



Pragmatic Paradigms in Professional Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics

Hana Abdallah Ibrahim Awad

Imberekha Saleh Bobaker Aboajjala

Faculty of Education, Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Bayda, Libya

hana.awad@omu.edu.ly

Received: 30/06/2026 - Revised: 18/06/2026 - Accepted: 28/06/2026 - Published: 1/8/2026

Abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and Gricean Pragmatics (Grice, 1975) as frameworks for interpreting institutional workplace discourse. Using a naturally occurring transcribed interaction from the Hadfield Institute involving three administrative staff members, the paper evaluates the explanatory adequacy of each model in accounting for both the actional and inferential dimensions of professional communication. It is argued that Speech Act Theory provides superior analytical leverage for workplace interaction due to its capacity to account for the high frequency of directive illocutionary acts, explicit performatives, and institutionally conditioned power asymmetries that characterize task-oriented talk. In contrast, while Grice's Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims offer valuable insights into inferential processes, their application to workplace data is limited by problems of maxim overlap, contextual indeterminacy, and a mismatch with the explicitness norms of professional settings (Thomas, 1995; Frederking, 2009). Through systematic coding of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts alongside observance and non-observance of Gricean maxims, this paper demonstrates that Speech Act Theory more effectively captures the functional, goal-driven nature of workplace language. Implications for discourse analysis, organizational communication training, and pragmatics pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords: Speech Act Theory, Gricean pragmatics, workplace discourse, directives, illocutionary acts, conversational implicature, institutional talk

1. Introduction

The study of meaning in context constitutes the central domain of pragmatics. Within this field, two paradigms have exerted enduring influence: Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics. Both originate from ordinary language philosophy but diverge fundamentally in their

treatment of how meaning is constructed and negotiated. As Thomas (1995) summarizes, Speech Act Theory is concerned with “the relationship between what speakers say and what they mean,” whereas Gricean pragmatics seeks to explain “how a hearer gets from what is said to what is meant, from the level of implied meaning” (p. 56).

The applicability of these frameworks, however, is not uniform across all discourse genres. Institutional settings such as the workplace present distinct communicative conditions: asymmetrical participant roles, goal-oriented interaction, time pressure, and an institutional preference for explicitness and accountability (Drew & Heritage, 1992). These conditions raise a critical question: which pragmatic model offers greater explanatory power for professional discourse?

This paper addresses this question through a comparative analysis of a transcribed workplace conversation recorded at the Hadfield Institute. It is hypothesized that Speech Act Theory, with its focus on utterances as social actions, is better suited to analyzing workplace interaction due to the prevalence of directive speech acts, performatives, and institutional authority. Conversely, Gricean Pragmatics, while insightful for inferential meaning, is posited to be less straightforwardly applicable due to known theoretical limitations including maxim overlap and its origins in cooperative casual conversation.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of both models. Section 3 outlines the methodology and presents the data analysis. Section 4 provides a critical discussion, and Section 5 concludes with implications and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act Theory: From Austin to Searle

Speech Act Theory was inaugurated by Austin (1962) in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin’s central claim was that language is not used solely to describe the world but to perform actions within it. He initially distinguished constatives, utterances that describe and are truth-evaluable, from performatives, utterances that enact actions such as I promise or I apologize (Schiffrin, 1994). Austin later abandoned this dichotomy, arguing instead that every utterance has a performative dimension. He proposed a threefold distinction:

- 1-Locutionary act: the act of uttering words with sense and reference.
- 2-Illocutionary act: the act performed in saying something, i.e., the speaker’s communicative intention.
- 3- Perlocutionary act: the effect the utterance has on the hearer.

Searle (1969, 1979) refined this model by developing a taxonomy of illocutionary acts based on 12 dimensions including point, direction of fit, and sincerity conditions. He classified illocutions into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. This classification has become foundational in pragmatics and discourse analysis.

The relevance of Speech Act Theory to institutional discourse has been widely recognized. Vine (2009) conducted a corpus-based study of directives in workplace meetings and found that directives are “profuse” and contextually complex, occurring at task boundaries and in problem-solving sequences. She argues that understanding workplace talk requires attention to how directives are realized and negotiated.

2.2 Gricean Pragmatics: The Cooperative Principle and Maxims

Grice (1975) proposed that rational communication is governed by a Cooperative Principle: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Levinson, 1983, p. 101). This principle is operationalized through four maxims:

- 1- Quantity: Be as informative as required.
- 2-Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false.
- 3-Relation: Be relevant.
- 4- Manner: Be clear and orderly.

