

Speech Acts of Request in O.Wilde's The Happy Prince

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Abstract

The theory of speech act contributed by Austin in 1962 has received much consideration in linguistic study. The main objective of this paper is to account for the ways whereby speakers express various actions via language. Accordingly, the current study tries to find answers to the following questions: (1) what is speech act theory? (2) what are the main classifications of speech act theory? (3) what is speech act of request , why it is made, and how it is achieved? The current study aims at: (1) presenting an illustration of speech acts (2) exploring the main classifications of speech acts (3) investigating the essence of speech act of request , the ways whereby it is achieved, and the reasons behind that. The study hypothesizes that (1) speech act denotes the verbal behaviour or the action which is done by the utterance or sentence uttered by a speaker in a certain occasion (2) Austin classifies speech acts into performative and constativeExpositions, whereas Searle states that there are three main acts performed in speech act including ;utterance act , propositional act and illocutionary act (3) speech act of request is an act asked by the speaker and accomplished by the hearer for the benefit of the speaker . There are three basic types of sentences by which speech act of request is made ; declaratives , imperatives, interrogatives. To achieve politeness interrogative sentences are the most recurrent ones so as to mitigate the impact of the action.

The Procedures followed are: (1) presenting a theoretical background of speech acts. (2) highlighting the primary classifications of speech acts (3) elucidating speech act of request, the ways by which it is fulfilled and the grounds that explicate its use. The study is limited to speech act of request in the short story "The Happy Prince " written by Oscar Wilde.

Section one exhibits the problem of the study exposing its aims, hypotheses, procedures and limits. Section two represents a theoretical framework including Austin's Classification of speech acts, the speech act of request, schemes of requesting, sentence kinds denoting request. Section three depicts the data and its analysis. The study ends with a section for its conclusions.

Key Words: speech acts, Austin , request, The Happy Prince, schemes,

An: Introduction

1-1 Speech Acts

According to Crystal (2008: 446) speech act is defined as “a term derived from the work of the philosopher J. L. Austin (1911–60), and now used widely in linguistics, to refer to a theory which analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication”.

This overall approach is known as speech act theory and it is another method by which -philosophers and linguists have tried to classify the ways whereby humans use language, in this case by treating it as parallel to other actions which humans perform. Proponents of speech act theory try, in the first place to list the various possible speech acts which speaker might attempt so as to perform- statements, requests, queries, commands, premises, placing of bets, and so on. (Aitchison, 1999: 98)

There are two classifications of speech act, the first is direct speech acts: the act is expressed overtly by the most obvious linguistics means. For instance , go to bed!. Another is indirect speech act: in that they possess the syntactic

structure more usually associated with another act. For example, “You should have been in bed long ago” (ibid: 99).

Verschueren (1999;22) states that this theory has been one of the most basic components of pragmatics as well as semantics for a long time. It was first introduced by the British Philosopher John Austin in (1962). In his own search for ways of coping with language as a form of action . Austin first made distinction between ‘(constative’ and ‘ performtive’ utterances)’. The performatives are formulated , under appropriate conditions not to describe something but to achieve something . For example , by saying :

(1) I bequeath my car to my brother .

The speaker is not stating a fact about the world , rather he is performing the act of bequeathing . On the other hand , constatives are propositions which can be stated positively or negatively , i.e. , they are statements of facts which could be right or wrong .For example:

(2) She is my sister .

Soon Austin realizes that such a neat distinction is problematic. That is why his conclusion was simple: all utterance contain both constative and performative elements, they are saying and doing at the same time.

