

# Speech Act Theory and Its Application in the Titles of Articles in WeChat

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## Abstract

Language is an important semiotic system. The nature of interaction is the communication and exchanges of information. Speech act refers to the fact that people use language to do something. Speech act theory originated with the British philosopher John Austin. Researches on speech act start with the study on the functions of language in daily life. Until now so many scholars conduct researches on the daily language based on speech act theory. With the development of mass media, people tend to use Internet more and more frequently. As a result, the Internet becomes an important part in people's daily life. People use the Internet to learn, to socialize and to have fun. Media discourse is a complex system which consists of diverse categories. Nowadays, WeChat as a kind of mass media is popular. This article will conduct a research on the titles of articles in WeChat based on the speech act theory. Meanwhile, some feasible suggestions on how to write a good title are put forward.

**Keywords:** titles; articles in WeChat; speech act theory; pragmatic function.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, WeChat is popular among people. It is not only a major means of communication but also a means of learning. There are a lot of articles which are related to people's daily life and study. The titles of these articles will give people preconceived opinions. The title of an article is the key for attracting people to read. A good title plays an important role in planning a composition and making an argument. With the development of people's life, their demands become diverse. The augment of the information in modern society and the promptly update of the propagate all make title's function enlarge and strengthen in WeChat.

### Background of the research

Recently, many linguists begin to take focus on the study on pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of language in use. Although both pragmatics and semantics focus on the study of meaning, they differ in whether or not to take context into account. [5] Speech act theory is a key part in pragmatics. It refers to the fact that there are three senses in which saying something may be understood as doing something. In another word, a speaker might be performing three acts simultaneously when speaking. The three speech acts run through the whole process of communication [8].

Nowadays, the speech act theory becomes more perfect and mature. And it plays an indispensable

role in linguistics. The speech act theory has permeated almost every aspect in our daily life. It greatly facilitates people's life. Meanwhile, it relates to sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

A lot of researches have been conducted based on speech act theory. Lin Gang [9] explore the Internet news language based on speech act theory. Han Qinqin [7] has explored the application of speech act theory in advertisements. A few researches have been conducted on this field. Wu Yan [11] conducts a research on the compliment speech act modes in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Wang Lirui [10] studies the titles of recommended articles in WeChat based on speech act theory. However, few studies have been done on this field. All of studies show that speech act theory becomes more and more closely related with our daily life.

WeChat as a means of communication not only offers great convenience to communication but also brings a lot of information some of which is beneficial to people' life and study. Recently many linguists tend to resort to speech act theory to conduct researches on people's daily life. Researches related to advertisements, literary works have been done. However, few researches have been done on the titles of article in WeChat. Thus, the study on the titles of

articles in WeChat based on speech act theory is necessary.

This article conducts a research on the titles of articles in WeChat based on speech act theory. And this article analyzes how titles of the articles embody the pragmatic function of speech act theory.

### **The Method Used in the research**

The research methods of pragmatics can be divided into three aspects: Descriptive Pragmatics; Formal Pragmatics and Applied Pragmatics. Descriptive Pragmatics contributes to analyzing how language connects with contexts. It takes focus on the competences of how to use and understand the language that people use to convey certain implied meanings in specific situations. Formal Pragmatics studies the forms and scope of Pragmatics. Applied pragmatics combines Pragmatics with other fields such as language teaching, high technology and so on [8]. This article resorts to the Descriptive Pragmatics to conduct the research.

### **Introduction to Speech Act Theory**

Speech act theory originated with the Oxford philosopher John Langshaw Austin [1] And then J. R. Searle, an American philosopher, modified and developed the theory of Austin. Then a more complete and systematic theory of speech act has been established.

### **Austin's Contribution to Speech Act Theory**

Austin first contributed to dividing sentences into performatives and constatives. Performatives are the statements used to do something. They do not state or describe a fact and are not verifiable. When a person is authorized to name a ship by saying "I name this ship Elizabeth", the ship is named. Constatives are statements that state or describe a fact and thus are verifiable. In contrast, the utterance "I pour some liquid into the tube" said by a chemistry teacher in a demonstration of an experiment is not a performative. It is a description of what the speaker is doing at the time of speaking. The speaker cannot pour any liquid into a tube by simply uttering these words. He must accompany his words with actual pouring. Otherwise one can accuse him of making a false statement. Sentences of this type are constatives [2].

