

Assertive and Commissive Speech Acts in Edward Albee's *The American Dream*: A Study

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Abstract

The present paper's aim is to study and analyze Assertive and Commissive Speech act theory in the play, *The American Dream*. The play deals with a satire on American family life, concerns a married couple and their elderly mother. On a particular day, they are visited by two guests who turn their worlds upside down. In pragmatics, speech acts are considered the essence of communication in written or spoken discourse. The speech act theory is applied to the study of language to explore from the user's point of view, the choices he makes, the constraints he faces in using language in social interactions and the effects of language on the other participants. Therefore, the theory of speech acts is an effective tool to infer the unstated meanings of the utterances used by the characters. While analyzing the utterances, the study focuses on investigating how context sometimes forces the addressees to choose one interpretation rather than another.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech acts, discourse, assertive, commissive, utterance, etc.

Introduction

Language is a means of communication. The communication in language cannot take place without society. Society controls the use of language through norms and conditions imposed on the human actions. People make use of language for expressive and communicative purposes. Pragmatics deals with the use of language by the humans while communicating with each other. The use of language in the human society is determined by interrelations of the human beings and the cultural norms in the society. It is Pragmatics which tries to grapple with the problem of actual usage of language in the interpersonal communication in the society.

In Linguistics, sentence is hypothetical to be the basic unit of syntax. But in Pragmatics,

speech act is the central concept for the pragmatic analysis of any discourse. Speech, rather than writing, acquired importance with the development of linguistic theory, which considered speech to be primary and writing a derivation of speech. J. L. Austin developed his theory of Speech Acts in his set of lectures published under the title, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).

Searle systematizes Austin's classification of speech acts saying that should be reasoned classification of illocutionary speech acts into certain basic categories or types. He states that Austin's criteria for classifying speech acts are overlapping. Austin, in his classification, emphasizes speech act verbs, but Searle points out that the classification, emphasizing speech act verbs cannot be a criterion for such classification. He divides

illocutionary speech acts taking out the illocutionary point such as to get the listener to do something, commit the speaker to do something. With this Searle (1976) wanted to have a scheme of classification based on felicity conditions, and proposes five basic kinds of actions as given below:

Assertive (or Representatives): This speech act can have the value of being true or false. Here, the speaker asserts a proposition to be true, using such verbs as affirm, believe, conclude, report, deny. This class also includes some stating, suggesting, criticizing, replying, concluding, predicting, denying, disagreeing etc.

Directive: As name suggests, this speech act expects the hearer to do something. This speech act involves requesting, ordering, questioning, etc. Directive speech acts can be forceful as commands. This can also be asking for information or indicating an indirect command.

Commissive: This speech act commits the speaker to do something. Here, the speaker commits himself/herself to a future course of action by using verbs such as: guarantee, pledge, promise, swear, vow, undertake, warrant etc. They express the intention of the speaker. This speech act express promises, threats, refusals, etc.

Expressive: This is the speech act in which the speaker expresses an attitude to or about a state of affairs using verbs such as: apologize, appreciate, congratulate, deplore, detest, regret, thank, welcome etc. In other words, they express the psychological state of the speaker's mind in making statements of pleasure, pain, joy, sorrow etc. The feelings

of the speaker are expressed through this speech act.

Declarative: In this speech act, the speaker intends to change the state of things or affairs. For example, in police station, the police officer's the expressions like 'I resign my job' or 'you are out' are declarative acts.

In this research paper the researcher is trying to apply the framework of Pragmatics to the analysis of speech acts occurring in the dramatic discourse. While reading a literary text, the reader, in a way, recreates what the author has written. In that sense it is an innovative process. The speech acts in a dramatic work can be analyzed in terms of the typology of speech acts stated by Searle. Searle's typology states five major speech acts. Pragmatics is essentially concerned with the use of language. But both Austin and Searle illustrate the typology of speech acts taking examples of single sentence. The researcher has to pay attention to the contextual aspects or conditions that obtain in the case of speech acts in a dramatic discourse, taking into account the social, cultural aspects and interpersonal relationship between the characters who interact. In view of this, the researcher is going to discuss here only two major speech acts such as Assertive and Commissive occurring in *The American Dream* (1961) of Edward Albee.

Analysis of Assertive Speech act: "Assertives represent the speaker's belief of something that can be evaluated to be 'true or false' and commit the speaker in varying degrees to something being the case, i.e., to the truth of the expressed proposition" (Searle, 12). Most of the characters in the

play under consideration tend to assert through their utterances the facts or beliefs which they believe to be true to the best of their knowledge. In other words, by assertion, they represent the world as they believe to be the case.

Utterance One

MOMMY: "We were very poor! But then I married you, Daddy, and now we're very rich" (AD 66).

