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4. A Study of Speech Acts in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

Researchers' interest in the study of speech acts in literature, particularly novels, has grown recently. The 1962 publication of *How to Do Things with Words* by John Langshaw Austin and the subsequent systematisation of his "Speech Acts" theory by John Rogers Searle in his book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969) marked a turning point in this area. Although the novel is a fictional story, it has some conversational passages. In a novel, the characters communicate themselves through a series of dialogues or a series of conversations. These conversational passages from the novel could be interpreted using the speech theory in a methodical way. The present research article aims at studying Searle's theory of Speech Acts in context of selected conversational passages and a set of dialogues from Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies*. The article's first section presents the theoretical foundation of the concept of "Speech Acts," as propounded by Austin (1962) and that further expanded by Searle (1969). In the second section, certain conversational passages from Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* are analysed utilising the theoretical insights from Searle's concept of "Speech Acts," which encompasses five different speech acts: Declaratives, Representatives, Expressives, Directives, and Commissives. The article aims to highlight how the reader's understanding of the characters' interactions in the light of the theory of "Speech Acts" can be classified.

Key words: Speech Acts; Locutionary Acts; Illocutionary Acts; Perlocutionary Acts; Felicity Conditions.

Introduction

Since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, pragmatics and discourse analysis have grown and developed. It has provided a wide range of perspective to analyse and to investigate the meanings of utterances in literary texts. Speech acts theory is one of such perspectives which was developed by the British philosopher Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin



aimed to shed light on how "the uses of language which, either directly or indirectly, commit the user recipient to a particular action" can be accomplished (Carter & Nash 33) in his book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Austin's student, American philosopher Searle, further modified, systematised, and advanced Austin's notion of Speech Acts.

The present research article aims at studying Searle's theory of Speech Acts in context of selected conversational passages and a set of dialogues from Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. The article's first section presents the theoretical foundation of the concept of "Speech Acts," as propounded by Austin (1962) and that further expanded by Searle (1969). In the second section, certain conversational passages from Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* are analysed utilising the theoretical insights from Searle's concept of "Speech Acts," which encompasses five different speech acts: Declaratives, Representatives, Expressives, Directives, and Commissive. The article aims to highlight how the reader's understanding of the characters' speech could be classified in the light of the theory of "Speech Acts."

Speech acts Theory

Austin covers the notion of speech acts in his path-breaking book *How to Do Things with Words*. This book describes how language is used in connection to the context, the speaker's attitude, and its impact on the listener (Lowe 130). Understanding the intent behind statements and the effects of such utterances is greatly influenced by these factors. Austin refers to speech acts as the activities involved in speaking (Cutting 16). Beginning with the distinction between two categories of utterances, constatives (Austin 3) and performatives (Austin 6), he goes on to describe the idea of Speech Acts. According to Austin, a performative is an expression that uses a particular kind of verb—a performative verb—to carry out an action (Austin 6). In other words, when someone uses a performative, they are not simply speaking something but also acting on it (Wardhaugh 283). For instance, when someone says, "I name this ship Queen Elizabeth," they aren't just stating what they are doing; they are actually doing it. The world has altered as a result of what the speaker did since the ship has been given a name ever since. The verb in the aforementioned example is a performative verb, which realises a specific action. In a given context, the verb designates the activity.

Performatives need the right words at the right situations (Austin 8). Since performative verbs can only collocate with the adverb "hereby," Austin develops a "hereby test" to determine whether a statement is performative or not. Thus, it is not strange to say "I hereby name this ship Queen Elizabeth." The phrase "I hereby believe in God" is strange, though, as "believe" is not a performative verb. Austin refers to these statements as "constatives" (Austin 3). Constatives are claims or statements that define truth and falsehood. Constatives are dependent on facts and may

only be evaluated in the light of those facts. Constatives are sentences that appear to be used more often for speaking than for doing (Austin 3). They therefore support truth-falsehood values. Austin distinguishes between constatives and performatives. Constative statements can be judged as true or false, while performative statements are neither true nor wrong; they only carry out the action they refer to (Austin 9). Therefore, statements like "I believe in God" and "I go to college every day" are constatives since they may be evaluated as either true or untrue.

Then, Austin continues by pointing out that, despite the fact that performatives cannot be judged in terms of truth or falsity, they can still go wrong or be "infelicitous" (Austin 14). Austin offers what he refers to as "felicity conditions," which performers must achieve in order to succeed or be "happy" (Austin 14). Felicity prerequisites are the requirements to be fulfilled for an action to be considered appropriately or felicitously carried out in the context in which it is performed (Cutting 18). The felicitous circumstances, Austin proposes are as follows:

- a) There must be an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect. That procedure must include the utterance of a certain word by certain person in certain circumstances.
- b) The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
- c) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely.
- d) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must intend so to conduct themselves, and further must actually so conduct themselves subsequently (Austin 14-15).

