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Performative Acts in the Plays of Shakespeare

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Abstract

Shakespeare, one of the greatest writers of Elizabethan drama, has given language a new shape. This paper tries to analyze the locutionary, illocutionary and the perlocutionary effects in the dramas of Shakespeare. This paper also tries to analyse the performative acts in the works of Shakespeare from Foucault's point of view—that even if a sentence is clear, there remains ambiguity in its meaning, as there may be a possibility that the meaning transferred may not be clear or taken in another way by the receiver. Another philosopher Derrida says that there are infinite meanings of a sentence spoken by the speaker. The present paper takes into accounts the relevance of performative acts in Shakespeare's plays.

Keywords- *Locution, Illocution, Perlocution, Archaeology, Deconstruction*

Language is basically a system of communication where sound or signs work in a coherent way. One is dependent on the other and without one the other cannot work properly. In this kind of communicative system, sound and signs convey objects, actions or ideas. In short, we can say that language is a form of communication, which involves two elements—the ideas or experience talking about the development of verbal communication that is language and secondly, language is about the description of an object and this is the base of the development of this idea. Language always works in duality like the two sides of a coin. One's existence depends on the other and both works in a parallel way. This is the beauty of language that it always carries a double meaning with it or the meaning can be interpreted in infinite ways. The advantage of this duality is always been taken by our politicians, writers, journalists and many more.

It is not that the significance or the duality of language that is being recognized by the society or linguists in the present era, many writers have used or moulded language in their own ways without knowing it. Shakespeare is probably the most famous of all Englishmen, who has given language a new shape. One of the things he is famous for is the effect that he had on the development of the Early Modern English language. For example, without even

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realizing it, our everyday speech is full of words and phrases given by Shakespeare. He was able to do that because English was changing as people modernized it in their normal daily speech. The relationship between Shakespeare's language and Shakespeare's speech is that Shakespeare's 'language' is an abstraction: a series of patterns, imagery, word frequency, syntactic signatures, or lexical originality. Shakespeare has used language in a very cunning way. According to Dr. Johnson,

Shakespeare was the originator of the form, the character, the language and the shadows of English drama and opens a mind that contains gold and diamonds. Addison speaks the language of poets and Shakespeare of men.

Thus, it can be said that Shakespeare is one of the greatest and the original masters of the language. The works of Shakespeare in the English context has the significance that most people have a general idea of what may be the story behind the title, even if the people are not regular theatre goers nor may be interested in the reading of the dramas. One of the reasons for this is, due to Shakespeare's popularity, many of his characters have become archetypes in normal speech. If one would tell a friend that she has a tendency to act like a true Brutus, every now and then, he or she would probably become angry. In the same way, a passionate lover is easily identified as Orlando. One of the Juliet's contemplations on names signifies: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet." (Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, 97)

In the Western world and far beyond, the names 'Romeo' and 'Juliet' have become synonymous with tragedy: A well-known tale of two famous lovers whose faith could only end in tragedy. Love at first sight, a secret wedding, followed by the deaths of Romeo's best friend by the hands of Juliet's cousin and the death of Juliet's cousin by the hands of Romeo, Romeo's banishment, Juliet's faked death and finally, the misunderstanding that leads to their tragic deaths. If Romeo had heard in time of Juliet's faked death, there is a possibility that he would have picked her safely without anyone knowing and had gone to live with her in Mantua, and lived happily ever after together, but there is also the possibility that then they wouldn't have become such well known characters in the world of English tragic literature. In a comedy or in a tragedy, words act as a powerful tool, both in the fiction or in reality that we have always called as 'the real world'. The power of words within the real world has been investigated by several theorists and scientists, and most notably by J.L. Austin and his followers, who first researched the power of words in the shaping of the reality through 'Speech Act'.