Searle (1969: 3-16-24) extended Austin’s theory in a significant publication, speech act (1969), in which he stressed the necessity of relating the function of signs and expressions to the social context in which they occur. The development of speech act theory has led to a split in philosophical semantics into truth- based semantics (involving constatives) in addition to speech act semantics (involving performatives). The distinction can be seen clearly in that between meanings in communication when it is opposed to meaning in language, hence the assign of the former to the field of pragmatics. The philosopher argues that the unity of linguistic communication is not the symbol, word and sentence but rather than the production or issuance of the symbol, word or sentence in the performance of speech act. Searle offers a

little different decomposition of speech act from that proposed by Austin. He distinguishes three distinct acts:

- (I) An utterance act (the production of speech sounds, words, sentences).
- (II) A propositional act (referring to an entity and predicting some properties of the entity).
- (III) An illocutionary act (the making of statement, command, promise,.... etc.).

As he mentions, whereas utterance acts consist simply in uttering strings of words, illocutionary and propositional acts result from the utterance of words in sentence in certain contexts, under certain conditions and with certain intentions.

1-2 Classification of Speech Acts

1.2.1. Austin's Classification of Speech Acts

Austin classifies speech acts according to their illocutionary force into five classes:

1. Verdicatives: these 'consist in the delivering of a finding, official or unofficial, up on evidence or reasons as to value or fact so far as these are distinguishable'. Examples of verbs in this class are: acquit, hold, calculate, date, and rank.
2. Execrative: one of these "is the giving of a discussion in favor of or against a certain course of action or advocacy of it.....", 'a decision that something is to be so, as distinct from a judgment that it is so'. Some examples are: 'order, advise, command, , and plead'. Austin also lists as well as the above:
3. Commissives: "is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action". Some of the obvious examples are: promise, pledge, contract, and swear.
4. Expositives: are used in acts of expositions involving the expounding of views, the conducting of arguments and the clarifying of usages and

reference '. Austin gives many examples of these, among them, are: affirm, deny, emphasize, answer, report, and call.

5. Behabitives: this class, with which Austin was very dissatisfied (“ a shocker”, he called it”) ‘ includes the notion of reaction to other people’s behavior, fortunes, and expressions of attitudes to someone else’s past conduct or imminent conduct (Paker,1946:15).

2.2 Speech Act of Request

The speech act of request consists of an action that is carried out for the benefit of the speaker. A speaker who does not want to state his intent explicitly has resorted to hinting strategies. By making a statement, for example, through describing the state of affairs or by asking a question, the requester can implicitly inform his listener what he wants to be done. The requester can leave out the desired action altogether or his wish can be partially mentioned, as in the following examples :

(3) It is hot in here.

(4) I am so hungry.

(5) The food is a total mess.

(6) The dishes are not clean.

In structures, where the action to be achieved is not specified in the proposition, the hearer cannot be assigned the role of an agent. It has, therefore, been left to him\ her as having both, infer the intent of the speaker in terms of the desired action to be carried out , and to infer that the speaker intends the hearer to take on the role of agent (Trosborg, 1995:192).

A direct requester, on the other hand , who wants to make explicit the illocutionary point of his utterance can simply use a performative statement or an imperative, there by issuing an order. If the requester choses a model verb expressing obligation or necessity, the utterance is also an order, even though presented in a weaker form. When employing a statement of

obligation or necessity, the speaker employs either his own authority or he refers to some

authority outside the speaker. The following requests are presented with higher degree of speaker authority. Structures with should and ought to involve moral obligation, have to may involve some obligation stemming from a source outside the speaker, while must often expresses obligation imposed by the speaker (ibid:203).

Schiffrin (2005:7) argues that sometimes people are unable to identify the intended speech act. If one is unsure of the role an utterance is playing within a dialogue, he will need some form of clarification from the co-participants. The following is a brief excerpt from an actual conversation, taken from the spoken section of the British National corpus (BNC) showing this behavior:

(7) a. You enjoyed yourself in America.

b. EH?

a. Did you?

b. Oh, I covered a nice trip, yes.....

In the example above it can be noticed that 'A' has asked a direct question by making a statement about attitude of 'B' towards his trip to America (that he enjoyed it), a statement which 'A' is clearly unqualified to make. 'B' signals his incomprehension of the function of speech of 'A'. 'A' then correctly judges that this is a request for clarification, and classifies it with an explicit question from of 'Did you enjoy yourself in America?' 'A' can omit the content here because that is already mentioned in the conversational context.

