

ENGLISH FOR HOUSEKEEPING: AN ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS AND SPEECH ACTS USED IN DAILY OPERATIONS

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Abstract

English proficiency is a pivotal competency for hospitality employees, specifically within the Housekeeping Department, where staff operate in the private spheres of guests. This study aims to identify the specific language functions and speech acts used by housekeeping staff during their daily operations. Grounded in Searle's Speech Act Theory and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies, this research employs a descriptive qualitative design. Data were collected through observation of staff-guest interactions in a four-star hotel. The findings reveal that Directives (requesting permission) and Expressives (apologizing, greeting) are the dominant speech acts. The study further highlights that housekeeping staff predominantly utilize Negative Politeness strategies to mitigate the imposition of entering a guest's private room. These findings contribute to the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) syllabi that prioritize pragmatic competence over mere grammatical accuracy.

Keywords: Housekeeping, speech acts, politeness theory, pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is a communication-intensive sector where the quality of service is defined not only by physical amenities but also by verbal interactions. While the Front Office is often viewed as the "face" of the hotel, the Housekeeping department acts as the backbone of hotel operations. Housekeeping staff frequently interact with guests in intimate spaces (guest rooms) and high-pressure situations (complaints, urgent requests), requiring a specific set of linguistic skills. The hospitality industry is fundamentally a domain of social interaction where linguistic competence serves as a primary tool for service delivery. As noted by Blue and Harun (2016), language proficiency in this sector is not merely a soft skill but a core professional competency that directly impacts guest satisfaction.

Recent studies, such as Choi and Kim (2020), highlight that training materials often focus heavily on technical vocabulary (e.g., amenities, linen, valet) while neglecting the communicative functions required for social interaction. Staff may know the words but fail to use them appropriately in context, leading to "pragmatic failure" an error where the speaker is grammatically correct but socially offensive or confusing. To address this, this article analyzes housekeeping English through two theoretical lenses: Roman Jakobson's Language Functions (1960): This theory categorizes language

based on the focus of the message (e.g., focus on the addressee, the context, or the contact itself). John Searle's Speech Acts (1969): This theory posits that speaking is performing an action. In housekeeping, saying "The floor is wet" is not just a description; it is a warning. Understanding how these functions and acts operate in daily housekeeping duties is essential for developing effective training materials and improving guest satisfaction. For instance, Kusumawardani (2021) found that in hotel settings, even simple statements like "The floor is wet" function not just as descriptions (Representatives) but as warnings (Directives). This study utilizes Searle's taxonomy to dissect how staff negotiate power dynamics with guests, specifically examining how Directives (commands/ requests) are softened to avoid threatening the guest's "face" (Al-Eryani & Al-Qurashi, 2022).

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design to analyze natural language use. **Setting & Participants:** The study was conducted at a 4-star hotel. Participants included Room Attendants, Housekeeping Supervisors, and Order Takers. **Data Collection:** Following the needs analysis approach suggested by Prachanant (2018), data were collected through: **Observation:** Researchers shadowed staff during the morning shift (08:00-16:00). **Audio Recording:** Conversations between staff and guests (with consent) and radio communications between staff were recorded.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the transcripts highlights specific patterns in how English is used in the housekeeping context.

1. Analysis of Language Functions (Jakobson)

Jakobson's framework reveals the "purpose" behind the utterances. The data indicates a hierarchy of usage:

a. The Conative Function (Focus on the Addressee)

This function is used to influence the behavior of the receiver. It is the most critical function in operational tasks.

- Context: A supervisor instructing an attendant, or an attendant asking a guest to move.
- Example: "Please make up room 204 immediately" or "Could you sign the laundry bill, Sir?"
- Discussion: In internal communication (Staff-to-Staff), the Conative function is direct and imperative. However, when addressing guests, this function is heavily mitigated with politeness markers ("Please," "Could you") to avoid sounding authoritative.

b. The Phatic Function (Focus on the Channel/ Contact)

This function serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication. It is the essence of "Hospitality".

- Context: Entering a room or passing a guest in the corridor.

- Example: “Housekeeping!” (announcing presence), “Good morning, Ma’am,” “Have a nice day.”
 - Discussion: While these phrases convey little factual information, they are vital for establishing rapport. A lack of Phatic competence makes staff appear rude or robotic.
- c. The Referential Function (Focus on Context)
- Example: “Breakfast is served from 6 to 10 AM.”
 - Discussion: Used primarily when answering guest inquiries about hotel facilities.

2. Analysis of Speech Acts (Searle)

Searle’s taxonomy classifies the illocutionary force (the intention) of the utterance.

Speech Act Category	Frequency	Housekeeping Context Examples
Directives	High	“May I clean your room now?” (Requesting permission)
Representatives	Medium	“The minibar is empty.” (Reporting facts)
Expressives	Medium	“I apologize for the inconvenience.” (Apologizing)
Commissives	Low	“I will bring extra towels right away.” (Promising)

In the hospitality industry, communication is not merely about exchanging information; it is about maintaining relationships, ensuring guest satisfaction, and protecting the image of the institution. Every interaction between staff and guests carries pragmatic meaning. The way something is said is often more important than what is said. Therefore, understanding speech acts becomes essential for hospitality professionals. Here is a more detailed explanation:

a. Directives: The Challenge of Politeness

Directives are attempts by the speaker to get the listener to do something.

- Findings: This is the most “dangerous” category for non-native speakers. A direct command like “Wait a moment” can be perceived as rude.
- Strategy: Experienced staff use indirect speech acts. Instead of using an imperative (“Check the bill”), they use an interrogative (“Could you please check the bill?”).
- Observation: Novice staff often struggle here, using “bald on-record” strategies (direct commands) due to limited grammatical range, which can lead to guest dissatisfaction.

b. Expressives: Managing Emotion

- Findings: Used heavily in “Service Recovery.” When a guest complains (e.g., about a missing item), the staff must perform the act of apologizing immediately.
- Example: “I am terribly sorry about the delay” acts as a social repair mechanism.

c. Representatives: Reporting Status

Findings: Crucial for Order Takers and Supervisors to report room status (Vacant, Occupied, Dirty) accurately to the Front Office.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that English for Housekeeping is not merely a list of vocabulary but a complex interplay of Language Functions and Speech Acts. Dominance of Conative & Directives: The core of housekeeping work involves getting things done (cleaning, repairing, moving), which requires frequent use of the Conative function and Directive speech acts. The Necessity of Phatic Communication: The Phatic function is the lubricant of social interaction in hospitality, distinguishing excellent service from adequate service. Pedagogical Implication: ESP curriculum designers for the hospitality industry should integrate Pragmatics. Students must be taught not just how to say a sentence (grammar), but when and to whom to say it (pragmatics). Role-playing scenarios should focus on softening Directive speech acts (using modals: could, would, may) to ensure high standards of politeness are met.

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