When speakers apparently violate these maxims, hearers infer additional unstated meaning: conversational implicature. Grice also distinguished conventional implicature, which is tied to specific lexical items such as *but* and *even* (Levinson, 1983).

Despite its influence, Gricean pragmatics has faced criticism. Thomas (1995) notes that the maxims “seem to overlap or are difficult to distinguish from one another” (p. 88). For example, being overly informative can be classified as both a Quantity and a Manner violation. Frederking (2009) further argues that the maxims “tend to lead to confusion more than enlightenment” when applied to real data. Additionally, the model was developed with informal conversation in mind and may not translate neatly to institutional contexts where clarity and efficiency are prioritized over conversational subtlety.

2.3 Workplace Discourse and Pragmatics

Workplace discourse has been characterized as a distinct genre marked by task-orientation, asymmetrical power relations, and a focus on accomplishing institutional goals (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997). Holmes (2000) notes that workplace talk often involves negotiating

competing demands: politeness, efficiency, and hierarchy. Given these features, Speech Act Theory appears well-aligned with workplace analysis because it foregrounds action. Gricean analysis, by contrast, may be less central because workplace participants often avoid ambiguity and implicature to prevent miscommunication. This paper tests this assumption empirically.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data and context

The data consist of a 12-minute audio recording of a naturally occurring conversation between three administrative staff members, labeled A, B, and C, at the Hadfield Institute, a UK educational institution. The recording was transcribed using Jeffersonian conventions. The topic of discussion centers on administrative tasks: student registration, email communication, and scheduling.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

A qualitative discourse analytic approach was adopted. The transcript was analyzed in two passes:

Pass 1: Speech Act Analysis

Each turn was coded for locutionary form and illocutionary force using Searle's (1979) taxonomy. Perlocutionary effects were also noted where observable.

Pass 2: Gricean Analysis

Each turn was assessed for observance, flouting, violation, or opting out of the four maxims. Examples of conventional implicature were also identified.

The goal was not to quantify but to determine which framework provided more coherent and insightful explanations of the data.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Speech Act Analysis: The Primacy of Directives

The analysis revealed a high density of directive and assertive acts, constituting 41% and 33% of all coded illocutions respectively.

Extract 1: Mitigated Directive

01A: Can you use the e-mail and e-mail her?

02B: I'll use the e-mail and e-mail her. Locution: Interrogative.

Illocution: Directive - request.

Perlocution: Agreement and compliance.

The interrogative form functions as a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987), mitigating the imposition of the request while still enacting institutional authority.

Extract 2: Bald Imperative

03A: E-mail her.

This occurs immediately after a 2-minute problem-solving sequence about Sara's registration. The shift from interrogative to imperative indexes increased urgency and the establishment of common ground. As Vine (2009, p. 1396) notes, imperatives "occur profusely... where people are set on accomplishing tasks."

Extract 3: Declaration with Institutional Force

04B: I've put Sara as registered at Hadfield Institute.

This utterance has dual force. As an assertive it states a fact. As a declaration, if B has the requisite institutional authority, it changes the institutional status of Sara. The felicity of this act depends on contextual conditions (Searle, 1969).

Extract 4: Assertive Seeking Justification

05A: I'm just saying why does Sara come?

This metalinguistic performative functions as an assertive that challenges the rationale behind an action. The phrase "I'm just saying" serves to downgrade the face-threat.

Extract 5: Commissive

06C: When you need lunch, you think, give us a shout and I'll cover, OK?

This is a commissive act: a promise and offer. It builds solidarity while also distributing labor.

Extract 6: Expressive as Refusal

07B: I'm sorry. That doesn't, that doesn't require me to authorise either Friday.

The apology functions as a politeness device that softens the subsequent refusal. The repetition of "doesn't" emphasizes the negative decision.

Extract 7: Representative

08B: Yesterday, a message was left from Sara Bosaed - and I didn't take it

This is a representative act that is truth-evaluable. The addition of "I didn't take it" may function as an implicit performative: I admit I didn't take it, suggesting a power asymmetry where B feels accountable to A.

4.2 Gricean Analysis: Ambiguity and Overlap

The Gricean analysis yielded less clear-cut results, with multiple instances of maxim overlap.

Extract 8: Flouting Quantity and Quality

09A: What did she say?

10B: She wanted to take it for March. Which means she might not be planning to come back. She only rang. B provides more information than required, flouting Quantity. The inferential leap "she might not be

planning to come back” lacks adequate evidence, flouting Quality. This pattern reflects workplace pressure to display thoroughness.

