

## Speech-acts as a Hindrance to Communication: The Case of the Hotel Reception Profession

أفعال الكلام كعائق للتواصل: مهنة الاستقبال الفندقى أنموذجا

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### Abstract:

This research aims to study the hotel customers' satisfaction with the reception staff's performance of speech-acts in the working environment. Depending on customers' expectations, visions and perceptions, some information about the speech-acts required at the front desk service were given to determine what language functions should be improved in the hotel reception profession. Using the convenience sample technique, a questionnaire was submitted to the English native and non-native-speakers customers of an Algerian Hotel to collect data, which was analyzed using descriptive statistics, standard deviation, and gap analysis. The results showed that improper use of speech-acts may affect the communication between the hotel reception staff and their clientele.

**Keywords:** Hotel Reception; Speech-acts; Customers' Satisfaction; Communication, English for Specific Purposes.

### ملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة رضا عملاء الفندق عن استخدام موظفي الاستقبال لأفعال الكلام في بيئة العمل. اعتمادا على توقعات العملاء، والرؤى والتصورات، أعطيت بعض المعلومات حول أفعال الكلام المطلوبة في مكتب الاستقبال في الفندق لتحديد ما هي وظائف اللغة التي ينبغي تحسينها في مكان العمل. باستخدام تقنية العينة الملائمة لأخذ العينات، تم تقديم استبيان إلى العملاء الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية أو غير الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية بفندق جزائري لجمع البيانات، والتي تم تحليلها باستخدام الإحصاءات الوصفية والانحراف المعياري وتحليل الفجوة. أظهرت النتائج أن الاستخدام غير المناسب لأفعال الكلام قد يؤثر على التواصل بين موظفي الاستقبال الفندقى وعملائهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستقبال الفندقى، أفعال الكلام، رضا الزبائن، التواصل، اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة.

## 1. Introduction

Successful Communication in workplace is a key to lucrative business. To avoid the problem of miscommunication, specialists, educators, and course designers implemented the English for Specific Purposes (Henceforth, ESP) approach in teaching English. This method stresses some particular required skills and speech- acts over others because the ESP teaching or learning is constrained by time.. Specialized fields, such as Hotel Management, need knowledgeable personnel to reach communicative competence and make their customers satisfied with their service. This research studies the speech-acts at the hotel reception and their impact on the service quality. It examines the hotel customers' satisfaction with the receptionists' use of language functions (speech-

acts). It to identify the speech-acts that the hotel receptionists should improve to please their visitors. The investigation depended on one fundamental research question: Which speech-acts should be improved? To answer the question, it was estimated that hotel customers were disappointed with the receptionists' use of speech-act. Their disappointment was due to their failure in using speech-acts (such as welcoming, dealing with complaints ...).

## 2. Literature Review

Speech-act is a keyword in the field of pragmatics; it is defined as the analysis of speakers' purpose and what they mean when they employ a specific language item in setting (Hatch, 1992). Today, there is a growing awareness of the characteristics of "paroles" and special care to represent those particular speech-acts and personal communicative acts (Widdowson, 1983). Basturkmen (2006) stated that language functions link the speaker/writer's words to his communicative purposes. This means that individuals do not employ language to state things only, but to get things done or to perform activities. Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) confirmed that language necessitates conveying meanings in certain situations through functions or speech-acts such as requesting, suggesting, promising, and describing. Likewise, Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006) explained that 'speech acts such as requests, offers, invitations, apologies, and complaints are often performed over a series of strategic turns, with an initial preface, for instance, being used to reduce the risks involved in performing the speech act from 'cold'(p. 164).

Speech-acts, therefore, differ from one setting to another according to the objective of the target situation. Realizing how to apply which speech- acts in which context lessens miscommunication. In business, some speech-acts are consumed more frequently than others are. For instance, orders or requesting that somebody complete something, have nearly become everyday schedules inside and across organizations. Because speech-acts fluctuate according to the setting, it is important to examine the regular speech-acts that happen in a specific field to highlight them when teaching/ learning the language specific to it. Determining the speech-acts and skills of a certain field may help reach a certain communicative competence.

