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ARTHUR MILLER'S ALL MY SONS: PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstract:

Drama as a genre has been studied from various angles by various scholars in the world. Different aspects of dramatic features and themes are studied by applying different critical theories. However, the use of speech acts in the plays has received almost no attention. Basically the 'Speech Act Theory' is a recent development and this theory has been mainly applied to natural language that is produced in day- today communication. Application to literature has been restricted to a few researches in the academic institutions.

KEYWORDS:

Drama, Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly with the writing of Firth, Labov, Austin, Searle, Grice, Brown, Mey, Leech and Levinson. Leech systematized this so called 'waste paper basket' in his Principles of Pragmatics published in 1983. Since then this subject has received significant attention of the scholars all over the world. There are groups of scholars working on various aspects and branches of pragmatics like politeness, postcolonial pragmatics, parliamentary discourse and natural language processing. Speech acts are central to any kind of study or research in pragmatics. Therefore, speech acts theory assumes central position in pragmatics.

Austin and Searle are the two founders of the Speech Act theory. It is Austin who gave the radical statement 'speaking is doing'. This view of language changed the entire perception of the phenomenon called language. This also exposed the earlier view of 'language as a system'. The distinction between 'language' and 'language use' become cardinal and provides the paradigm shift that is at the base of pragmatics. Searle further developed the Austin's concept of speech act and added his own classification based on the parameter of illocutionary points. Thus, the present article aims to study Arthur Miller's famous play 'All My Sons' in the light of Searle's typology of speech act.

What is Dramatic Discourse?

Drama being one of the major forms of literature is basically made for the theatrical performance and its elements are some extent unlike to other forms of literature. Stage, light effects, costumes, dialogues, dramatic action, characters, chorus, soliloquies, asides, songs etc contribute for the enhancement of the intended effects in the minds of viewers. The dramatic discourse is the composition of speeches, which makes its own world. The characters come on the stage and perform the actions via the words. However, in dramatic discourse, the author has no place to narrate the incident directly as he narrates in fictional discourse i.e. the third person or omnipresent narrator. Therefore, as a result of the absence of

author in dramatic discourse, he has to put his intention in the mouth of the characters. Another important thing is that in fictional discourse the author, through setting and local color builds the context and situation. However, in dramatic discourse the context is built up with only dramatic action. Thus, it becomes very difficult to determine the intentions of speeches i.e. speech acts because it is a linguistic transaction between characters or as an interpersonal activity whose goal is determined by its author. Therefore, the best way to understand the dramatic discourse is to consider its elements i.e. stage, character, consume, color, setting, language, light effects etc in the light of speech act theory i.e. assertive, expressive, commissive, directive and declarative speech acts.

Notwithstanding, speech acts in a play, vary in terms of their functions and significance in the context of the play. From the playwright's point of view, every speech act is designed with a set purpose to serve a function such as imparting a particular piece of information, describing a state of affairs, commenting on a situation, criticizing, accepting or declining the views etc. The analysis of such speech acts reveals the explicit and implicit intentions of the characters the in play. Therefore, examining and analyzing the utterances deployed in the structural design is interesting as well as a challenging task. Let us examine the following utterance taken from 'All My Sons':

Keller: They are all asleep yet. I'm just waiting for her to see it. (P. 3)

The above speech act is assertive and in the context of the play, bears a lot of significance. Keller, being the central figure, is the most responsible person behind the cause of the death of twenty-two pilots including his own son Larry. The above utterance puzzles the spectator and the reader because the relevance and the significance of the broken tree is a mystery in the beginning of the play. However, the utterance serves some more significant function, which is not stated but has to be worked out. In normal circumstance, a sensible spectator or reader with little curious attention senses that there is some sort of intention behind Keller's utterance. The first part of the utterance asserts that something is happened. The use of an adverb 'yet' intensifies the adjective 'asleep' as well as the hidden purpose of the speaker. If the utterance is judged against the theory of speech acts, it reveals that the speaker of this utterance seems to be under the threat of uncertainty and the future consequences. It is also true that the speaker cannot change the situation. From the author's point of view, the utterance serves to establish the logical setting for the future discussion of the crux idea of the play.

SEARLE'S CONTRIBUTION

Searle made a significant contribution in the study of speech acts. He says that to understand language one has to understand the speaker's intention. According to him, language is intentional behavior. Therefore, it should be treated like a form of action. Searle refers to statements as speech acts. The speech act is the basic unit of language that expresses meaning. In fact, an utterance expresses an intention. Mostly, the speech act is a sentence, but it can be a word or phrase as long as it follows the rules necessary to carry out the intention. When a person speaks, he/she performs an act. Speech is not only used to choose something, it also essentially does something. Speech act lays the stress on the intent of the act as a whole. According to Searle, understanding the speaker's intention is crucial to arrest the meaning. Without the speaker's intention, it is not possible to understand the words as a speech act. Thus, Searle considers the intention i.e. the force of an utterance as a central part for the classification of utterances into different categories. Let us consider the five classes of speech act propounded by J.R.Searle (1979).