Extract 9: Flouting Manner

11A: Have you finished the timesheets?

12B: No, well, I’ve done three. Last week we kept on finishing early but I don’t know what The response is lengthy, disorganized, and contains a false start, flouting Manner. The implicature is “I have not completed all timesheets.” The disfluency may also signal B’s lower status and anxiety.

Extract 10: Flouting Relation

13A: What did you say in the e-mail?

14B: I’ve not finished This is initially irrelevant, flouting Relation. The implicature is “Please wait.” 47 seconds later B provides the relevant answer. This suggests that in workplace settings, maxim violations often result from cognitive load rather than strategic deception.

Extract 11: Conventional Implicature

15A: I owe you a lot of money. I can’t pay you. Today I have exceptionally. So do you need money?

The adverb “exceptionally” functions contrastively, similar to “but,” creating a conventional implicature despite not being a canonical marker.

4.3 Comparative Evaluation

A qualitative comparison of the two frameworks suggests that Speech Act Theory provided more direct and consistent analytical categories for the present dataset. The majority of utterances in the Hadfield Institute transcript could be readily classified according to Searle’s (1979) taxonomy of illocutionary acts, particularly as directives, assertives, and expressives. This aligns with previous research noting the action-oriented nature of workplace talk (Vine, 2009). In contrast, application of Gricean maxims proved more challenging. Several extracts demonstrated overlap between the maxims of Quantity and Manner, confirming a limitation noted by Thomas (1995). Furthermore, many instances of maxim non-observance appeared to result from cognitive load and time pressure rather than from strategic generation of implicature, which is the primary focus of Grice’s (1975) model. Thus, while Gricean analysis illuminated moments of inference and ambiguity, it was less systematic in accounting for the overall actional structure of the interaction. Therefore, for this specific genre of task-oriented, institutional discourse, Speech Act Theory offers greater explanatory power.

5. Discussion

5.1 Why Speech Act Theory is More Suitable

Three reasons emerge. First, workplace discourse is fundamentally action-oriented. The primary purpose is to accomplish tasks. Speech Act Theory is designed to analyze exactly this dimension. Second, it better accounts for power and institutionality. The variation between interrogative and imperative directives directly maps onto institutional hierarchy. Declarations and commissives are central to how institutional reality is constructed. Third, it offers greater analytical precision. Searle's taxonomy provides discrete categories, whereas Gricean maxims frequently overlap.

5.2 Limitations of Gricean Pragmatics for Workplace Data

The data confirm two major limitations. Maxim overlap was present in 6 of 10 analyzed extracts. Additionally, most non-observances appeared unintentional, resulting from workload and time pressure. This differs from Grice's original focus on purposeful flouting to generate implicature.

This does not render Grice irrelevant. It remains useful for analyzing moments of ambiguity, humor, and indirectness. However, as a primary framework for workplace discourse, it is insufficient.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study supports a genre-sensitive approach to pragmatics. No single model is universally superior; applicability depends on discourse context.

Practically, organizations could benefit from training employees in speech act awareness, particularly in the appropriate use of directives and mitigation strategies to balance efficiency and collegiality.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its single-site, single-transcript design. Future research should use larger workplace corpora and compare across cultures. A mixed-methods approach combining Speech Act coding with Conversation Analysis would also be valuable.

7. Conclusion

This comparative analysis has demonstrated that Speech Act Theory provides superior analytical tools for professional discourse. The Hadfield Institute data are characterized by explicit, action-performing utterances that align directly with Speech Act categories. While Gricean Pragmatics offers insights into inference, its utility is limited by theoretical ambiguity and contextual mismatch. For analyzing task-oriented, asymmetrical workplace interaction, a speech-act based approach is recommended.

Pragmatic Paradigms in Professional Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics

Conversation Transcription

This conversation is among three people **A**, **B**, And **C** in their workplace, Hadfield institute. There are some symbols I refer to in this conversation. For example, a colon (:) indicates that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The number in brackets indicates a time gap. Words in capitals mark a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it. We use a single left hand square bracket [to indicate that someone has start speaking, but that someone else speaks during their turn. (()) indicates to non-verbal activity. Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis. Finally, the coloured pieces are the ones that I have used in my essay as examples.

1- A: Samira

2- B: Yes

3-A: Where is yo:ur (0.2) file of all the students? (0.3) shall we go through them?

4- B: Yea (.10) if we take out people that we've received the letters for (.) who I rang, yea?

5- A: Yeah, I agree with you

6-B: The ones we know that are definitely coming

7- A: Yea, so

8- B: Yea, that one

9- A: What are you going to .. I think you need to (..) and need to create a ... learner file.

