

Analysis of Speech Act Theory in Gil Adamson's Literature, in the Short Story Collection 'Help Me, Jacques Cousteau'

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Abstract

This paper delves into the concept of speech-act theory through a review of the book, Help Me, Jacques Cousteau, one of the literary works of acclaimed author Gil Adamson. The paper first briefly introduces the theory and the key literary works by the author, followed by the main plot of the book chosen for review. The paper then focuses on listing out some examples of events from the book that depict speech-act. An analysis is presented for each event, to show how or why it may be interpreted as a speech-act. By doing this, the paper adds to the existing understanding and usage of speech-act and also portrays one aspect of the richness of the text of the book.

Keywords- *Speech act theory, Adam Gilson, Speech analysis*

Introduction

Proposed by J.L. Austin (1962), the speech act theory tries to explain how speakers use language to achieve intended actions and how listeners, in turn, garner intentions from what is said. It is a component of the Pragmatic approach (Bach, 2014; Sbisà, 2007). It has a performative function in language and communication. Austin enlisted three main categories of speech acts – Locutionary, which is the actual utterance, the actual act of speaking, along with its verbal, semantic and syntactic aspects; Illocutionary, the central aspect of the theory, in which the intended significance is conveyed and which focuses on some action like a promise or a command; and perlocutionary, which focuses on the effect of the act on the listener (Ambroise, 2010; Birner, 2013). John R. Searle added to it the

psychological interpretation that focuses on the intention of the speaker. The illocutionary act was further detailed out and refined and thus, the indirect speech act has also been defined (Bach, 2014). The theory has since been studied, analysed and further developed by a number of researchers in the branches of literature and psychology.

Gillian ‘Gil’ Adamson, born on 1 January 1961, is a Canadian author. She is among those authors who write poetry as well as prose with equal skill and flair. *Primitive*, a volume of poetry, was her first published work, in 1991. The collection of short stories, *Help Me, Jacques Cousteau*, was her second work, published in 1995, followed by *Ashland*, again a volume of poetry. Having produced several other volumes, she has been well-known. However, she shot to further fame after the ‘Books in Canada First Novel Award’ in 2008 for her 2007 novel *The Outlander* (Antkowsky, 2008). Of these, *Help Me, Jacques Cousteau* offers an unconventional perspective and attracts further study to understand the nuances of the text.

This book is classified as a coming-of-age fiction. It has a blend of magical and autobiographical aspects, written with wisdom and wit. The story is about a peculiar girl, Hazel, growing up in her equally peculiar family, consisting of her parents and brother. They sail back to Canada to restart their lives. The short stories are events in Hazel’s life as she grows up in a world that she finds worrisome (Barr, 2011; Goodreads, 2015). The aim of this study is to elucidate and explore the use of the speech act theory on the book, *Help Me, Jacques Cousteau*, and also to add to the knowledge about the usage of speech-acts.

Discussion

Events depicting speech act theory in the story and their interpretation

The speech act theory can be seen in multiple scenarios throughout the novel, with instances of all the three categories mentioned by Austin. In fact, the entire book itself is a voice-driven narrative (Goodreads, 2015). The narrator or protagonist attempts to create a magical world for the readers and through the narration, hopes to transport the readers, who may be considered as listeners in a sense, to this world.

In the first chapter, ‘The Lakemba’, the mother expresses relief that her children did not pick superstitious beliefs from her. The protagonist, who is the daughter, recounts some of the actions of her brother. Implying in her mind that they are acts of superstition, asks the mother, “Where did he get that?”. This is not really a question, but, is a blame on the mother for inculcating superstition. There

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are several points where statements or dialogues appear in the story, several of them with gesticulations and expressions. For example, “Madam – ” with an outstretched palm, by the ship captain, by way of greeting the mother; “You are sweaty” as an observation by the daughter about the status of her mother when she is ill on the ship; “How can they drink in this heat?” by the mother, is not really a question but astonishment about people drinking in hot weather; “Excuse me”, “Somebody?” by the mother, to look for anyone on the deck.

