

Facial Expressions and Speech Acts

The illocutionary force-indicator devices (IFIDs) are all the linguistic elements that indicate how an utterance is to be taken, i.e. what illocutionary act a speaker is performing while uttering a sentence (Searle & Vanderveken 1985). Up to now, research in linguistics and psycholinguistics has produced a rich literature focused strictly on the *linguistic* IFIDs (i.e. semantic, syntactic and prosodical IFIDs). Nonetheless, it is commonly recognized that the comprehension of a speech act depends on non-verbal illocutionary force-indicators devices too. Indeed, decoding the illocutionary force of a speech act constitutes a multimodal process that often involves the computing of non-verbal signals such as gestures – e.g. movements of the hands and of the body – or postural signs – e.g. arms folded. A psycholinguistic research line on non-verbal IFIDs is still lacking though.

The present paper proposes three production and comprehension psycholinguistic experiments aimed at evaluating the role of facial expressions (Ekman & Friesen 1978) as non-verbal IFIDs for three prototypical types of illocutionary forces: assertions, questions and orders. Data collected support three main results: (i) there are peculiar facial Action units and combinations of action units jointly produced with the speech acts of assertions, questions and orders. (ii) There are Action units and combinations of action units in the upper face that in language comprehension are significantly recognized as illocutionary force indicators for the three illocutionary forces at stake. (iii) Different Action units and combinations of action units indicating the acts of assertion, question and order are associated with the corresponding speech act with different degrees of compatibility. Finally, different action units indicating the very same illocutionary force can be interpreted as either a IFID for a direct speech act or as a IFID for an indirect speech act (Searle 1975).

References

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