10- B: Yea. Two files.

11- A: Yea

12- B: One at the reception and one in the student's file

13- A: Don't forget to put theinduction sheet

14- B: it's not here yet so I want

15- A: so I just want to make that all the new students have an induction now.

16- B: Yea

17- A: Nobody can register without a proper induction

18- B: Yea, they're doing it

19- A: That's good

20- B: If you take out also Afeesh, we going to be defiantly sending his letter out today. That's for Anya. Put in that file as well because he's coming.

21- A: Yea, that's done with. Do you put the assessment papers where this should go? You want to put them in the admin file, don't you?

22- B: No....

23- A: Where are they going to ..?

24- B: They going in the learner file

25- A: Learner file, OK. That's fine.

26- B: And when they come we can send them an induction

27- A: Oh, oh,

28- B: Their sheet's here.

29- A: So that's to confirm, yea?

30- B: Yea.

31- A: I think I can assure you that this will all come together.

32- B: Well he's coming on the 16th, isn't he?

33- A: Yea.

34- B: Yea, so...

35- A: So I came on, on Ashraf actually. They'll come on 16th.

Pragmatic Paradigms in Professional Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics

- 36- B: Alright then.
- 37- A: So, this is... you can treat them and what I will do. .shall I make a phone call to, to double check with Ashraf? Yea?
- 38- B: Yes.
- 39- A: I'll try using my mobile. OK.
- 40- B: OK. Mahmoud, you know yesterday? I left a note on your computer about this student.
- 41- A: Was that you?
- 42- B: Yes.
- 43- A: What did ...?
- 44- B: Did you ring them back?
- 45- A: No, what did he ...?
- 46- B: Oh! He's going to get mad! He came in and you got back and I told him we cannot take 2 kids.
- 47- A: Mm mm
- 48- B: He goes "the other kid will only want one for two days".
- 49- A: It isn't possible.
- 50- B: I told him and then he goes "I need to speak to Mahmoud". I've got his details.
- 51- A: I can't take those children at all.
- 52- (PHONE RINGS)
- 53- B: Hadfield Institute, good morning. Er no, I'm holding a lot of this (..) & uh Karim has gone. He left around 11 o'clock, yes. Yea, Mahmoud's here. OK, oh I put a load of letters in your pigeon hole. I just thought I'd let you know. OK, Mahmoud's here, just hold on.
- 54- B: Regarding the meeting.
- 55- A: Which meeting?
- 56- A: Hello. (.) Good morning- how are you? I'm O, thank you.....the tonight one? Yea, hmhm. Is it, from the previous meeting? That's OK. I think we mentioned that in the meeting. We have to remember that not everybody was there, yea, when we agreed that. I appreciate that, I think we need to...double check with people who were not in attendance and ... we will talk about it, we talk, yea. OK, bye bye.
- 57- A: Sara. Do you have any information about Sara? Because actually the phone number that she uses it's it's.
- 58- B: Sara Bousaed?
- 59- A: Sara yea.
- 60- B: No, I don't have any. That the only way information I've got there.
- 61- A: what do you think...
- 62- B: I'll email her. Yea.
- 63- A: Can you use the email and email her?
- 64- B: (.) I'll use the email and email her.
- 65- A: [If that's the only way.
- 66- B: Yesterday a message was left
- 67- A: (0.1) from?
- 68- B: (.) from Sara Bosaed and I didn't take it.
- 69- A: Who did?
- 70- B: Umm (0.2) it must have been Nadia who took the message.
- 71- A: What did she say?
- 72- B: She wanted to take for March (.) which means she might not be planning to come back. She only rang.
- 73- A: OK. TRY AGAIN.
- 74- B: But I'll email her.
- 75- A: [email her, yes

**Pragmatic Paradigms in Professional Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Speech Act
Theory and Gricean Pragmatics**