Traditional theories on language believe that speech and acts are different. Speech act theory combines speech and acts. Austin believes that people use language not only for conveying or asking for information but also for the sake of performing acts. According to the speech act theory, to say something is to do something [1]. There are three senses in which saying something may be understood as doing something. That is to say, speaker might be performing three acts simultaneously when speaking [6].

The three acts are the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act. A locutionary act is the act of uttering words, phrases and clauses. It is an act of conveying literal meaning by means of syntax, lexicon and phonology, namely the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference. An illocutionary act is the act of expressing the speaker's intentions. Pragmatics is most interested in the illocutionary act because it is identical with the speaker's intention, so the speech act theory in fact the illocutionary act theory. A perlocutionary act refers to the act performed by or resulting from saying something. It is the consequence or effect of, or the change brought by utterance. The perlocutionary act involves many psychological and social factors [4].

### **Searle's Indirect Speech Act**

J. R. Searle describes indirect speech acts as follows: "In indirect speech acts, the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information both linguistics and non-linguistics, together with the general power of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" For example, the use of an interrogative "Could you pass me the salt?" is not to ask a question but to make a request.

### **Analysis of the Pragmatic Functions of Titles of Articles in WeChat**

Pragmatic functions of speech act theory is realized by the illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Searle holds the idea that the speech acts are the basic factors for human communication [3]. No human communication can separate from speech acts. There are five language forms of illocutionary speech acts : assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations [6].

### **The Pragmatic Functions of Speech Acts**

Lightbulb candy hot on line, but is it safe? (From China Daily)

This title of an article is extracted from China Daily. This article talks about a kind of candy shaped like life-size lightbulbs. Recently this kind of candy is popular. The locutionary act is producing this meaningful sentence. The illocutionary act is to warn people that this kind of candy may not be safe, which expresses writer's doubts. The perlocutionary act is performed upon readers. Readers may hold rational attitudes towards lightbulb candy. This title takes the form of an interrogative clause. The interrogative clause is used not for merely asking for information but for conveying writer's doubts about lightbulb candy. The word "but" subtly shows writer's attitudes and conveys his intentions.

The writer resorts to this special way not only for conveying his intentions but also for arousing readers' curiosity, which may make readers begin to read the article as soon as they see the title so that the

article can be recommended successfully. In fact, it is a pragmatic strategy which can prompt readers to read the recommended articles. A number of titles of articles in WeChat take the forms of interrogative clause some of which are constatives used for merely asking for information, while some of which are performatives used for subtly conveying writers' intentions. Taking the following title as examples:

- Are you ready for the Nov.11 shopping carnival?
- Want to start golden week with a movie?
- Can you go five days without your phone?

Is it true that there's no place like home? (From China Daily)

中国的乘法口诀老外为啥学不会？竟是因为第一无二的中国字！

天下第一错字竟是它？看完以后不敢下笔了（From HBGQT）

These titles take the forms of interrogative clauses. Writers resort to these interrogative clauses to show their surprise, doubts and so on, which can be seen the illocutionary speech acts. The perlocutionary acts are to arouse readers' curiosity, to make articles be recommended successfully. When readers are attracted by the title, they may click on the title to read the whole article as writer hopes. A good title may attract more and more readers to read the articles so that the purpose of spreading can be achieved.

快删！千万不要晒支付宝账单！后果扎心了！（From China Daily）

This title of the recommended articles takes the form of declarative clause. Recently, a lot of people share their Alipay-bills in their WeChat's Circles. However, there is a bug to share the bills. The locutionary act is the production of these words. The illocutionary act is to warn people that it is risky to share Alipay-bills and suggest them not to share Alipay-bills. The perlocutionary act is that the writer wants readers to be cautious and to stop sharing Alipay-bills.

It is hot to share Alipay-bills in WeChat's Circles. This article takes focus on the hot topic. The title of the article resorts to such words as “快”“千万”“扎心”to capture readers' attention. When people see the title of the article, they may want to know why the writer puts forward such suggestion. Thus, readers may cannot resist clicking on the title to satisfy their curiosities so that the quantity of reading can be increased. Meanwhile, the article can be recommended successfully. Taking the following titles as examples:

- Monkey shines in Chinese TV classic
- The Chilean bird that rescued our holiday.
- 中国人用两周建成了罗马

这么多老外爱上成都，可不仅仅因为火锅和熊猫滚滚

我国造出了一艘会思考的船！（From China Daily）

These titles take the forms of declarative clauses. These titles have the same perlocutionary act: to attract more readers to read articles. When readers see the title of the article, they are desire to know more about the topic that have mentioned in the title. Thus, articles are recommended successfully.