The speech act theory explains that language can be used not only to describe things, but also to do many things with language. A speech act, also called an illocutionary act, is an action performed with the help of words, such as the act of helping occurs when someone says "Please, help me." When Austin created the speech act theory, he specifically omitted

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literature and drama in his analysis. According to Austin “performative utterance will ... be in a peculiar way hollow if said by an actor on the stage”. However, the modern critics apply the speech act theory to theatre, while knowing that it is a complicated area of study. Theatrical language reveals the relevance of speech acts to theatre, as most theatrical language revolves around the intertwined themes of ‘doing’ and ‘pretending.’ Drama comes from a Greek word ‘dran’, which means ‘to do.’ Acting is a word that has dual connotations: that of performing an action, as well as that of playing an action or a role. Performing is another word with two layers; performing is doing, and performing is making-believe. Speech act criticism, therefore, is supremely relevant to theatre, because it deals with the performance of language to act. A character’s ability to use performative language is often an indicator of how much power he or she has in the play. Many critics have analysed Renaissance drama through these lenses, and have been able to gain further insight into particular plays, particularly tragedies. Speech Act analyses of tragedies raise issues of social standing. In *Richard III*, Queen Margaret’s curses both initiate and indicate action, and the play can be read as the tragedy of the irreversibility of these curses. In his prime work on speech act theory, *How to Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin wrote that: “Language (...) is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language.” (Austin, 22). He also made a point of excluding these ‘parasitic forms of communication’ from consideration in his theory. As examples of parasitic language, he names the use of language for joking, sentences pronounced in a play, or words written for the purpose of poetry. Speech act theorist John Searle agrees with Austin on the idea that language in fiction and stage plays is derived from language in reality, and its properties are therefore different. A marriage on stage is not a ‘real’ marriage; the effect upon reality is not the same. The actors are not married by law and do not have to abide the same rules as a couple married in reality. Actors already married in reality can still act that they are married to a fellow. According to Austin, the fact that the fictional Juliet declared her love Romeo dead within her fictional reality has had no impact upon our ‘real’ reality.

Nowadays speech acts are generally used for gender character analyses, gender analysis and genre studies; one of the ways modern scholars use speech acts is by analyzing the power of dialogues in a drama and the promise they make to one another. Saying “I swear,” “I promise,” or “I vow” and all these kinds of promises are none other than speech acts. Many times, in Shakespeare’s plays, using this performative language poorly leads to a character’s downfall, as in the case of Hamlet and King Lear. Using performative language comes from not anticipating the power of the performative, not recognizing the appropriate times to perform speech acts, or from not matching physical actions to illocutionary actions.

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In the drama *'Hamlet'*, the ghost of Hamlet's father insists that Hamlet swear to remember him. He also insists that Horatio and Marcellus swear not to reveal that they have seen the ghost. Hamlet's tragedy could perhaps have been avoided if his physical actions had matched his illocutionary (the dialogue of a character) actions. Perhaps, if Hamlet had taken his own advice to "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (III.ii.17-18), he would have killed Claudius immediately and avoided the tragedy. It is also interesting to note that the actual act of swearing is not scripted, it is given in a stage direction, and Hamlet does not ever actually say "I swear," he simply states "I have sworn" (III.ii.112).

In the same way the story of king Lear was totally the result of the locution effect (idea in one's mind) of king Lear that he, that image that he thinks his daughters have about him and in that effect he banishes his youngest daughter. At the end of the play he realizes his mistake and the powerful speech of king Lear is the perlocution (the result of the dialogue of the speaker) effect. Holding the dead body of Cordelia in his hands, King Lear says,

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh... (King Lear Act V Sc. III)

One of the great philosophers of the modern era, Michel Foucault (born in France) in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) says, that the system of knowledge and thought are governed by rules and these rules are beyond those of grammar and logic. These rules are totally operated by the consciousness of individual subjects and define a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought and language use in a given domain and period.