2.3 Schemes of Requesting

The recipient might feel that the request is an intrusion on his freedom of action or even a power play. As for the requester, he is likely to hesitate to make requests for fear of exposing need or out of fear of possibly making the recipient lose face. In this sense, requests are face-threatening to both the

requester and the recipient. One way for the speaker to minimize the imposition is by employing indirect strategies rather than direct ones. The more direct a request is, the more transparent it is and the less of a burden the recipient bears in interpreting the request. The scale of directness can be characterized according to the following three strategies: Direct strategies (marked as requests, such as imperators):

(8) Wash the car .

(9) Bring me some water.

Traditionally indirect strategies (referring to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance as conventionalized in the language):

(10) How about cleaning the car ?

(11) Could you bring me some water, please?

Non- conventionally indirect strategies (partially referring to the object depending on contextual clues). You have left the kitchen, in a right mess (Kulka , 1989:11). Kulka(1985:118) states that there are four types of requests which are termed as “request goals”:

1. Request for action: cases where compliance requires action on the part of the hearer. For example, request to open the window.
2. Request for goods: cases where compliance demands handing over material goods (which might be small or large, handed over temporarily or permanently), e.g: request for a loan.
3. Request for information: the purpose of this request differs from the rest in that it is aimed solely at verbal goods.
4. Request for permission such requests are speakers rather than hearer oriented on two accounts. If granted, a request for permission activities the speaker and not the hearer and it constitute a threat to the requestor's rather than to the requester's face.

2.5 Sentence Kinds Denoting Request

Requests can be recognized in a extensive collection of linguistic forms. There are types of sentence:

2.5.1. Declaratives

The speakers can use declaratives to perform any category of speech acts. Therefore , a request can be expressed in the form of a declaratives as in the following examples:

(12) It is hot in here (as a request to open the window)

(13) I think you have forgotten to open the windows.

(14) I need some rice.

Speakers may use a declarative sentence with models, semi- models or forms functioning like modals to express requests.

(15) I might help close the door.

(16) I would like to have some more coffee.

Requests may tag their declaratives with a moralized tag questions:

(17) You will not go, will you? Kulka (1985:118)

2.5.2. Imperatives

Requests can be expressed by imperatives in different ways as in the following examples:

(18) Let me have a look.

(19) Help us to solve this problem.

Speakers can express that act of requesting by characterizing the imperative with the pragmatic formative 'please' or with a modality marker, as in :

(20) Just take a seat .

2.5.3. Interrogatives

Requester may use conditional interrogative to convey the requested force and the interrogative sentence is considered as more polite than imperative sentence since the former mitigates the impact of the action as in (21) or yes\ no question as in (22):

(21) Do you mind if I close the door?

(22) Would you get me a glass of water if I asked you? (ibid)

3. Data Analysis

After reading the whole short story of The Happy Prince by Oscar wilde , (18) data have been found whereby the usage of speech act of request is made either by declarative , imperative, or interrogative sentence and request are usually made for goods, action , information or for permission and they are to be analyzed as follows:

3.1 Interrogatives

The short story of The Happy Prince includes (7) occurrences of interrogative sentences and each text is explained as follows:

Text (1)' Why aren't you like The Happy Prince?' mothers said to their little boys when they cried. (p.1)

The sentence presented above is an instance of interrogative speech act of request whereby the mother asks her son about not being as happy as The Happy Prince and it is an indirect request to make her son happy.

Text (2) Where can I stay tonight?' (p.1)'

The data shown above is another occurrence of interrogative speech act of request and it involves indirect request of staying at the statue of The Happy Prince .

Text (3) 'Who are you?' asked the bird .(p.2)

This sentence includes a direct speech of requesting the name of The Happy Prince and it is obviously a request of information since the whole sentence is built on verbal request.

Text (4) ‘ Little bird , little bird’ said the prince ‘ will you stay with me another night’ (p.3)

The sentence above is another instance of direct speech act of request whereby the requester who is The Happy Prince asks the swallow to stay with him for one night and this request is for action to be done by latter.

