utterances are idioms- the meanings of the individual words are not of great importance and synonyms cannot be substituted- it is the uttering of predetermined words in a fixed sequence in a few highly conventionalized and at times ritual situations, which constitutes the performing of the action. (Coulthard 1985:15)

The separate lexical items that compose an expression such as “Can you shut the door?” are not understood nor have the function that they would if used in isolation or in a different context.

Compare these expressions:

1. Do you drink?
2. Do you exercise?

1 can be explained as an idiomatic expression referring to alcohol. If broken down and each word were interpreted literally one would answer, “Of course, everybody drinks” because we must swallow liquid in order to survive. Yet based on the socio-linguistic culture language users are familiar with the expression “Do you drink?” as one unit taken to refer to alcohol though alcohol is not mentioned. 2, however, is not idiomatic and can be interpreted literally with a variety of possible answers.

3.3 Speaker cooperation

Verbal interaction heavily depends on the cooperation of speakers and listeners (Brazil 1995). When a speaker and listener cooperate they are meeting half way as the speaker is attempting to make clear to the listener what s/he wants to say in a way that is easiest for the listener to interpret (Brazil1992). An adult speaking to his 5-year-old is going to do so differently than he would to his wife when asking about a trip to the zoo based on his perception of what he believes will communicatively meet the listeners perceived need.

Brazil (1992:5) provides a basic example of a language form that contains little meaning apart from the context of the situation and is therefore dependent on the shared knowledge and cooperation of the individuals:

I arrived late one morning in my office and a colleague told me: John Called. I replied: Good. I'll ring him back. If we think for a moment of how

this fragment 'worked' as a piece of conversation we have to recognize that my colleague's assertion is very far from being explicit. For I know a large number of people called John. And so, doubtless, does my colleague. What is more, quite a few of the Johns I know are known to both of us. Yet on this occasion he could confidently use the name as a label, and I could unhesitatingly associate it with a particular person: I knew exactly who had called. (Brazil 1992:5)

The word John in itself has no meaning other than a common name (it's not in the dictionary) but based on these two colleagues' shared knowledge they were able to cooperate and meet the other's need with a very limited amount of language.

Garfinkel(1967) argued that "it is never possible to say what one means in 'so many words' - speakers require hearers to 'work' to a greater or lesser extent to derive their message from the words uttered." (from Coulthard 1985:30)

Grice provides a principle that reveals the "cooperativeness" of conversationalists as each predicts the other's needs and they attempt to "meet half-way." This principle covers the areas of relation, quality, quantity, and manner and is displayed in maxims:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 1. relation | be relevant |
| 2. quality | a) do not say what you believe to be false
b) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence |
| 3. quantity | a) make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
b) do not make your contribution more informative than is required |
| 4. manner | a) avoid obscurity of expression
b) avoid ambiguity
c) be brief
d) be orderly |

(Grice 1975, in Coulthard 1985:31)

Obviously, these maxims do not characterize what is required for a successful conversation to occur and for listeners' needs to be met. Things often communicatively fail when measured against these maxims. As Coulthard points out a speaker "may lie, he may not give as much relevant information as he could, or he may.... offer utterances which are.... ambiguous." In situations where a maxim is "violated" or not fulfilled the speaker/listener is forced to infer in order to bridge the information gap and understand what is being communicated (Coulthard 1985:31). Through observing Grice's maxims we might conclude that language users are constantly cooperating in order to understand one another and realize communicative function.

3.4 Shared knowledge

Speaker cooperation has to do with predicting the listener's understanding of what the speaker understands himself (Brazil 1995). Speakers assume that the listener knows what s/he is talking about as they alter language based on the assumptions about what listeners already know. "What a speaker assumes is true or is known by the hearer can be described as a presupposition" (Yule 1996:32). Consider the following question which assumes two presuppositions: When did you stop smoking cigars? In this question the speaker has presupposed that the listener used to smoke cigars and that s/he has since quit (Yule 1996:132).