Further, Austin recognises that the categories of performatives and constatives are insufficient, so in an effort to replace them with a general theory of Speech Acts, he "isolates three basic senses in which in saying something one is doing something, and hence three kinds of acts that are simultaneously performed" (Levinson 236). Austin claims that there are three different levels at which the action that results in the production of an utterance can be examined (Cutting 16).

- 1) The locutionary act: the locutionary act is the fundamental act of speaking (Yule 48). It is the performance of an utterance. This is essentially equivalent to saying a specific sentence with a specific sense and reference (Cutting 16). For example, In the sentence, 'Mr. A said to me to Slap her!' the locutionary force can be described as the act of slapping someone.

- 2) The illocutionary act: The second act is the illocutionary act. The phrase "illocutionary act" describes the use of a sentence to convey an attitude with a particular function or "force," also known as an illocutionary force. The way that they contain a sense of urgency and make an appeal to the speaker's purpose and direction sets them apart from locutionary acts. It refers to what is done in uttering the words, the function of the words and the specific purpose that the speaker has in mind. It takes place in issuing an advice, a command, a request, etc. (Cutting 16). To explain further, the man who witnessed the above locutionary act might describe the accompanied illocutionary act as X urged, advised or ordered him/her to slap her.
- 3) The perlocutionary act: The perlocutionary act is the third act. The effects of the utterance on the listener, or the shift in the listener's attitude or behaviour as a result of producing locutions and illocutions, are what it refers to (Cutting 16). So, continuing with the aforementioned example, the same man who saw the two earlier behaviours may have described the subsequent utterance as X having convinced him/her to smack her.

Beyond Austin's initial research, Searle expanded the theory of Speech Acts. Although Searle, like Austin, is primarily focused on what the speaker does rather than the hearer, his contribution enables us to transfer our attention from the speaker's intentions to the process by which the hearer interprets the speaker's intention (Lowe 136). Declaratives, Representatives, Expressives, Directives, and Commissives are the five types of speech acts identified by Searle (Cutting 16). These are explained as follows.

- 1) Declaratives: These are words and expressions that change the world by their very utterance. In declarations, the speaker alters the external status or condition of an object or situation only by making the utterance (Cutting 16-17). For instance, the sentence, "I hereby pronounce you husband and wife", turns two singles into a married couple (Cutting 17).
- 2) Representatives: Representatives are such utterances which commit the hearer to the truth of the expressed proposition. It is an illocutionary act which states the facts. The class involves asserting, concluding, affirming, believing, concluding, denying, reporting, etc. (Cutting 17).
- 3) Commissives: Commissives commit the speaker to some future course of action. The class involves promising, offering, guarantee, pledging, swearing, vowing, undertaking, warrant, etc. (Cutting 17).

- 4) Directives: Directives are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something. It is an illocutionary force that gets things done by the addressee. The class involves ordering, requesting, asking, begging, challenging, commanding, daring, inviting, insisting, etc. (Cutting 17).
- 5) Expressives: Expressives are the words which state what the speaker feels. The class involves thanking, congratulating, apologizing, appreciating, deploring, detesting, regretting, thanking, welcoming, etc. (Cutting 17).

Additionally, Searle changed the felicity conditions that Austin had previously introduced. According to Searle, there are five main categories of felicity circumstances: general conditions, content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential conditions (57-62).

- 1) General Conditions: In general conditions, the participant should know the importance of language used and he/she should be serious about it and should not be nonsensical towards it. For instance, participants must share knowledge of the language and must be serious while communicating (Lowe 136).
- 2) Content Conditions: Content conditions concern the appropriate content of an utterance (Lowe 137).
- 3) Preparatory Conditions: Preparatory conditions include the status or authority of the speaker to perform the speech act, the situation of other parties and so on (Lowe 137).
- 4) Sincerity Conditions: The speaker should genuinely intend to fulfil the future action. There are some speech acts such as taking an oath where this sincerity is determined by the presence of witnesses (Lowe 137).
- 5) Essential Conditions: It must be possible for the speaker to carry out the future action as per the utterance (Lowe 137).