Blue and Harun (2000) examined communication between hotel staff and their clients at hotel receptions to find the language patterns used for hospitality purposes. They identified speech-acts as frequent regularities in this context and they found out hotel receptionists should develop a set of language skills such as addressing people appropriately, soliciting and giving the necessary information, responding to questions/requests, using prompts, using gestures, managing difficult customers and appeasing complainants. The primary speech-acts that happen at the hotel front desk were welcoming, managing complaints, and reacting to customers' solicitations for information or amenities. Consequently, these speech-acts were the center of this research paper.

The front desk bodies symbolize the entire services of the hotel because they are the liaison between the organization and the customers. The receptionists should satisfy their visitors to convince them to return to the hotel. To achieve this goal, customers' communicative needs should exceed their anticipations through receptionist' language proficiency and competence. The present research explores the speech-acts hotel receptionists should acquire to reduce misunderstanding between them and their transitory guests.

## 3. Research Methodology

The target population in the current investigation was the Algerian hotel visitors. Non-probability sampling is decided to be the most appropriate technique to gather information to collect data. Convenience sampling is simple and useful because data can be collected in a short time (Cohen et al., 2000). The researcher, in convenience sampling, seeks the available access without

the intention of generalizing the findings i.e. Accessibility was the first principle for the hotel receptionists sample size instead of the generalization, 'Description rather than generalization is the goal' in purposive sampling (Dawson, 2002, p. 49). This principle brought the sample size to sixty guests from different hotels. A questionnaire was used to gather information and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of means, standard deviations and gap analysis to measure customers' satisfaction.

#### 4. Findings

The hotel customers were rearranged into two groups: native speakers and non-native speakers of English as presented in table 1 below. The majority of customers were non-native speakers of English (68.34%).

**Table .1: Native versus Non-native Speakers of English Respondents**

Nationality	Number of respondents	Percentage
English Native Speakers	19	31.66%
Non-native English Speakers	41	68.34%
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### 4.1. Customers' Anticipation and Perception

The general mean score of perception was 4.08 with a standard deviation of 0.74, in other words, visitors received a high level of service quality in regards to the speech-acts performed by the receptionists. This level met their desire, which was evaluated at a high level, too (3.75). It is important to highlight that customers felt a moderate level towards receptionists' use of the right address forms (3.13); however, they anticipated a high level (3.45). The standard deviation of perception was 1.25, which demonstrated that receptionists' responses changed from one respondent to another. Visitors' perception was at a very high level in greeting their clients suitably, responding to their solicitations correctly and dealing with their complaints tactfully (See Table . 2 below)

**Table .2: Respondents' Anticipation and Perception**

The hotel receptionists can:	Expectations			Satisfaction		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. greet you properly.	3,42	0,67	high	4,34	0,92	very high
2. ask proper inquiries.	2,85	1,37	moderate	3,68	0,85	high
3. respond to your solicitations correctly.	3,98	0,91	high	4,31	0,51	very high
4. deal with your complaints tactfully.	4,40	0,96	very high	4,97	0,07	very high
5. understand your problem	4,13	1,02	high	4,59	0,73	very high
6. ask for additional information appropriately	3,98	0,95	high	3,58	0,82	high
7. use the right address forms.	3,45	0,68	high	3,13	1,25	moderate
<b>Score</b>	<b>3,75</b>	<b>0,94</b>	<b>high</b>	<b>4,08</b>	<b>0,74</b>	<b>high</b>

#### 4.2. The Gap between Customers' Expectations and Perceptions

The divergence between clients' customers' anticipations and observations quantifies their satisfaction and unveils whether they are satisfied or not. Table. 03 below shows that visitors were satisfied with the speech - acts (with 0.36 difference between their expectations and their perceptions). It was surprising that they were disappointed with the receptionists' use of the right address forms (- 0.33) and their request for additional information appropriately (- 0.41).