Strangers have a very limited, if any, foundation on which presuppositions can be formed. This is possibly one reason why misunderstandings (or at least a greater sensitivity to potential misunderstandings) are more common between people who do not know each other well. It is more difficult to interpret language utterances without the shared knowledge and background of the conversationalists because there is less common ground on which to interact. Coulthard claims:

All interaction proceeds, and can only proceed, on the basis of the existence of a great deal of common ground, between the participants. In fact a major difference between interactions between strangers and those between friends lies in the degree of uncertainty about the boundaries of common ground and in the amount of time spent exploring these boundaries. (Coulthard 1985:105)

Two strangers require more effort in interpretation of language. Not only do their personal biographies (Coulthard 1985) have very little overlap, but also one is not “tuned in” to the other’s personal history, personality, and linguistic habits. As a speaker becomes more familiar with these s/he is likely to more accurately anticipate the listener’s need in a given context. Conversely, the listener is more able to interpret intended language functions, as they will know better where the other is coming from.

3.5 Phonological considerations concerning form and function

Within the scope of language phonology we find that lexical sounds function in ways that are not predictable by the represented forms. The pronunciation of words in citation form often misrepresents the same item’s pronunciation as it functions in discourse. It does not include the phonetics of the various contexts the word is involved in.

More specifically, sounds of individual letters can misrepresent the letter’s pronunciation as it functions in discourse. No one can argue that the letter k realizes a k phoneme in “like” and that the letter c has a similar k sound in “cat”. However, when these forms are used in the context of discourse as in “Do you like cats?” further explaining is needed if natural pronunciation is the target function. It would sound a bit unnatural to pronounce both k sounds in like and in cats, rather it would most likely be pronounced in discourse as “Do you li cats”.

3.5.1 Intonation

Intonation is an important contextual factor in giving forms a communicative and functional identity. It plays a crucial role in determining what communicative function a language form will take. Coulthard (1985:98) claims that the role of intonation is “to express in addition to and beyond the bare words and grammatical constructions used, the speaker’s attitude to the situation in which he is placed.”

Notice below that there are at least two possible functions that result depending on intonation used, though grammatical form remains the same.

1. did I make a fool of myself (question/exclamation)
2. you don’t love me (question/statement)
3. you eat it (command/statement/question)

(McCarthy 1991:9)

Upon observing the above samples one might visualize the alternative contexts of each item and “imagine” the intonation that typically characterizes that function. Though intonation is “invisible,” it is responsible in many cases for communicative functions that are represented by the same grammatical form. Brazil states:

their (features of intonation) real importance lies in the way they affect meaning. Intonation is not a ‘tune’ imposed arbitrarily upon speech: its use contributes to how speech carries a message. (Brazil 1994:16a)

In the EFL classroom a teacher can use intonation to make corrections or draw attention to certain grammatical points without actually verbally making a reference to the form. If the student mistakenly says “I live at Japan” and the teacher responds:

// r i live ↑AT japan //

with a questioning tone, then adds:

// p YOU mean // p i live ↑IN japan//.

Teachers often use a questioning tone to give a negative evaluation as a way of asking students to continue trying for the correct answer.

Brazil claims that “There is no generally agreed method of describing how the intonation system of English works” (1994a:7). We have to be careful in labeling certain tones to certain sentence types. He states:

The task of pairing different kinds of utterance with different intonation patterns seems like an enormous, and perhaps even an open-ended, one. Having explained how intonation affects one sentence, you move on and find that a quite different kind of explanation is needed for the next. To describe the meaning of any intonation feature, we have to think of the tone unit as being part of some interactive event: that is to say, the speaker is to be thought of as addressing a known listener, or listeners, at a particular moment in time. Each feature then reflects the speaker’s view of what state of background understanding exists at that moment between speaker and listener. This means, of course, that discussion of the intonation of isolated sentences must be avoided: the context must always be taken into account. (Brazil 1994a:16)

There are the many contextual factors to consider some of which we have discussed which contribute to the dynamics of intonation’s role in the function of an utterance. However, it is difficult to assign tones to certain functions, as there are always exceptions.

4.0 Analyzing authentic language form and function

So far I have addressed a few issues involved in how speakers deal with the form/function gap that exists in language. Next I will introduce a sample of spoken language and analyze some communicative functions that are not predictable simply by a consideration of their formal properties.

A is speaking to several family members at a house party about an experience in a Japanese home. A standard transcript is provided in the Appendix.