Speech Situation

The Addressee: Daddy is a pitiful figure emasculated and infantilized by the sadism of Mommy. Under Mommy's reign of terror, Daddy is a negative entity indeed early in the play Mommy reduces his speech to the echo of hers.

The Addresser: Mommy is an archetypal bad mother, Mommy is the household's sadistic disciplinarian, dismissing Grandma and infantilizing Daddy at every turn.

The Context: The above utterance occurs in the play when Daddy and Mommy discuss about her past family life and conditions which Mommy could complete her desire and wishes and now how she fulfills them with Daddy. Mommy assures that all her conditions are be satisfied. Mommy reminisces about how poor she and Grandma used to be and expresses how grateful she is that she married Daddy, who has allowed her and Grandma to finally feel rich.

Deictic Expressions: The person deictic expression 'We' points to Grandma and Mommy and 'I' points to Mommy and 'You' points to Daddy.

Speech act analysis: Mommy, in the above speech act, implicitly asserts her belief that Daddy should know about her past and what her intention behind her marriage and therefore she commits herself to truth of her propositional content. Mommy tries to fit her words to the state of affairs which he believes to be true. Simultaneously, Mommy finds Daddy's weaknesses and presumptions that Daddy should cooperate and understand somewhere in the future. Mommy uses a hypothetical form of utterance and states the factual information about her past life and her intention behind her marriage with Daddy. She informs this to Daddy implicitly. She suggests implicitly that Daddy should not understand how they betray him. It seems that Mommy is aware of her roots, and she remembers just how poor she and Grandma once were. She even speaks nostalgically about many sacrifices Grandma made for her, and the things they did for each other so that they could survive.

The interpersonal relations of Mommy and Daddy create a complex situation for her to talk about her past openly. Therefore, Mammy wants to express her intention implicitly as she asserts that she makes him emotionally blackmail and uses him in threatening and dominating way. In other word, it suggests that how they control and pressurise on Daddy. The utterance further interprets that Mommy taken it in a very casual way and she neglects his intention. Mommy assures that she would get everything.

Utterance Two

MRS. BARKER: (*Pulling the hem of her slip above her knees*) "You're lucky to have such a man for a husband". (AD 79)

Speech Situation

The Addressee: Mommy is Grandma's daughter and Daddy's commanding wife. She fulfills the stereotypical role of a housewife, and it is strongly suggested that she married Daddy for his money.

The Addresser: Mrs. Barker is Mommy's friend. Mrs. Barker is the caricature of the dim-witted socially responsible American housewife.

The Context: The above utterance occurs in the play when Mrs. Barker breezes into the living room. Daddy asks her to come back another time, but Mrs. Barker refuses to leave. Daddy asks Mrs. Barker to sit down, and she does. Mommy offers her a cigarette and a drink. Mrs. Barker refuses the drink and the cigarette at the same time Barker observes Daddy how he works under Mommy and she utters above utterance.

Deictic Expressions: The person deictic expression 'You' points to Mommy 'Husband' points to Daddy.

Speech act analysis: Mrs. Barker's illocution of the utterance is an implicit assertion of her belief that it is a flirting gesture on the part of Daddy. She indirectly states her strong resentment about Daddy's attachment with his wife, Mommy. Therefore, she passes a sharp sarcastic comment on Mommy. The speech act, thus, belongs to Searle's assertive category. It is an instance of indirect speech act having ironic interpretation, viz. Daddy need not entertain Mommy. The expression 'You're lucky' has double meaning, and may be, Mrs. Barker wishes to highlight the other one.

The interpersonal relations of the addresser and addressee are the essential parameters of

this speech act. Mrs. Barker very tactfully uses the face saving strategy to express her strong agreement about Daddy's attachment with Mommy. The successful performance of speech act depends on the addressee's shared knowledge and ability to decode the intended illocutionary force. The implicit illocutionary force of the speech act suggests that Mommy is uncooperative while talking to Daddy. She seems to be a rude and adamant while talking to her husband. Mrs. Barker intends to criticize Mommy's behavior and also wants to say that she should respect and support her husband, Daddy. It is universally acknowledged that behind every successful man there is a woman.

Analysis of Commissive Speech Act:

Commissive speech acts are frequently used by most of the characters in plays. When people find it difficult to fiddle with a situation, they tend to commit themselves to the future course of action such as promising, threatening, vowing, offering, refusing, guaranteeing, etc. In the same way, we find many utterances in a play in which the characters commit themselves to the future course of actions.

However, sometimes commissives are also used to suggest that the actions cannot be performed immediately because of the inappropriate circumstances. Commissive speech acts commonly occur in the play and they play a major role in building the interpersonal bond of relations.

Utterance Three

MRS. BARKAR: "I really do feel that I can trust you. Please tell me why they called and asked us to come." (AD 95).