**Table .3: The Gap between Respondents' Expectations and Perceptions**

Speech-acts: The front desk staff can:	C.E	C.P	Gap
1. greet you suitably.	3,42	4,34	0,93
2. ask proper inquiries.	2,85	3,68	0,83
3. respond to your solicitations fittingly.	3,98	4,31	0,33
4. deal with your complaints tactfully.	4,40	4,97	0,57
5. understand your problem	4,13	4,59	0,46
6. ask for additional information appropriately	3,98	3,58	-0,41
7. Use the right address forms.	3,45	3,13	-0,33
<b>Overall mean score</b>	<b>3,75</b>	<b>4,08</b>	<b>0,36</b>

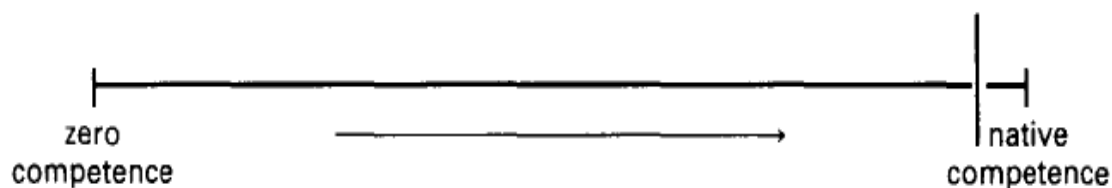
## 5. Discussions

The hotel visitors were highly satisfied with the receptionists' performance of the speech-acts. They perceived a significant level of service quality. However, some disappointments happened at the level of some speech-acts use. This might be because of the little consideration paid to such socio-pragmatic skills in textbooks designed for non-English-speaking backgrounds workers as Holmes confirmed in his study of 50 textbooks for English for the workplace. He found out that 'most devoted less than 15% of their content to social and interpersonal aspects of workplace interaction such as small talk' (2005, p. 347). He added that even advanced textbooks regularly marginalized this feature totally; casual chitchat is viewed as too fundamental to even think about deserving consideration (ibid).

Basturkmen affirmed that there is a distinction between the employment of speech-acts by native speakers and non-native speakers of English (2006, p. 50). For example, it is entirely proper to ask a Euro-American male traveler about his spouse. Nevertheless, this would be a break of social behavior for a male from the United Arab Emirates (Reisinger, 2009). Medgyes (1992) commented that the best non- native speakers of English would never reach 'native competence' regardless of their endeavors. As presented in figure. 01, non-native speakers will consistently be ended up by an obstacle that is a sort of imperceptible 'plateau' where their language ability will remain blocked (ibid, p. 342).

Research has indicated that regardless of the levels of grammatical competence, non- native speakers may experience communication issues because of their inability to express speech-acts properly (Bardovi-Harlig, 1990; Thomas, 1983 cited in Basturkmen, 2006). This paper uncovered that hotel customers concurred that the front office staff (who are non-native speakers of English) could not request additional information appropriately and that they could not use the right address forms. This infers that there is somewhat diverse cross-cultural linguistic politeness that needs formal types of address.

Figure. 1: Interlanguage Continuum



Source: Medgyes, 1992, p. 342

Each language has its linguistic politeness. The most significant components affecting speakers in their selection of words for showing politeness are the ratio of the speech-acts in the culture, the distance between speakers and the relations between them (Brown and Levinson, 1988). Speech-acts are linked to one's culture. This means that if the hotel receptionists are not acquainted with the speech-acts used in a particular culture; they may fail in communicating with visitors belonging to this culture. A clear example is given by Reisinger who states that 'In Europe, addressing other people by their second names and professional titles, such as "Dr" or "Mr" is expected. In Asian cultures, the appropriate and formal address forms are very finely differentiated, according to social status, age and gender' (2009, p. 175)

Malaysian respondents considered that the front line staff could not react to their solicitations properly and that they could not understand their complaints. This infers that Malaysians are delicate and sensitive while communicating with others. They care very much about speech-acts performed by their hosts. Malaysians and Koreans are increasingly worried about the individuals with whom they work or cooperate socially (Reisinger, 2009). Italian visitors were satisfied with the speech-acts utilized by the hotel receptionists. This may be because Italians 'are very creative and can find solutions to any problem; they are very good at getting around and beating the system' (ibid: 362).