A) Assertive Speech Acts:

Assertive speech acts have a truth value and state what the speakers believe to be the case or not. They are generally expressed through declarative form. However, declarative is not the only form, they are also expressed through imperative and interrogative forms. This class includes stating, suggesting, boasting, complaining, claiming, reporting, criticizing, denying, disagreeing, predicting, hypothesizing, concluding, replying etc. All the rhetorical questions come under assertive speech acts because they do not expect answer but are asked for only intensification of the assertion of one's ideas, views, opinions etc. Thorat the pioneer of Indian pragmatics observes: "Speakers talk in order to have effect on their listeners. They assert things to change their state of knowledge"(2000)

It amply becomes clear from the above statement that the assertives present the actual state of affairs and usually corrects the knowledge of its addressee. Let us consider the following glaring examples of this kind in All My Sons:

Chris: About four this morning (Indicating window above them) I heard it cracking and I woke up

and looked out. She was standing right here when it cracked. (P.11)

Here, Chris has performed assertive speech act by transmitting the information via words. Thus, via assertive, the speaker wishes to give a piece of information that usually corrects the reader's knowledge and expectations of the world as regard to forces such as heat, light, sound, pressure, gravity and the way that they affect objects. What the speaker does here is to make an assertion whose relevance is informativeness. Now, let us consider the validity and significance of Chris' utterance in context of the play. The speech situation of this utterance is that the tree, which was planted in memory of Keller's dead son Larry, who was supposed to marry Ann, is broken by the wind last night. Therefore, there is an obvious connection between the tree and Larry. The illocutionary force of the utterance indicates that Keller is not too much worried of the tree but the hidden consequences. The moment Chris informs him that there is no need to worry about Ann because she has already seen through the window when the tree was breaking down at about four o' clock in the morning. As the result illocutionary force and the perlocutionary effect of Chris' utterance, Keller becomes uncomfortable and asks many questions in order to control the situation. It is also not so clear at this point in the context of the play that why Keller is so much concerned with Ann's responses but later the context provides details that Keller is the only person who is responsible for Larry's death and Steve's imprisonment. Therefore, he feels in danger and asks many questions in order to be careful in future.

B] Commissive Speech Act:

The commissive speech act commonly occurs in a play. It plays a major role in building interpersonal bond. It includes a promise, a vow, a pledge, a guarantee etc. In the first act of 'All My Sons', Chris at one moment tries to maintain his love relationship with Ann by promising her a comfortable, loving and healthy married life in future. He also promises to marry her. Thus, the entire scene of that moment is about promising. In the following example Chris commits for the future course of action.

Chris: Ann, I love you, I love you a great deal. (Finally.) I love you (Pause she waits) I have no imagination. That's all I know to tell you. (Ann is waiting, ready) I'm embarrassing you. I didn't want to tell it to you here. I wanted some place we had never been, a place where we'd be brand new to each other you feel it's wrong here, don't you this yard this chair? I want you to be ready for me. I don't want to win you away from anything. (P. 34)

Here, Chris performs the speech act of promise and guarantee (a solemn promise). Although, Chris and Ann have been known each other for more than three years, they never revealed their feeling. Therefore, there was a touch of uncertainty to their relationship. By performing a speech act of promise, Chris has succeeded in developing a very deep, cordial relationship. The depth of their relationship and love for each other is revealed especially through the commissive speech act. Before worsening the situation, Chris by expressing his love, tries to make Ann ready for the future course of action. As Chris repeats his utterance twice, he intensifies his love. It also seems that Chris is exploring his love according to Ann's responses. Thus, Chris using different expressions commits for the future course of action. In the last part of the utterance, Chris offers many options to Ann. He indirectly forces her to forget the past life and be ready for the marriage i.e. he says 'a place where we'd be brand new to each other'. Apparently, it seems that Chris is just expressing his love but at the deeper level of communication he seems to be testing and observing Ann's mental state because Keller's have not wiped off the memories of Larry and Ann's engagement. Therefore, Chris feels somewhere uncertainty in his heart and opens his love to boost the decision taken by Ann. In other words, it can be called the speech act of guarantee and promise for the determination of future consequences.

C] Directive Speech Acts:

Directive speech acts are produced to create an effect on the hearer. These types of speech acts attempt to get the hearer to do something via words. In other words, these speech acts have the intentions or purposes of some sort of actions to be performed by its hearer. Therefore, directive speech acts are hearer centered. This class includes requesting, questioning, ordering, commanding, suggesting, urging etc. This group frequently belongs to earlier discussed competitive category of Leech and comprises a category of illocutionary forces in which illocutionary goal competes with the social goal and creates negative politeness on the hearer. Let us consider the following examples of these kinds:

Mother: Altogether (To Chris, but not facing them) your brother is alive, darling, because if he is dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me now? As long as you live, that boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father. Now you see, don't you? Now you see. (P. 73)