A Study of Speech Acts in Amitav Ghosh' Sea of Poppies

The discussion of the above "Speech Acts" theory is used in this section of the article to analyse a few conversational passages from Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh tells the interconnecting tales of a number of characters who find themselves aboard the Ibis, a former slave ship, in the early 19th century. The main protagonists are on board the ship while engaging in varied degrees of deception and in a variety of more or less ideal settings. The story, which is set just before the First Opium War, centres on issues of imperialism and colonialism against a backdrop of drug trafficking and human trafficking committed by the British in India and (though mainly invisible) China. *River of Smoke* (2011)

and *Flood of Fire* are the next two books in the Ibis trilogy that follow this one (2015). The 2008 Man Booker Prize shortlist included *Sea of Poppies*.

Part 1 begins when Deeti is working on her poppies farm, she has a vision of Ibis. When Deeti's opium-addicted husband passes away, she resolves to commit suicide by burning herself alive on a window pyre out of fear for her options and the fact that her family is one of the most influential in the area. She is saved at the last second by Kalua, a low caste ox-cart driver, and the two depart together. Meanwhile, Zachary Reid, who embarks on his first journey with the Ibis in Baltimore, is the only surviving member of the original crew and the acting captain when they arrive in Calcutta. Serang Ali takes him under his wing. A Muslim boatman named Jodu visits Paulette, with whom he spent his formative years, in Calcutta. When the Ibis smashes his boat, though, Jodu asks Paulette to ask Zachary to secure work for him on the ship. The Raja of Raskhali, Neel Halder, also meets with Benjamin Burnham to settle debts after observing the Ibis' arrival. He is brought up on inflated forgery allegations by Burnham when he rejects Burnham's request to cede his properties for one last time.

Deeti and Kalua proceed downstream in Part 2 while attempting to hide as much as they can. They eventually reach Chhapra, but when they encounter Bhyro Singh and learn that they are being sought after, they decide to register as indentured slaves in Mauritius in order to flee. In the meantime, Zachary starts to integrate himself into Calcutta's gentlemanly culture. Burnham and the other crew members warm up to him, but the ship's first mate dislikes him almost right away and almost murders him at the end of the section. Despite the rest of the crew initially disliking Jodu since he is a freshwater boatman, he manages to become accustomed to the ship and win their respect. When Zachary declines to let her board the ship, Paulette and Baboo Nob Kissin come up with a scheme to be carried on board while disguising themselves as Bengali women and travelling for an arranged marriage. Paulette knows that she must leave Calcutta and the Burnhams. Neel is given a 7-year prison sentence in Mauritius and loses his farm. He is taken to jail to wait for his release, when he meets Ah Fatt, an opium addict who will also be taken there.

As the several narratives come together in Part 3, the action is virtually exclusively on the water. Upon boarding, Deeti and Kalua learn that Bhyro Singh is on board. They manage to avoid him for the majority of the voyage, or so they believe, but learn near the conclusion that he is aware of their presence on board. Even though Kalua is able to save Deeti, one of Bhyro's guards drowns in the process, and Kalua is accused of murder. He then starts to wreak his revenge on Deeti. Chillingworth sentences Kalua to death after he escapes from his chains and kills Bhyro while being flogged for the separate offence of saving Deeti in Ghazipur.



While this is going on, Zachary starts to settle into his second mate position and frequently fights with Crowle. Zachary learns via a chat that Serang Ali was a pirate. Ali is confronted by Zachary and offers to vanish in Port Louis. When Crowle learns of Zachary's ethnicity, he tries to use blackmail to get him to mutiny, but Zachary refuses. Following Jodu's infatuation with Munia, one of the immigrant women, Bhyro Singh beats him badly. Paulette, in contrast, unintentionally discloses herself to Jodu before purposefully doing so to Zachary after learning about his race and believing that he is the only one on the ship who might be able to comprehend her own various identities. As Neel and Ah Fatt become closer, Crowle interferes by persuading Ah Fatt to pee on Neel in exchange for what he thinks is opium.

Ah Fatt sneaks in and murders Crowle in retaliation for his deeds as Zachary and Crowle quarrel in the final chapter. Serang Ali, Jodu, Kalua, Neel, and Ah Fatt vanish in a stolen longboat headed for Singapore just as Zachary emerges from the water. There are three people on deck: Baboo Nob Kissin, Paulette, and Deeti, the last of whom he is familiar with despite having never met her.

It would be fascinating to examine how the various characters employ various speech acts in their dialogue because the story features a wide variety of individuals engaged in strong conflictual circumstances.

Conversational Passage One

Deeti and her daughter were eating their midday meal when Chandan Singh stopped his oxcart at their door. Kabutri-ki-má! he shouted. Listen: Hukam Singh has passed out, at the factory. They said you should go there and bring him home... . A chill crept up Deeti's neck as she absorbed this: it was not that the news itself was totally unexpected (Amitav Ghosh 27).