Speech Situation

The Addressee: Grandma is Mommy's mother. She is portrayed as the most intelligent character in the family. She is the sardonic and witty commentator of the play, Grandma is somewhat marginalized from the central action of the household. Her advanced age allows her to be further isolated from Mommy and Daddy's dialogue due to bouts of (potentially feigned) deafness and senility.

The Addresser: Mrs. Barker is a simplified exaggeration of the typical American housewife, with her sense of social responsibility, Mrs. Barker is representative of a society that would place a child (known as the bumble) in a home where it could be mutilated and brutalized. As the back story or history of Mommy and Daddy is pieced together during the play, the connection between Mrs. Barker and the family becomes one of increasingly complex speculations.

The Context: The above utterance occurs in the play when Mrs. Barker replies that she is not sure that she would not care for some water. Mommy orders Grandma to the kitchen; having quit, Grandma refuses. Moreover, she has hidden everything. Mrs. Barker declares herself in a near-faint, and Mommy goes for water herself. Mrs. Barker relates her disorientation to Grandma and implores her to give up the secret of her visit. Grandma relishes in being implored and asks her to beg again. After some resistance, Mrs. Barker beseeches her a new.

Deictic Expressions: The person deictic expression 'I' points to Mrs. Barker, 'You' points to Grandma and 'They' points to Mommy and Daddy.

Speech act analysis: Mrs. Barker promises to indirectly point out the absurdity of Grandma and consequently commits herself to the future course of action. The promised act seems to be pending for some time now. Mrs. Barker requests Grandma trust her. She therefore, urges Grandma in turn and promises her that the desired action will be soon perpetrated and commits herself to the future course of action.

Syntactically, the utterance is in the present progressive form but the propositional content and its illocutionary force make Mrs. Barker to commit herself to the future course of action. She believes that the committed action will assure Mrs. Barker that the future is bright than the present. According to the propositional content, one could infer the meaning such as Grandma was neither happy in the past nor would be happy even in future with her daughter (Mommy) if she acts according to their wish. Mrs. Barker's intention is that to know the secret why they called and asked her to come. Hence, Mrs. Barker makes a literal promise in the words '*I can trust you*' which does not need much interpretation because its explicit and implicit illocutionary force is quite clear.

Utterance Four

MOMMY: "Nonsense, Grandma! Just wait until I get my hands on you. You're a troublemaker ... that's what you are" (AD 102).

Speech Situation

The Addressee: Grandma is Mommy's mother. She is portrayed as the most intelligent character in the family, and is the only character to physically break the fourth wall.

The Addresser: Mommy is the cruel, domineering, self-centered driving force at the center of the play. She berates and belittles her live-in mother, Grandma, and constantly threatens to have her carted away by “the van man” to live in a nursing home.

The Context: The above utterance occurs in the play when Grandma concludes her story; Daddy calls from upstairs and says that he cannot find the television. Mommy shouts back that she cannot find any water. Grandma laughs, muttering that she’d tried to warn them that everything was hidden. Daddy shouts that he cannot even find Grandma’s room. Mrs. Barker admires Grandma’s ability to hide things. Mommy comes back into the room and chides Grandma for being a “troublemaker,” but Grandma assuages Mommy by telling her that she’ll soon be “out of here.” Mommy says that she’s “sick and tired” of Grandma, and just might send her away in a van.

Deictic Expressions: The person deictic expression ‘I’ points to Mommy ‘You’ points to Grandma.

Speech act analysis: Mommy directly threatens her mother and implicitly directs herself to fight with her. It is implied that Mommy is the mastermind behind the torture of the “bumble” (a child). She threatens Grandma to leave the house. At the surface level, Mommy commits herself to the future course of action but at deeper level she emphatically denies her mother’s suggestion.

Mommy knows the significance of the interpersonal relations of the daughter and

mother. Therefore, she deliberately makes a final attempt through her main interest is to remain in control and make life convenient for herself, which means, among other things, getting rid of outspoken and quarrelsome Grandma, who has become a nuisance. Moreover, in the socio-cultural context, the implied suggestion of leaving home is similar to break up the interpersonal relation. Thus, Mommy not only threatens her mother but also punches her. Mommy and Daddy want to stick their heads in the sand and hide from the mistakes of their past. So Grandma hides some things from them as a way of retaliating.

Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of the selected utterances taken from *The American Dream* has revealed that every utterance is a goal-oriented or a purposeful activity. The characters, by performing an intended act, usually perform other acts as well, because each major speech act contains a wide range of sub-acts such as stating, informing, suggesting, threatening, hypothesizing, commenting, promising, and so on. It is noticed that in the analysis of an explicit meaning of the selected utterances in the play, the characters do not convey more than what they say. However, in the analysis of implicit level, the pragmatic meaning of the character’s utterance conveys more than what is said. Therefore, there is a possibility of having more than one interpretation, in other words, the utterances produced by the characters in the play consist of more than one layer of meaning.

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