### Pragmatic Functions of Perlocutionary Act

Perlocutionary act refers to the act of producing the intended effect on the feelings, attitudes and subsequent behavior of the hearer. However, whether the hearer is affected in the intended way is beyond the speaker's control. The speaker may annoy or excite the hearer without the intention to do so. Perlocutionary acts are not essentially linguistic since the success of the acts depends largely on psychological, social or physical factors [6]. Thirteen scientific signs you are smarter than others (China Daily)

This title of the article is extracted from China Daily. This title takes the form of declarative clause to perform three speech acts. The writer resorts to a declarative clause to state a fact that a smarter person has thirteen signs. When readers see the title, they may be cannot wait to read the article to know whether they are smarter than others. Or they may not click on the title to read the article. However, whether readers click on the title to read the whole article or not, the perlocutionary act has been performed upon readers. Because as soon as readers see the title of the article, they know a smarter person has thirteen signs. And they may click on the title to read the whole article, which shows that they think they are smarter. On the other hand, they may not click on the title to read the whole article, which shows that readers think they are not smarter than others. Thus, whether they click on the title to read the whole article, the perlocutionary act has performed upon readers, which embodies the pragmatic function of perlocutionary act. The following titles are similar with the above title.

Ten imported goods that will become cheaper

你离 offer 只差一个好形象：面试着装打扮六大雷区

有这十个“坏习惯”的人都很聪明，请自行对号入座！

这十九道关于十九大的自测题，你都会做吗？不服来战！（From China Daily）

These titles share a similarity that whether readers click on titles to read the whole article, the perlocutionary act has been performed upon readers. As soon as readers see the titles the perlocutionary act has been performed.

10岁男孩跳了几个后竟然瘫了……这种玩具全国很多地方都有！[10]

This title is extracted from China Daily. This article is recommended to warn people in a direct way, which makes readers know that the article is necessary to read. This article is related to kids' safety. Readers may click on the title to read the whole article, which shows that they want to check if their kids are threatened by the toys. On the other hand, they may not click on the title to read the whole article, which shows that they deny or doubt the truth of the article. Whether they click on the titles to read the whole articles or not, the perlocutionary acts are performed upon readers. The following titles are similar with the above example.

紧急通知，这个害人东西正在飞速传播，赶紧告诉身边朋友！

重罚！入刑！公安部紧急下发通知！

没买车的人恭喜了，公安部宣布，下月有重大变化！（From HBGQT）

Taking the first as an example, the locutionary act is the production of these words. The illocutionary act is that the writer wants to warn people. Whether readers read the whole article or not perlocutionary acts are performed upon readers. Readers may click on the title of the article to read the whole article as writer hopes. On the other hand, readers may not read the whole article but hold negative attitudes toward the article.

## CONCLUSION

Pragmatic functions embodied in speech act theory are realized by illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Speech act theory plays an indispensable role in Pragmatics. A lot of researches have been done based on speech act theory. However, speech act theory is not equal to Pragmatics. It is essential for researchers who are interested in Pragmatics to have good commands of some key theories.

This article analyzes the pragmatic functions of the titles of articles in WeChat based on speech act theory. This is the era of self-media. Because the media are more portable, everyone can become the main body of information dissemination. Some people are writers of their own articles as well as readers of others' articles. Thus, they may have better understandings of how to attract more readers. Hence, the analysis of the titles based on speech act theory is valuable. A good title can attract more readers to read. A good title can arouse readers' curiosity. If a writer wants to increase quantity of reading, first his titles must be attractive and. In addition, the titles are more or less related to people's daily life or some hot issues. Last but not least, titles need to be brief with some words to emphasize something or to surprise readers.

This article chooses the titles of recommended articles in WeChat as corpus. Nowadays, few researches have been done on this part. Thus, this study on the titles of recommended articles in WeChat is worthwhile. However, these article not have collected a lot of corpus. Because of the limited corpus, the research is not conducted deeply enough. In addition, this article only chooses titles of articles in WeChat to analyze its pragmatic functions based on speech act theory. That is to say, subject of this research has been restricted to WeChat, which may be a drawback of this article. Thus, a deeper research is needed.

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