The above conversational lines comprise the declarative speech act. Here when Deeti and her daughter Kabutri were finishing their household chores, Chandan Singh stopped his ox-cart there before Deeti's home. Chandan Singh conveyed that Deeti's Husband Hukam Singh is no more. He passed away when he was working in factory. Chandan Singh advised mother and daughter to bring the dead body from factory. In this discourse, the speaker performs the declarative speech act. His words and expressions change the world of listener Deeti. The speaker alters the life situation only by making the utterance 'Hukam Singh has passed out, at the factory'. This life changing declarative speech act of Chandan Singh shocked both mother and daughter as they realised that their life is not same as earlier. It is also noticed that the utterance followed the three out of five felicity circumstances given by Searle, i.e., general conditions, content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential conditions. In

general conditions, Chandan Singh know the importance of language used and he is serious about it and is not nonsensical towards it. In Content conditions Chandan Singh utters the appropriate content. He follows preparatory Conditions while conveying message as he is a co-worker of diseased person. In this speech act sincerity conditions is not followed as the speaker did not genuinely intend to fulfil the future action of helping Deeti. The speaker also lacks essential conditions of not carrying out the action as per the utterance.

Conversational Passage Two

...Neel summoned his personal bearer, a tall, turbaned Benarasi called Parimal. 'Take a dinghy and row over to that ship', he said. 'Ask the serangs who the ship belongs to and how many officers are on board.'

Huzoor.

With a gesture of acknowledgement, Parimal retreated down the ladder ...

Parimal returned to report that the ship belonged to Burnham-sahib, of Calcutta.

How many officers on board? Neel inquired.

Of hat-wearing topi-walas there are just two, said Parimal. And who are they - the two sahibs? One of them is a Mr Reid, from Number-Two-England, said Parimal. The other is a pilot from Calcutta, Doughty-sahib. (Amitav Ghosh 42).

In this second conversational passage, representative speech act is used by the speaker Piramal who brings the factual information that is asked by his master Neel and reports it. Neel is Zamindar who observed a ship 'Ibis' anchored at port, so he sends his servant Piramal to find out the information regarding ship. Returning to Zamindar, Piramal performs representative speech act through asserting the truth of expressions i.e. the facts he collected. When Piramal returned to Zamindar Neel, he didn't speak of other things but he only informs Zamindar that on the ships, there are only two sahibs. The speaker provides information that is a part of representative speech acts.

Conversational Passage Three

Mr Burnham took a cheroot from his waistcoat and tapped it on his thumb.

'But if you don't mind, Raja Neel Rattan, I would like to have a few words with you in private.' Neel could think of no way to refuse this request.

'Certainly, Mr Burnham. Shall we proceed to the upper deck? There some privacy should certainly be available.' (Amitav Ghosh 121).

The above conversation is a fine example directive speech act where the speaker is Mr Burnham who wants to share some private information with the listener, Neel so he requests Neel to have some privacy. Neel also uses directive speech act and ask the Mr Burnham to proceed to the upper deck of ship in a polite way. Here Neel uses the direct speech act when he says, 'Shall we proceed to the upper deck?'. In directive speech act, the speaker intends to use the verb like request, command, order, ask invite etc.

Conversational Passage Four

When he came back, there was something hidden in the folds of his sarong. Shutting the door behind him, he undid his waist knot and handed Zachary a shining silver watch...

'I can't take this from you, Serang Ali.'

'Is all right, Zikri Malum,' said the serang...

Zachary was e. 'Thank you, Serang Ali. Ain nobody never gave me nothin like this before.' (Amitav Ghosh 20).

The taken conversation takes place between Serang Ali, the attendant on the ship 'Ibis' and the Captain incharge Zachary. When the ship reached the island of Mauritius, Zachary had to visit Monsieur d'Epinay to exchange a cargo of grain for a load of ebony and hardwood. Before visiting Monsieur d'Epinay, Serang Ali helped Zachary to be ready as a gentleman. At last, Serang Ali offered Zachary a silver watch. During this conversational discourse, the expressive speech act is exploited by Zachary when he thanked Ali. Zachary's utterances are emotional and are replete with feelings. In expressive speech act, the speaker uses the words which state what he/she feels. In the above utterance, Zachary expresses his thankfulness to Ali.

Conclusion

Thus, a few conversational passages from Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* has been discussed in the context of Scafe's typology of speech acts. The felicity circumstances have also been observed in these conversations. Each utterance is serious in tone. Appropriate content of utterance is used by the speaker with sincerity condition.

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