- A : TU 01 // p the FUNniest//
TU 02 // p+ one of the ↑ FUNniest things//
TU 03 // p that HAPpened//
TU 04 // r was After all the SUgar//
TU 05 // r and all the BLACKblack gum//
TU 06 // r that her WONderful FAmily had brought//
TU 07 // p her BROther was//
TU 08 // p he was ASKing me//
TU 09 // p if i LIKED the FOOD//
TU 10 // r and i said YEAH//
TU 11 // p i really like JAPAnese RICE//
TU 12 // o and SHE'S TRANslating//
TU 13 // o and she SAID to ME//
TU 14 // p i'm NOT gonna ↑ TELL them//
TU 15 // p you really like RICE//
B : TU 16 // o WHY WHY//
C : TU 17 // p beCAUSE they they're just LOOKing//
TU 18 // p for SOMETHing to BUY her//
A : TU 19 // r because SHE SAID//
TU 20 // r they'd come UP//
TU 21 // p with a TRUCK load of RICE//

4.1 Prominence and the existential paradigm

As we analyze the above sample I want to first discuss the significance of those syllables that have been marked as prominent. Speakers place prominence on syllables in words that carry the most important meaning. Brazil claims: "The purpose of prominence is to direct listeners to the part

of the message they must pay special attention to” (1994b:13). Prominent syllables represent a selection. The speaker has chosen syllables of words to make prominent which are the most changeable; the least predictable; and the newest information to the listener. Thus, by emphasizing the syllables of these words the listener is better able to follow the speaker’s message more accurately.

Brazil maintains:

When you choose to put prominent syllables in some words but not others you are helping the listener to follow your message. It helps them to know which words they should pay particular attention to (1994b:11).

Through prominence a speaker is capable of achieving communicative purposes by drawing more significance to certain words that are more crucial to the story.

A great influence behind a speaker’s choice of prominence is the “existential paradigm: the set of possibilities that a speaker can regard as actually available in a given situation” (Brazil 1997:23). In TU 11 she places prominence in the word Japanese and rice as these are the least predictable items in the tone unit. Rice exists in a position that could have been occupied by noodles, tea, vegetables, cake, etc.

Coulthard illustrates the significance of prominence and its informative function with question/response pairs in the following example:

1. Q: Which card did you play?
R: //the QUEEN of HEARTS//
2. Q: Which queen did you play?
R: //the queen of HEARTS//
3. Q: Which heart did you play?
R: //the QUEEN of hearts // (1985:102)

The grammatical forms of the responses remain identical, yet prominence placed by the speaker functions in helping the listener follow the information that is least likely to be predicted.

4.2 Expectations

As speakers engage in communication there are certain expectations present i.e. listeners and speakers expect the other to attempt to communicatively meet them half way. The speaker has an idea of what the listener's need is and what will be understandable and s/he will attempt to meet this need. We can find evidence of a speaker attempting to make the message understandable as s/he repeats and rephrases certain utterances. This can "head off problems that they may have in interpreting" the message (Brazil 1995: 81).

Notice in TU 01 and 02 A uses repetition and rephrasing to obtain control and to ascertain that she has the listener's attention. With the second utterance of "funniest" as high key dominant A is attempting to "take the stage" preparing her listeners to "tune in" to her funny story.

4.3 Proclaiming and referring tones: new and shared knowledge

The tone units in this sample consist of primarily proclaiming (p) and referring (r) tones. These frequently used tones in discourse carry certain implications. A referring or falling tone shows "that we are not expected to know about any of these things in advance." A proclaiming or rising tone "is used to show that no new information is changing hands" (Brazil 1994b:22). In TU 04 and 05 A speaks with (r) tones as she is referring to an earlier story shared about sugar and "Blackblack" gum which she assumes the listeners are familiar with.

In TU 14 and 15 we are dealing a communicative function taking place dependent on A's past experience that she has shared with the listeners

(referred to in TU 04 and 05).

In a previous story (see TU 04 and 05) A had indicated to her hosts that she liked Blackblack gum and a certain type of sugar, resulting in her being presented with a ridiculously large amount of these items to take home. A tells about her translator whose wittiness serves as the “punch-line” of the story: the translator is protecting A from a repeat of the experiences referred to in TU 04 and 05. Yet, with jokes or language involving humor such as that used by comedians, often what is funny is the thing that is left unsaid as it is realized through shared background or other contextual factors. Such is the case here. A feels she has provided adequate information to meet listeners where they are and perform the desired function.

