

A Pragmatic Study of Speech Acts in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion*

Sachin D Bhandare

Asst. Professor of English,
Rajarshi Shahu Mahavidyalaya, Latur Dist,
Latur MS

Dr. S G Bhanegaonkar

Asst. Professor of English,
People's College Nanded,
Dist Nanded MS

ABSTRACT

Language is a social and cultural institution. It is a tool for social (and many other types of) communication and interactions. Linguistics is the scientific study of natural languages. It is defined as the study of the nature, structure, and variation of language, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. Pragmatics, as one of the major branches of linguistics, basically studies how the utterances made by the communicator communicate a certain meaning to establish communion with the listener. It encompasses speech act theory, conversational implicature (politeness principle and co-operative principle), talk in interaction, and other approaches to language behaviour. The present paper discusses the application of speech act theory to the play *Old Stone Mansion* by Mahesh Elkunchwar.

KEYWORDS

Mahesh Elkunchwar; *Old Stone Mansion*; Linguistics.

Introduction

Man has been using language as a tool for social (and many other types of) communication and interactions. It has enabled him to interact with the environment and regulate his social behaviour (Mohan and Banerji 2009:3). Despite some means to commune, language is the most widely used mechanism. Human beings do communicate through sentences or utterances. Pragmaticists believe that every utterance is an act. That is to say, when we use words, we do things. J.L. Austin in his *How to do Things with Words*

(1962) described the speech act theory as “the uttering of the sentence is or is a part of, the doing of an action” (Austin 1962:5). This theory was later explored and expanded by John Searle, Lakoff, and H.P. Grice. Speech act theory is concerned with the linguistic acts, made while speaking, which have some social or interpersonal purpose and pragmatic effect.

Speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises and so on (Searle 2011:16).

The production or issuance of a sentence token under certain conditions is a speech act and speech acts are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication (2011:16)

Actions performed via utterances are generally called speech acts (Yule 2011:47). In English, these acts are labeled as an apology, complaint, invitation, order, promise, request, etc. John Searle, a Student of Austin later on developed the theory of speech acts. On a functional basis, J R Searle in his *Expression and Meaning Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (1979) classifies five types of speech acts: assertive, expressive, directives, commissives, and declarations.

The first, assertive or representatives as Yule (2011:53) calls it are the speech acts that state what a speaker believes to be the case or not. Assertions, conclusions, descriptions, and statements of fact as exemplified in [1] are examples of this type. a) Today is a cool rainy day. b) Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth president of America. c) Shakespeare didn't write about the art of painting. [1]

The second, expressive refers to what the speaker feels. Austin calls them behabitives (1962:151). They express psychological states or social behaviour and include the utterances of apology, joy, sorrow, likes, dislikes, pleasure, pains, etc as occurred in [2]. A) I'm extremely sorry! B) Congratulations. C) I am full of grief; there is no room for more. [2]

The third, commissives, as Austin (1962:150) mentions, are typified by promising or otherwise undertaking; they commit you to do something. They express what the speaker intends. They include promises, threats, refusals, pledges, etc. as shown in [3]. A) We will see a film. B) I'll see you later. C) I do not accept it.

The fourth, directives are the speech acts that the speakers use to get

the addressee or someone else to do something. They express what the speaker wants. They are commands, orders, and requests as illustrated which can be positive or negative similarly advice, invite and permit are the directives. [4] A) Shoot her. B) Will you give me a glass of water, please? C) Don't take it.

The fifth is declarations. These acts, as Levinson (2010:240), describes, bring immediate change in the state of human affairs. It is the exercising of powers, rights, or influence (Austin 1962:150). Here a speaker performs a special institutional role. Its consequence may be that others are compelled or allowed or not allowed to do certain acts (1962:154). Declaring war, excommunicating, performing a marriage, firing from employment, compelling a player (not) to play further, etc. are the paradigm cases as stated in [5]. A) Priest: I now pronounce you husband and wife. B) Boss: You are fired from this job. C) Umpire: You're out! [5]. Within the framework of these speech acts a play or a novel can be analysed. Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion* illustrates almost all these speech acts.

The theme of the play

The *Old-stone Mansion* is one of the best plays by Mahesh Elkunchwar. It deals with a variety of themes and ideas. The Deshpande family has differences and is separated over the issue of rural-urban disagreement. Bhaskar and his family grumble to Sudhir, his younger brother, for not paying any attention to them. Sudhir shares the fact that he has been living in Bombay for many years besides, he doesn't give up his job in Bombay to adjust to the rural setting. This disagreement instigates the domestic conflict where everybody tries to signify their sacrifice and survival for the family. The death of Venkatesh, their father brings two families together. It symbolises that human civilization has reached a grave state.

