

The Exchange of Talk: A Study of Speech Acts in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

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ABSTRACT

The study of dramatic dialogue as the discourse has caught the attention of researchers in recent times. A defining moment regarding this was the publication of John Langshaw Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and his theory of 'Speech Acts' in 1962, which was further modified and systematised by John Rogers Searle in his book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* published in the year 1969. A characteristic feature of drama is that characters express themselves through their dialogues and this raises the issue of applying the theory of 'Speech Acts' in studying the conversational features of dramatic dialogues as it enables the interpretation of dramatic dialogues in a systematic manner. The present paper first outlines the theoretical framework of the notion of 'Speech Acts' put forwarded by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) before discussing the contribution that the theory of 'Speech Acts' makes to the understanding of dramatic dialogues. The paper then analyses some selected conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's first full-length play *Where There's a Will* (1986) using the theoretical insights from Austin's and Searle's notions of 'Speech Acts' and shows how the theory of 'Speech Acts' affects the reader's interpretation of the characters' speech.

KEYWORDS

Speech Acts; Locutionary Acts; Illocutionary Acts; Perlocutionary Acts; Felicity Conditions.

The growth and development of Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis since the late 1970s and the early 1980s have helped equip stylisticians with tools and techniques for analysing the meanings of utterances in dramatic texts. One such tool is the theory of Speech Acts, which was introduced by the British philosopher, Austin, in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, where he tried to shed light on how "the uses of language which, either directly or indirectly, commit the user

recipient to a particular action" (Carter & Nash 33). Austin's theory of Speech Acts was further modified, systematised and advanced by his student, the American philosopher, Searle in his book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. The purpose of the present paper is to outline the theoretical framework of the notion of Speech Acts and to analyse some selected conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's play, *Where There's a Will* (1986), using the theoretical

insights from the notion of Speech Acts put forward by Austin and Searle. The paper also aims at exploring the relationship and characterisation of the different dramatic characters in the Dattani's play using the theory of Speech Acts.

In his seminal book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin discusses the theory of Speech Acts, which explains the use of language in relation to the context, the attitude of the speaker and its effect on the hearer (Lowe 130). These aspects play an important role in understanding the meaning of utterances and their consequences. Austin defines speech acts as the actions performed in saying something (Cutting 16). He begins his discussion of the theory of Speech Acts by distinguishing between two kinds of utterances: constatives (Austin 3) and performatives (Austin 6). Austin defines a performative as an utterance which contains a special type of verb – a performative verb – by force of which it performs an action (Austin 6). In other words, in using a performative, a person is not just saying something but is actually doing something (Wardhaugh 283). For instance, in uttering the sentence, 'I name this ship Queen Elizabeth', the speaker is not just describing what s/he is doing, but actively performing the action of naming a ship. After the speaker has done it, the world has changed because from that moment the ship has been named. The example given above has a particular type of verb called a performative verb that realises a particular action. The action is named by the verb in a particular context. Performatives require the appropriate language in appropriate circumstances (Austin 8). To see whether an utterance is performative or not, Austin introduces a 'hereby test' since he finds that performative verbs only can collocate with the adverb 'hereby'. So the utterance 'I hereby name this ship Queen Elizabeth' is not odd. However, the utterance 'I hereby believe in God' is odd

because 'believe' is not a performative verb. Austin calls such utterances 'constatives' (Austin 3). Constatives are statements or assertions which describe truth and falsity. Constatives depend on facts, and can only be judged with reference to them. Constatives are sentences that seem to be employed mainly for saying something rather than doing something (Austin 3). Thus, they lend themselves to truth-falseness values. Austin makes a distinction between performatives and constatives. Constative utterances can be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity but performative utterances are neither true nor false and they simply perform the action to which they refer (Austin 9). Utterances like 'I go to college everyday' and 'I believe in God' are, therefore, constatives as one can assess these utterances as either true or false.

Austin then goes on to explain that though performatives cannot be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity, they can go wrong or be 'infelicitous' (Austin 14). Austin suggests some conditions which performatives must meet if they are to succeed or be 'happy', calling these conditions "felicity conditions" (Austin 14). Felicity conditions are those conditions that must be fulfilled in the situation in which the act is carried out if the act is to be said to be carried out properly or felicitously (Cutting 18). The felicity conditions suggested by Austin are as follows:

(a) There must be an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect. That procedure must include the uttering of certain words by certain persons 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).