In TU 16, B has most likely been left out of the shared background or it does not seem to be sufficient to bridge the form/function gap needed to meet his need. Consequently, C (TU 17 and 18) provides some explicit language about the background needed to help close the gap.

A finishes the story by spelling out what was previously intended to be inferred in TU 14 and 15. As A retells what the translator (“she” in TU 19) said, A reiterates the function or act that the translator accomplished: warning A not to too strongly convey to her host a particular fondness of rice. Actually, the translator did not utter anything about what A’s host may do. Therefore, A in a sense put words in the translator’s mouth when she reiterated the translator’s communicative function. Thus, we have an indirect speech act: a simple inform which functioned as a polite warning in TU 14 and 15. Following, A gave the translator’s indirect speech act (the inform/warning) a language form (in TU 19–21), which it never actually possessed.

4.4 Ethnography of speech

Notice that A expression (in TU 21) is an exaggerated figure of speech that fits the needs and conventions of the listeners involved as well as the humorous atmosphere. This type of play on words requires a certain cultural awareness in order to distinguish an utterance intended literally from one that functions differently than the form indicates. Furthermore, a certain discretion is needed by the speaker to judge when an expression such as TU 21 is appropriate to meeting the needs of the language community involved. Hymes proposes

the ethnography of speaking, concerned not simply with language structure, but with language use, with “rules of speaking...the ways in which speakers associate particular modes of speaking, topics, or message forms, with particular settings and activities.

(Hymes 1972, in Coulthard 1985:34)

He also asserts that though language is “understood” superficially (the forms at face value) it is not always interpreted by an “outsider” in terms of the meaning implied. “A truckload of rice” (TU 21) may be grammatically understandable to an outsider, but as a figure of speech, functionally meaning “a lot,” as a humorous exaggeration it may not be properly understood

(It is important to note that this expression is of course not limited to the context of humor.) In an extreme case, Lobov (1972) observed that adolescent New York Negroes might use an utterance like “Your momma’s a peanutman” which is “superficially intelligible but whose real significance as ritual insults is not available to most English speakers” (Hymes 1972 in Coulthard 1985:35).

Here we have “ethnography of speaking” (Hymes 1971) attributed to the contextual factor of shared background. Speech ethnography utilizes language “appropriacy for the situation in which it occurs” (Brazil

1995:98). Grammatical meaning of a form may be understandable, yet the functional meaning accomplishes a specific communicative act that cannot be predicted simply by a consideration of the form as it is dependent on situation and shared social awareness of the listeners.

5.0 Conclusion

This discussion has concerned how language functions are not predictable simply by a consideration of their forms. Though language takes certain labeled grammatical forms these forms have various functions that accomplish acts based on the communicative context. We observed that speakers indeed say things without actually saying them; and, in a more profound way than the cliché intends, actions do speak louder than words.

This analysis of the “lack of one-to-one correspondence between grammatical form and communicative function” (McCarthy 1991:7) has by no means been exhausted. There remain many fascinating areas of the form/function gap that we commonly experience as language users such as face saving acts (Levinson 1978, Goffman 1976 and Coulthard 1985); and more in-depth aspects of the role of intonation in influencing the many functional manifestations that occur in the context of communicative acts.

The gap that exists between language forms and functions is bridged by what I have referred to as contextual factors including speaker/listener cooperation, shared knowledge, intonation, conventional social norms and others. As these factors are relied on by language users and compensate for the lack of correspondence between form and function we can at least begin to explain this mysterious form/function gap in communication.

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Appendix

Sample of spoken language transcript

A : The funniest...one of the funniest things that happened ...was after all the sugar, and all the...Black Black Gum that her wonderful family had brought, her brother was...he was asking me if I liked the food and I said yea, I really like Japanese rice and she's translating and she said to me, I'm not gonna tell' em you really like rice. (laughter)

B : Why? why?

C : Because they they're just lookin' for something to buy her.

A : Because she said they'd come up with a truck load of rice.