Pragmatics and Drama

The literary text, as mentioned by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, uses language as its medium. Hence, the literary text is a linguistic entity that can offer, what it intends to be, only when the readers or audience can work out the literariness which is hidden in culture-specific, speaker/writer intentional and context-bound use of language which is the area of pragmatics. The dramatist creates men and women who speak to each other and make their intentions known to each other. It is here, that the speech act theory is relevant. The characters in a play use speech act to convey their messages thereby using illocutionary acts which lead to perlocutionary act. Thus, pragmatics helps us to know the literariness of literature hidden in the use of language. When we read drama we read speeches or dialogues which reveal the message of the dramatist. The dictionary tells us that dialogue is a conversation between two or more persons, real or imaginary. These dialogues or speeches fall in the category of speech acts hence dramatic dialogues can be analysed in the light of Speech Act Theory.

Assertive Speech Act

Assertive or representatives are the speech acts that state what a speaker believes to be the case or not (Yule 2011: 53). According to Searle, the Purpose of an assertive class is to commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. It means the speaker wants to make the listener believe the truth of what he or she says. The Assertive speech act most closely resembles Austin's constative utterance. The speaker asserts a proposition that represents a condition or a state of affairs that in principle could be true or false like Austin's constative utterances. As Yarahmadi and Olfati (2011) point out Assertive speech acts are statements of facts, getting the viewer to form or attend to a belief. Here, the

speaker's words reveal his beliefs and he/she is uttering about the external world. Assertions, conclusions, descriptions, reporting, predicting, informing, accusing, testifying, confessing, swearing, criticizing, complaining and statement of fact are examples of this type.

In *Old Stone Mansion*, the Deshpande family is waiting for Sudhir and Anjali to come from Bombay. When they come the following dialogue takes place.

BHASKAR: When did the telegram reach you?

SUDHIR: Day before yesterday. We left immediately.

BHASKAR: Hmm. I was wondering what happened. It was already past ten. I thought perhaps you hadn't got the telegram at all.

SUDHIR: The train reached Amravati very late. The last bus had left by then. We had to take a taxi.

BHASKAR: Tatyaji gave us no time at all. He got up from his evening pooja and collapsed on the spot. I shouted, 'Tatyaji! Taraji!' But it was all over. (Act 1, p 137)

In this exchange of speech act, Bhaskar and Sudhir mention the facts. The mention of telegram shows that the setting of the play is somewhat old, where people do use telegram as a means of communication with people living in distant places. In India usually, telegrams were used to convey the message of something unpleasant and shocking. Bhaskar mentions the fact of their father's death to Sudhir. His statement 'Tatyaji gave us no time at all' shows that Bhaskar would have tried to save Tatyaji by taking him to the hospital if he would have survived after collapsing on the ground. Through this assertive speech act, Bhaskar wants to understand Sudhir that Tatyaji has passed away as he has fallen on the ground after performing his evening pooja. He was not on the death bed or

suffering from illness. The violent or shocking scenes like death and murder rape are generally not shown on the stage directly. They are communicated through speech acts usually indirect speech acts. Here through Bhaskar's assertive speech act, which is indirect, 'I shouted, 'Tatyaji! Tatyaji!' But it was all over' the dramatist wants to convey to readers/audience the fact of the death of Vyenkatesh.

In rural and urban India, to maintain their high social status, many families, despite losing their past wealth and glory are forced to continue with their traditional familial cults and practices. The falsified practices of the "valuable" and "rich" traditions lead to further socio-cultural degradation (Dey 2014). The same thing happens with the Deshpandes of Dharangaon in *Old Stone Mansion*.

Bhaskar, after the death of Vyenkatesh wants to do all post-demise rituals. The Deshpande's continue to flow with their false notion of status and honour and continue to blow out even their minimal financial balance behind baseless customs. Sudhir and Anjali are very practical. They feel all such things are outdated and futile. Following a conversation in the form of an assertive speech act, shows the impact of ancestral tradition on Bhaskar and Vahini.

BHASKAR: He used to look after Tatyaji as well. I was so busy with farm work. So he took the brunt. There's a lot of work for you for the thirteenth and fourteenth-day rituals Chandoba. Your last service to Tatyaji.

SUDHIR: A lot of work? why?

BHASKAR: Won't it be? With the whole village coming for a meal?

SUDHIR (tense): What?

BHASKAR: What do you think?

SUDHIR: The village?

BHASKAR: Come on. That's a custom here. We have to feed the whole village on the thirteenth day or we lose face.

SUDHIR: So you're going to feed all the four or five thousand?

BHASKAR: Is there a choice? The sittings will start in the morning and go on till ten or twelve at night.

SUDHIR: And no thought for the expense! Five thousand plates mean at least twenty or twenty-five thousand rupees. Where will you get that?

BHASKAR: That's what I wanted us to discuss. Tell me if you have an idea.

SUDHIR: I won't give anything.

BHASKAR: Whether you do or not, we'll have to manage as best we can.

VAHINI: Bhauji, this is the last expenditure for a family elder. Do we refuse it and get closer to hell?

SUDHIR: What old-fashioned ideas, Vahini?

VAHINI: Say what you like...