As Austin develops his theory, the distinction between constatives and performatives becomes blurred. Austin realises that the categories of performatives and constatives are not sufficient and thus, in an attempt to replace them by 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). According to Austin, the action performed when an utterance is produced can be analysed on three different levels (Cutting 16). The first one is the locutionary act which is the basic act of utterance (Yule 48). This is roughly equal to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference (Cutting 16). For example, the locutionary force of the sentence ‘X said to me to shoot her!’ can be described as the act of shooting someone. The second act is the illocutionary act. This is a conventional social act recognised as such by both the speaker and the hearer. 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 shoot her. The third act is the perlocutionary act. It refers to the effects of the utterance on the listener, i.e., the change in the mind or behaviour of the listener as a result of producing locutions and illocutions (Cutting 16). Thus, to proceed with the above example, the same man who witnessed the two

preceding acts might describe the resulting perlocution as X having persuaded him/her to shoot her.

Searle developed the theory of Speech Acts beyond Austin’s original work. Although like Austin, Searle is primarily interested in what the speaker does and not the hearer, his contribution allows us to shift our focus from the intentions of the speaker to the way in which the hearer arrives at an interpretation of the speaker’s intention (Lowe 136). According to Searle, speech acts can be classified into five types: Declaratives, Representatives, Expressives, Directives and Commissives (Cutting 16). These are going to be discussed below in brief.

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).

Searle, further, modified the felicity conditions introduced by Austin. According to Searle, the five major types of felicity conditions are 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).

The following section is devoted to the application of the theory of 'Speech Acts' discussed above to analyse the selected conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's play *Where There's a Will*. *Where There's a Will* is a provocative and contemplative play, the central theme of which, in the words of Dattani, is "the exorcism of the patriarchal code" (449). The play also deals with other interesting aspects like male-egoism, subordination of female

characters, women empowerment, etc. The storyline of the play is simple at best. Hasmukh Mehta, a symbol of patriarchal ego, who does not allow his family members to do as they wish, is a self-made industrialist and has established the Mehta Group of Companies. Though his active role in the play is limited as he dies soon, he is present spiritually throughout the play. He introduces all the members of his family: his wife, Sonal, their son, Ajit and daughter-in-law, Preeti. At the beginning of the play, Hasmukh is seen grumbling against his son, whom he considers useless, irresponsible and idiotic, and, therefore, does not want to make him the Chief Managing Director of his company. Hasmukh expects all his family members to obey him blindly. However, as his wife and son are found to be acting contrary to his wishes, he thinks that they are a burden on him. Sonal is very meek, submissive and obedient and cannot handle the family kitchen on her own and depends on her servants too much. Sonal finds it difficult to understand her husband and therefore blames him for being sullen and cheerless. Since Hasmukh and Sonal often fight with each other, their married life is not a successful one. Hasmukh, thus, turns towards Mrs. Kiran Jhaveri, the marketing executive of his company, for emotional support. Hasmukh finally dies of cardiac arrest. In the remaining part of the play, he can be seen on his spirit. Hasmukh has made a special will for his family. After seven days of his death, the family members come to know about his will. Hasmukh has made a trust – "The Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust" – out of hidden money. Mrs. Kiran Jhaveri has been nominated as the trustee and all the property, finances and shares belong to the trust now. The trust will be dissolved when Ajit turns forty five. The family members are shocked at the contents of the will. As per the will, Kiran comes to stay with them in their house. All the family members are apparently uncomfortable

at her presence. However, things gradually change. Ajit becomes a responsible man. Sonal becomes friendly with Kiran and Preeti becomes obedient. Thus, the whole family turns good by the efforts taken by Kiran. Since the play exhibits a wide range of characters involved in intense conflictual situations, it would be interesting to analyse how the different characters make use of different speech acts in their conversation.