Foucault defines a "discourse" as a 'way of speaking'. Thus, Foucault's method studies only the set of 'things said' in a particular situation and its transformations, without thinking about the overall meaning, only the collective meaning of those said statements, and carries his emphasis on discourse-in-itself down to the smallest unit of things said and that is, 'the statement'. During most of *Archaeology*, Foucault argues for and against various notions of what are inherent aspects of a statement, but he does not arrive at a comprehensive definition but he, however, argues that a statement is the rules which render an expression (that is, a phrase, a proposition, or a speech act) discursively meaningful. This concept of meaning differs from the concept of signification: Though an expression is signifying, for instance "The Taj Mahal is in Agra", this statement can never be called as false and therefore have no existence within a certain discourse. For this reason, the "statement" is an existence function for discursive meaning.

In Shakespeare's famous play, *Julius Caesar*, Antony incites the Roman people against Brutus and conspirators. It was Antony's speech which turns the ball in his court.

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When Antony ascended the pulpit, he faced a very hostile crowd that had been completely swayed by Brutus's arguments. Antony did not accuse or criticize the conspirators but simply questioned the credibility of Brutus's arguments by giving examples to prove that Caesar was not ambitious. He reminds the people of Caesar's achievements that many battles that he fought, his depositing the Romans, his compassion towards the poor and his reluctance to accept the crown on the feast of the Lupercal. Antony says,

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious
And Brutus is an honourable man.
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man. (Act III, Sc II)

It is only the powerful speech of Antony which made all the difference. Antony moved the people to tears and succeeded in provoking the mob to rebel against the conspirators and avenge Caesar's brutal assassination.

Language has the quality that it keeps on changing within a decade or two. Therefore the language of Chaucer is different from Shakespeare; Shakespeare's language is different from Wordsworth. Language also has a unique quality that it can always be interpreted in numerous ways. Shakespeare has taken the full advantage of this aspect of language. He has moulded the language according to the drama's demand, which helped Shakespeare in the raising action and at last in the resolution. This may be called Shakespeare's Performative acts. One of the German philosophers has also defined performative acts in a play: Jacques Derrida, best known for developing a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstruction. Derrida's use of the performative aspects of language attempts precisely to take the road which was never taken. His argument is that proper and improper uses of languages do not separate each other, but in fact depend on one another, because according to Derrida language does not always built on its successes, sometimes but on its failures too. Language is never uttered in a singular moment. Every word uttered has been uttered by many others and in many ways. It superficially appears that this theory cancels any concept of truth in favour of an absolute performative understanding of language. The present world is a world where utterances can never be fully understood. According to Derrida a statement always hides its

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full meaning in context therefore it can be said that, there cannot be any true value to utterances.

Another aspect of Performative Act is 'the indirect speech acts'; the concept is given by John Searle. Searle (1932) an American philosopher was the disciple of J L Austin. He says there is an indirect relation between the sentence uttered and the meaning to it. The answer or the reply of a sentence may not be in the same way the question asked but then also the receiver understands it. For example in 'Macbeth' -

Lady Macbeth - He has almost supp'd: why have you left the chamber?

Macbeth- Hath he ask'd for me?

Lady Macbeth - Know you not he has?

Macbeth- We will proceed no further in this business: He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought Golden opinions from all sorts of people, Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, Not cast aside so soon. (Act 1. Sc.VII)

The above conversation is just before the death of Duncan, when the lady Macbeth is planning of Duncan's death and actuates her husband to kill the king. She asks her husband if he has left the king alone in his chamber. Macbeth does not give the direct answer and asks to her wife something else (Duncan was asking for Macbeth) but then also lady Macbeth understands what her husband means. This is called as indirect speech.

Many aspects of Shakespeare's dramas have been analyzed by different scholars. The command on language is one of the aspects that make his characters famous and universal. Shakespeare brought a revolution in the field of drama. Shakespeare is known for the introduction of nearly 3,000 words into the language in the Oxford English Dictionary. Although the Elizabethan language differs slightly from Modern English, but the principles and rules are generally the same. This imagination with language, and the art which he used, is why Shakespeare is as relevant today as he was in his own time.

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