The abovementioned events are all examples of locutionary speech acts. Added to that, the speeches of the brother may also in a way be characterized as speech-acts of this category. As mentioned in a review Barr (2011), the brother speaks in surreal aphorisms. These may be taken as insisting listeners to follow some commandments, or just propositional speech. Barthes also mentions about aphorism that may be considered a speech-act (Frankenberg, 1997).

In chapter one, the father exclaims to the mother, “Do you want me to track this stuff through the house?”, referring to his dirty shoes. This is said not as a question, but as indignation towards a suggestion by the mother. The question is an indirect and illocutionary speech-act of refusal to do something. The next sentence in the story, about body language of the parents, corroborates the use of speech-act. In one section of the book, Hazel narrates about her telling bedtime stories to Andrew and then stating her opinion about fairytales to the father. Those opinions may be taken as illocutionary speech, as they are not facts, but stated just to convey own thoughts and hoping for agreement by the listener. On the ship, the mother threatens the captain, “If I don’t get a fan in my cabin in four minutes I am moving my mattress on to the deck!” In this, the demand for a fan is implied, and hence this is an example of illocutionary speech-act. At the time, when Andrew has a nightmare about his grandfather and wakes up from sleep, the father makes some statements about the grandfather so as to comfort Andrew. However, it may seem that those statements have another purpose too – the father just tries to voice his opinion about grandfather and pour out his frustration, rather than caring much about whether Andrew is able to understand or not. In the chapter Bigfoot, the grandmother commands the grandfather to eat food by saying, “Hazel made dinner. Sit down and eat. What’s the problem?” This is also illocutionary.

Further, the conversation about eating mastodon that follows at the dinner table, has examples of perlocutionary speech. On the one hand, the grandfather tries to impress the grandchildren by, yet again, narrating the story about him having eaten a mastodon, while, on the other, the grandmother tries to make sure that the grandchildren do not believe the story, by stating that it is all made up. Considering the following snippet from Lakemba, ‘Inside the church, we look for a place to hang our coats and, right away, I see what seems to be a little closet against the wall. “There, look!” I say and

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am well on my way before my father snaps me back by the upper arm. “That’s a confessional,” he whispers.’ The father’s exclamation about what the place is, is not so as to inform the daughter, but more to stop her from going there to hang her coat. Hence, it is said to stop the listener from doing something, i.e. the focus is on the action of the listener. This may be considered as an example of perlocutionary speech-act. During the event of Andrew’s nightmare about grandfather, the mother exclaims, “North!”, with the focus on making the father stop saying things about grandfather, again an example of perlocutionary act, as the father shifts to defending what he is saying.

Conclusion

The book has a rich quality of language use and sub-text to impress upon readers, the strangeness of the world. Its narrative style is as though the protagonist is speaking to the reader. Thus, at one level, the entire book itself, through written word, may be taken as a speech act, as it is a narration. Due to the magical and strange subject of the book and the strangeness of all the characters, the author has used several opportunities to bring in dramatics and gestures by speakers and listeners, thus abundantly using speech-acts to convey intonations. All forms of speech-acts, as enlisted by Austin and then further refined, have been found in the book. Not just a single character, but a number of characters in the book use speech-acts. The brother makes abundant use of propositional utterances, which are part of locutionary act.

Events, such as the one on the ship when the mother falls ill, when they visit the church, when Andrew has a nightmare and when the children sit with their grandparents for dinner when they start living with them, all present examples of all types of speech-acts in them, used by different characters. Each character has their own personality and way of saying things, for example, Hazel is comparatively calm, composed and thoughtful, while her mother is more boisterous, noisy and energetic. This too has presented a setting for using speech-acts differently, attuned to the nature of each character.

This kind of a focused analysis of the book has brought out the nuances of text and speech and the realization of the numerous points where speech acts have been used in the story. Hence, it has given a new viewpoint of reading this book, which already has its own unique characteristics. While there are numerous coming-of-age stories, this one is different because of its magical nature and strangeness of characters. This analysis has also added to the available literature on the subject of speech-act theory by presenting several examples of different types of speech acts, with their unique contexts and interpretations.

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