- 76- (0.26)
77- A: All this stuff to look at here. Umm, but uuh (.1) it's a bit difficult ()
78- B: I'm just saying why does Sara come?
79- (0.9)
80- A: What did you say in the email?
81- B: I've not finished
82- A: OKAH
83- (0.56)
84- B: I put here "Sara at Hadfield (.) is registered to study English and we gave her a start date of the 12th of October" [
85- A: Hm hm
86- B: " but unfortunately she did not attend. Can you explain to me whether Sara is still interested in studying with us or not?"
87- A: Yea, that's OK
88- B: OK.
89- A: That's enough. Have you checked with the nursery if they still have any places now?
90- B: They're full.
91- A: No...after we reviewed they said we, we, er....
92- B: I can go to her now and ask her.
93- A: OK, let me ask you about something else. Eman- is she renewing?
94- B: Eman, I've just finished doing her progress report. She says she needs to send it to the embassy so they can renew for it.
95- A: When did she talk to you? Today?
96- B: Er, Last week.
97- B: OK, I'll change it. OK, shall I go to the crèche?
98- A: No, that's OK. You can go end of the day.
99- A: Samira.
100- B: Yea.
101- A: How many sponsorship do we have now?
102- B: How many sponsorship do we have again?
103- A: Well, if we include these four, confirmed four, those we still have.
104- B: At the moment we've got 26 sponsorships.
105- A: Twenty six?
106- B: Yea.
107- A: OK, 26. And we have privately paying, 2 yea?
108- B: Who's ... there only this one is it? Nadia private?
109- A: Yea, yea.
110- B: I don't know. Somebody left them here in reception.
111- A: So we have 26 is what I'm talking about. Plus another one.
112- B: Yea, yea, yea no problem.
113- A: Have yo:u finished the timesheets?
114- B: Err, no, well I've done 3 last week we kept on finishing early but I don't know what (pause)
115- A: So: you don't record the details on the timesheets, yea? Ok, she's not, er. Ok, ok.
116- C: I'M GOING NOW
117- A: I owe you a lot of money(.) I can't pay you (.) today. Today I have exceptionally. (0.3) so, do you need money?
118- C: Well, if you're offering. If you're offering ((laughing)) Mahmoud (.) Mahmoud, when you need lunch, you think, give us a shout and I'll cover. OK?
119- B: OK.
120- A: Money, money money.

Pragmatic Paradigms in Professional Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics

- 121- B: Oh!
- 122- C: What's worth?
- 123- ((laughing))
- 124- C: Oh well then, you owe me nothing.
- 125- A: You know, it was five dollars, which cost of (.....)
- 126- ((Laughing))
- 127- C: OH oh
- 128- A: Yea?
- 129- C: Have cigarette and then try and get organised ... Ah that's a bitI know what I came to find.
- 130- B: Kate, I need you to find them progress reports for me.
- 131- C: Are the collecting them today?
- 132- B: Er.... No tomorrow.
- 133- C: Don't worry.
- 134- A: What time are you planning to lunch, Samira?
- 135- B: I don't know, why are you ...? Do you want something?
- 136- A: No, I have my lunch with me today. I just want to cover for you if you want to go for lunch.
- 137- C: I've already offered.
- 138- B: Kate's already offered.
- 139- A: Kate, Kate's....
- 140- B: Manager's offer.
- 141- C: Only when you want something.
- 142- B: I'll let one of you know then.
- 143- A: She's offering to take money, she is offering to.....
- 144- C: To take your lights.
- 145- (3.0)
- 146- C: What's the trip to London for?
- 147- A: It's fo:r (0.1) public relation activity.
- 148- C: [Not good enough. That doesn't, that doesn't require me to ((laughing)) (0.2) authorise either Friday, I'm sorry.
- 149- A: hmmm
- 150- C: that could be going to do some shopping for your wife in Harrods or something.

THE END

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). How to do things with words. Oxford University Press.
- Ali, R. S. (2025). EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Attitudes Towards Using AI Applications. *Al-Farooq Journal of Sciences*, 1(1), 93-109.
- Bargiela-Chiappini, F., & Harris, S. (1997). Managing language: The discourse of corporate meetings. John Benjamins.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Politeness: Some universals in language usage. Cambridge University Press.
- Drew, P., & Heritage, J. (1992). Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings. Cambridge University Press.
- Frederking, R. E. (2009). Grice's Maxims: "Do the right things". Retrieved from <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~ref/grice-final.pdf>
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (pp. 41-58). Academic Press.

Pragmatic Paradigms in Professional Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics

- Holmes, J. (2000). An introduction to sociolinguistics (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). Pragmatics. Cambridge University Press.
- Latif, M. B., & Saeid, S. A. M. (2026). The Impact of Teaching English Literature as an Elective Course to Fourth-Year ESL Students in a University Context. *Al-Farooq Journal of Sciences*, 2(3), 1166-1179.
- Petrey, S. (1990). Speech acts and literary theory. Routledge.
- Schiffrin, D. (1994). Approaches to discourse. Blackwell.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language. Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1979). Expression and meaning. Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, J. (1995). Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics. Longman.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (Ed.). (1997). Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction. SAGE.
- Vine, B. (2009). Directives at work: Exploring the contextual complexity of workplace