Text (5) ‘ What shall I take to him ’ (p.3)

The data above shows a direct speech act of request whereby the swallow wants to perform an action which is what to take to the poor seamstress.

Text (6) ‘Take out your eye, dear prince?’ said the bird (P.4)

This data shows another occurrence a direct speech act of request whereby the swallow wants to perform an action which is whether to take the eye of The Happy Prince to the poor seamstress .

text (7) He had just strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. 'Good-bye, dear Prince!' he murmured, 'will you let me kiss your hand? (p. 8)

This sentence is the last occurrence of direct speech act of request whereby the swallow wants to perform an action which is to kiss The Happy Prince and say to him good-bye before he gets to die.

3.2 Imperatives

The short story of The Happy Prince includes only four data of imperative sentences acting as speech acts of request and they are explicated as following:

Text (8) Take off one of my eyes, they are rare rubies. (p.3)

The data above includes an imperative sentence acting as a direct speech act of request whereby The Happy Prince asks the swallow to take out one of his eyes and this indicates that it is request for action.

Text (9) Take my second eye and give to the young match girl. (p.4)

This another occurrence imperative sentence denoting a direct speech act of request .In this sentence The Happy Prince asks the swallow to pluck his second eye and deliver it to the poor match girl and this is undoubtedly a request for an action to be achieved by the swallow.

text(10) Talk to me about what happens as I am completely blind (p.5)

The data above involves an imperative sentence functioning as a speech act of request whereby The Happy Prince asks the swallow to talk to him about what goes around him and this is a request of information.

Text (11) 'do as I tell you.' (p.6)

The data above is another instance of speech act of request by means of an imperative sentence whereby The Happy Prince asks the swallow to pluck the second eye of him and this is a request of action.

Text (12) 'Bring me the two most precious things in the city' (p.10)

The data above is the last instance of speech act of request by means of an imperative sentence whereby the councilor asks the mayor to bring two most valuable things in the city and this is a request of action.

3.3 Declaratives

The short story of The Happy Prince contains only three occurrences of speech acts of request by means of declarative sentences and they are explained as follows:

Text (14) 'I am waited for in Egypt,' answered the Swallow. To-morrow my friends

will fly up to the Second Cataract.(p.7)

The sentence above includes an indirect speech act of request by means of declarative sentence since the swallow does not state explicitly his intention to leave the Happy Prince and this is a request for permission.

Text (15)' It is cold in here' answered the swallow .(p.8)

The sentence above includes an indirect speech act of request by means of declarative sentence since the swallow does not state explicitly his aim to leave the Happy Prince and this is a request for permission to desert The Happy Prince.

Text (16)' She is unable to afford her family'.(p.8)

The sentence above includes the last occurrence of declarative sentence acting as an indirect speech act of request whereby The Happy Prince implicitly asks the swallow to help the match girl by performing an action which is taking a ruby to the poor girl to make her able to afford her family.

Conclusion

Speech act theory denotes the act which is done by words and it was firstly discussed by Austin in his well-known book How To Do Things With Words by dividing sentences and utterances into constative and performative and then extended by Searle who said that there are three primary acts that are performed in speech act including ;utterance act , propositional act, and illocutionary act.

Requests are expressions that can be uttered by anyone who is acts as if he has no authority or power over the hearer to convey the speaker's desire that the hearer can do some kind of action for the benefit of the former and the speaker is committed to being grateful if the hearer complies.

The speech act of request can be expressed through the use of declarative sentences indirectly so that it does not impose on the hearer. Otherwise, the

speaker can use modals, semi-modals and forms acting like modals in order to convey requests.

Requests can also be expressed through the use of imperative sentences. Moreover request can be manifested through the use of interrogative questions specifically 'yes\ no' questions and conditional interrogatives and this kind of sentences is the dominant one specifically in the short story of The Happy Prince which verifies the third hypothesis.

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