In the above utterance, Mother performs directive speech act. It is an act of suggestion, in which mother requests her son, Chris not to marry Ann. The reason behind the restriction is Keller's crime. Here, it must be provided the required context which is necessary for proper understanding of the illocutionary force of the utterance. Keller and Ann's father Steve were the partners in weapon production factory. As the war was going on, there was an emergency of cylinder heads. The armed officers were in need of cylinder heads and suddenly one batch of cylinder heads came out with serious defect. Steve was in the factory and he noticed and immediately phoned to Keller at his home. Keller having heartless ambition directs Steve to patch up the defected cylinder heads and dispatch to the army. He also promised if there would be any problem, he will take all the responsibilities. As a result of seriously defected cylinder heads, twenty-two pilots including Keller's younger son Larry were killed. When the army officers came to know that the cylinders were seriously defected, they took Steve and Keller to the court but Keller escaped on the ground of his absence in the factory but Steve was imprisoned.

Later, after three years of this incident, Ann and Chris decided to marry. But the real problem is that Chris doesn't know too much about this incident and Mother and Keller want to keep him in ignorance by assuming that Larry is alive. They believe that Ann also doesn't know anything about this case. However, the reality is different. Ann is the only person who knows more things about Larry's death and Steve's imprisonment. Therefore, here Mother is not allowing Chris to marry. She indirectly suggests Chris to believe at least for his father's sake that Larry is alive.

The illocutionary force of the utterance implicitly assumes that Larry is alive and will come back. The reason behind this assumption is that Mother knows if Chris will marry Ann, if Ann will act like a defector then Keller has to go to jail. Therefore, Mother tries to avoid future consequence by objecting their marriage.

D] Expressive Speech Acts:

The expressive speech acts are in which characters express their psychological states, feelings or attitude about a particular state of affairs. This class includes apologizing, complimenting, condemning, complaining, criticizing, etc. Since Drama is particularly made for theatrical performance, it is always written in the form of dialogues. One specialty of drama is that the characters come on the stage and they express the feelings. In other words, they perform linguistic actions. However, 'All My Sons' is the play, where social and family responsibilities are juxtaposed and one could easily find many utterances of this kind. Let us consider the following speech act:

Ann: What else can you say? When they took him away, I followed him, went to him every visiting day. I was crying all the time. Until the news came about Larry. Then I realized. It's wrong to pity a man like that father or no father there is only one way to look at him. He knowingly shipped out parts that would crash an airplane. And now do you know Larry wasn't one of them. (P. 31)

Here, the above speech act expresses Ann's pathetic feeling about her father, Steve Deever and Keller's sense of responsibility and at the same time the responsibility towards family and society. This piece of information contains two kinds of feeling simultaneously. One being positive is the result of Ann's ignorance in the subject. Second, being negative is the result of her full knowledge. Ann expresses the feeling of guilt at the end of her speech. She describes her father as a 'no father' and feels embarrassed because she has followed to protect him from the punishment. It seems that Ann was not aware about all the things done for self-profit by her father and Keller. But, when she got news about Larry's death, she turned her back towards her father. However, Keller escaped unhurt on the basis of his absence in factory being ill but Steve Deever was sent to prison. It has been also made clear at the end of the play, why Ann emphasized confidently here that Steve Deever and Joe Keller knowingly shipped out parts that crashed an airplane because she has a letter written by Larry. Thus, she has authentic information about the whole incident. Therefore, she declares that Steve and Keller have knowingly done that. At the end, she has asks one question in order to put emphasis to make her mind clear that Larry is dead 'do you know Larry wasn't one of them'. Similarly, through this question she also requests for their consent for her marriage with Chris.

E] Declarative Speech Acts:

Declaratives are speech acts are the speech acts whose successful performance is based on authorized and the highly institutional framework. In other words, declarative speech acts are extremely ceremonial. Leech observes (1983): "Successful performance of declarative brings about the correspondence between the propositional content and reality."

According to the above definition, it becomes clear that for the successful performance of declarative speech acts; the speaker must have a special institutional role in specific context. For instance,

in Hindu religion all the religious rituals are performed by socially and conventionally authorized or granted persons in a traditional sequence by chanting some holy words in a particular manner or tone. This class includes resigning, dismissing, christening, naming, appointing, sentencing etc. Following are some glaring examples of this kind in which words are immediately transformed into actions:

- a. The President: I declare the CYG open to be played.
- b. Umpire: You are out!
- c. Judge: I sentence you for ten years imprisonment.
- d. Priest: I pronounce you man and wife

In using a declaration, the speaker changes the world via words instantly. In other words, there is no gap between illocutionary force and its perlocutionary effects. There are no examples of this speech acts in the play under consideration.

CONCLUSION:

In the present article an attempt has been made to analyze the selected speech acts within the framework of the five major speech acts proposed by Searle. It is also explained that how the function of various speech acts is vary from speech act to speech act in the context the play. Each major speech act contains a wide range of sub-acts that can be distinguished from one another by looking at what felicity conditions they fulfill within the contexts in which they are employed. It is also observed that in 'All My Sons' the assertive, expressive, commissive and directive speech acts play a major role, whereas declarative plays the least important role because of the immediate transformation into perlocutionary effect.

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