The findings show that the front line workers ought to figure out how to develop their use of various speech-acts following their clients' cultures. The appropriate use of linguistic politeness is noteworthy in hotel reception vocation. Consequently, receptionists should think about the forms of address when talking, posing inquiries and managing customers' complaints as well as solicitations. In this way, the hypothesis assuming that customers' dissatisfaction was because of their disappointment with the receptionists' misuse of speech- acts was somewhat affirmed.

## 6. Recommendations and Implementations

Exploring the front office employees' performance of the speech-acts through hotel customers' satisfaction, expectations and perceptions led to a set of recommendations and guidelines based on the study findings. These proposed suggestions are intended to improve ESP for Tourism, particularly Hotel Management. Needs Analysis is a key element in ESP courses that should be an on-going activity. A regular Needs Analysis can be converted into a formative assessment (Dudley Evans and St John, 1998). To identify the receptionists' language needs in the working environment, a Needs Analysis is vital. Apprentices' needs cannot decide the final objective; other factors should be taken into consideration while designing syllabi. In the business industry, the client is the mirror of the entire organization. Clients' desires and satisfaction could be used in Needs Analysis to check feedback and to measure the service quality. Needs Analysis is intended to expand business success and allow the personnel to play out their job successfully.

Based on clients' feedback, course designers can evaluate the ESP syllabus for hotel receptionists taught in training centers on the one hand. On the other hand, hotel managers can improve the service quality provided by their service encounter. Hotel administrators should be aware of the importance of continuous Needs Analysis. They should assign ESP practitioners the task of conducting Needs Analysis for their employees. Such Needs Analysis is known as Language Auditing. It is particularly relevant to Business Communication in companies. According to Huhta (2002), Language Auditing is the first step in diagnosing language challenges and analyzing the potential of the staff on a strategic level. ESP practitioners can conduct negotiations with senior management. They need to identify the hotel communication environment and its needs by asking key questions. Needs Analysis should be conducted repeatedly throughout the training period so that to get feedback on the effectiveness of the syllabus.

A training course should be arranged for the front desk staff before starting work and for on-the-job training. Hotel managers should be aware of the importance of training. Hotel receptionists need specific English skills. Much research proved the effectiveness of the on-going training at the workplace in business. Hotel managers should plan on-going training for their reception employees. A teacher or an ESP practitioner should be assigned the role of providing them with practical English language training, focusing on the language used at the front office where the interactions between the receptionists and their clients occur. Hard situations (such as dealing with complaints, responding to requests and the like) that the front desk employees may encounter should be included as part of the training.

## 7. Conclusion

When managing English for Vocational or Professional Purposes, syllabi planners should consider the business target. English for Hotel Reception is a specific discipline where English does not involve language accuracy only; it focuses on the effectiveness of the communication that affects business. There is a need for planning a syllabus dependent on customers' satisfaction and visions. This prospectus can be founded on customers- centered approach. This investigation found out that speech-acts often occur at the front desk. They should be highlighted to help the receptionists communicate adequately with their customers. The difference between English native speakers and the non-native speakers' different employments of speech- acts should be part of the syllabus.

This research should be properly observed as a little exploratory investigation instead of an in-depth study. It is important to consider various constraints that ought to be remembered for additional research. Regarding the choice of instruments, the study included an assessment of attitudes, views and convictions; there is a probability that respondents may react with a complimentary aim. Questionnaires provide subjective information and they can be unrepresentative for various reasons. The investigation could not give a greater sample. A survey was used to give information yet there exist different sorts of triangulation, for example, time, space, and people.

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