(Act 2, p167-68)

Bhaskar and Vahini live in a village under the impression of old customs and conventions. The Deshpandes are already running short of money even though they cannot think of cutting off the expenditure for the rituals. Sudhir who is educated and working in Bombay, advises withdrawing or minimising the scale of expenditure for the rituals as the family lacks money. But Bhaskar's assertive response, "Come on. That's a custom here. We have to feed the whole village on the thirteenth day or we lose face", shows that it is necessary to perform the rituals to avoid social dishonour. Bhaskar expects some economical help from Sudhir but he refuses to "give anything" and expects to give up "old-fashioned ideas". But Sudhir's intentional force, due to heavy pressure of social customs and rituals in their rural settings, brings no perlocutionary effect in Bhaskar and Vahini. Besides their speech act reveal the attitude of the traditional mode of life vis-a-vis modern.

Expressive Speech Act

The second, expressive refers to what the speaker feels. Austin calls them behabitives (1962:151). They express psychological states or social behaviour and include the utterances of apology, blessing, cursing, congratulation, praises, joy, sorrow, likes, dislikes, pleasure, pains, etc. Some of these occurred in selected plays are enlisted below.

Old Stone Mansion is full of expressive speech acts where various characters express their psychological states, apology, joy, sorrow, likes, dislikes, pleasure, pains, etc. Two are quoted for the sake of study. Sudhir and Bhaskar argue over the matter of ancestral property and its consumption after the death of their father Vyenkatesh. Aai's 'dislike' for it is an example of an expressive speech act. She says-

AAI: It's not even ten days yet.
What do you think we look like?
Does it suit us to bicker like this?
(Act 2, p 173)

Aai intends to stop her sons Bhaskar, Sudhir, and Chandoba from quarrelling. Her intention is defeated as the three brothers go on arguing without paying any attention to Aai.

Ranju, Bhaskar's daughter elopes with her teacher in the village. Sudhir finds her out from Bombay and brings her back home. He saves the family from social dishonour. The utterances exchanged between Bhaskar and Sudhir are expressive speech acts.

BHASKAR: Sudhir, how can I ever repay you for what you've done.

SUDHIR: Let's just forget it, Bhau. It's over and done with

BHASKAR: The younger brother has become the elder and the elder younger today.

SUDHIR: We have found Ranju. Nothing
(Scene 2, p 192)

Bhaskar feels very much obliged as Sudhir brings Ranju back from Bombay. He expresses his feelings of respect for his younger brother through the utterance "The younger brother has become the elder and the elder younger today". He feels as if he is in debt to his younger brother and he can never repay it. Sudhir's responses "Let's just forget it, Bhau. It's over and done with" and "We have found Ranju. Nothing else matters" express his sense of maturity and affection for family members.

Commissive Speech Act

The third, commissives, as Austin (1962:150) mentions, are typified by promising or otherwise undertaking; they commit you to do something. They express what the speaker intends. They include promises, threats, refusals, pledges, vows, guaranteeing, etc.

In *Old Stone Mansion* Sudhir's promise to Vahini of taking Parag to Bombay is a commissive speech act. "SUDHIR: I'll take him to Mumbai for a few days." (Act 1, p 154) Towards the end of the play we realize that Sudhir and Anjali decide not to take Parag to Bombay as their son, Abhay makes fun of Parag. Besides Sudhir feels that Parag should be in the home as their family is under tension due to Ranju's elopement with her teacher.

Directive Speech Act

The fourth, directives are the speech acts that the speakers use to get the addressee or someone else to do something as a response. As Yarahmadi and Olfati (2011) mention many directive sentences are posed as questions so they are easy to identify by the presence of a question mark. However, some sentences that end in question marks are rhetorical and do not represent a directive speech act. Directives express what the speaker wants. They are commands, orders, and requests, which can be positive or

negative similarly advice, invite and permit are the directives. In *Old Stone Mansion* Sudhir's family is waiting for Sudhir and his wife Anjali who are coming from Mumbai as Sudhir's father has passed away. Aai's remark is an example of a directive speech act.

AAI (to Prabha): Tell Chandu to take another look at the bus stop, dear...

PRABHA: The last bus must have come and gone, Aai. Why don't you sleep? They'll be here tomorrow. ... (Act 1, p 134)

Aai's remark shows that she is eagerly waiting for her son and his wife. She becomes restless and asks her daughter Prabha to tell Chandu to go to the bus stop. Prabha is supposed to behave as per Aai's expectations but instead her response "The last bus must have come and gone, Aai. Why don't you sleep? They'll be here tomorrow" shows the mother's intentional effect not achieved.

Declarative Speech Act

The fifth is declarations. These acts, as Levinson (2010:240), describes, bring

immediate change in the state of human affairs. It is the exercising of powers, rights, or influence. (Austin 1962:150). Here a speaker performs a special institutional role. Its consequence may be that others are compelled or allowed or not allowed to do certain acts (1962:154). The class includes betting, declaring, resigning, passing a sentence, appointing, nominating, giving judgment, etc. These speech acts are uncommon. Instances of declarative speech acts are not found in the play.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made to show how various speech acts by the characters in a play, play a significant role in the context of the dramatic world to carry and convey the message of the dramatist. An attempt has also been made to show the culture-specificity of these speech acts at some length. Though the plot is important, speech acts on the part of the characters to carry forward the actions in a play. Owing to limitations of space only particular expressions are analysed with the help of speech act theory.

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