The first conversational passage discussed below occurs at the beginning of Act I of *Where There's a Will*. The passage contains the encounter between Ajit and Hasmukh Mehta. Ajit, at first, initiates the conversation by asking his father not to insult him and then the conversation between Ajit and his father follows. The place is the living room. Ajit is talking on the phone. Preeti can be seen drifting in and out of the kitchen. Hasmukh enters through the main door with his walking stick and then the conversation between Ajit and his father begins.

Conversational Passage One

AJIT. Daddy, you have no right to humiliate me in front of my friends!

HASMUKH. I am not trying to humiliate you. I am trying to put some sense into you. Trying to fill up empty spaces.

AJIT. There, you see! You are doing it again. This is unfair. You have no right!

HASMUKH. Wrong! I, Hasmukh Mehta, have every right. It's my phone you are using in my house, and it's my business secrets you are leaking to government officers, and my typists your friend is flirting with. (Dattani 458)

The focus of the study is the analysis of the characters' emotions and reactions as reflected in their utterances. Ajit's speech acts, which are expressive in nature, vocalise his

reaction on being humiliated by his father. Expressives, we must remember, are speech acts with which the speaker expresses a propositional attitude or emotion. A cursory glance at the conversational passage above shows that the two characters are not happy with each other and to express their unhappiness they attack and counter-attack each other. Ajit wants to let his father know in no uncertain terms that the latter has no right to humiliate him in front of his friends. But Hasmukh immediately rejects Ajit's proposition and expresses his irritation at the latter's remarks.

Ajit's direct illocutionary speech act expects the perlocutionary effect of not getting humiliated by the hurling of pejorative words by his father. However, Hasmukh does not follow what Ajit says and hence the failure and infelicity of the speech event. Hasmukh does not reciprocate the wish and the need of Ajit to not humiliate him and so it can be said that he is also being impolite to Ajit. His refusal to Ajit's detestation emphasises that Hasmukh cannot be forced or flattered to comply with Ajit's expressive at this particular point in time.

Has mukh's use of the sentence "I am trying to put some sense into you" indicates that he is in the position to control the situation by suggesting a course of action without counselling with Ajit. The verb phrase "am trying to put some sense into you" possibly implies that Ajit is bound to listen to what his father says. His next sentence, "Trying to fill up empty spaces", which is declarative in construction, has the perlocutionary effect that Ajit should accept what his father says without any argument. It can also be considered to be a piece of advice without any polite expression added to it because Hasmukh thinks that his son is useless, irresponsible and idiotic. However, Ajit's annoying refusal turns the whole situation topsy-turvy. What the reader is

possibly expecting from him is that he should accept what his father is saying and show some respect towards the latter. However, Ajit's declining his father's comment categorically is unusual and unexpected for the reader. Consequently, his utterance pops out of the text, comes to the fore and becomes prominent for analysis and interpretation.

Ajit's first utterance is an exclamatory sentence, an expressive, with the sign of exclamation. The playwright may have used the mark of exclamation intentionally in order to reveal the genuine feelings of Ajit because it has become a routine affair for him to get humiliated by his father. So, this expressive act communicates Ajit's genuine emotion of detestation on being humiliated by his father. Later, Ajit says, "...You are doing it again. This is unfair. You have no right". This shows that the habitual acts of his father have become the cause of monotony and dullness in Ajit's life. In his routine life, Ajit feels fed up with his father's regular humiliation which has sapped him of his enthusiasm. But, Hasmukh does not even pretend to pay any attention to Ajit's feelings because he is a self-centred man who does not allow Ajit to live his life according to his own will. He has to listen to his father's command carefully in order to obey them keeping his talent and efficiency aside. Thus, the above analysis seems to implicate that Hasmukh Mehta and Ajit do not share a healthy father-son relationship which is the result of the egoistic nature of Hasmukh Mehta.

The second conversational passage chosen for analysis has also been taken from Act I of the play. Here, Hasmukh and Sonal share contrary opinions regarding their son's choice and interest. All the family members are seen sitting at the dining table. Sonal wants to go to the kitchen for making *parathas* for her son, Ajit. Hasmukh stops Sonal from going to the kitchen and then the conversation between them begins.

Conversational Passage Two

HASMUKH. Wait! (*Sonal stops.*) I say there's no need to make parathas.

SONAL. Aju wants them.

HASMUKH. He does not.

SONAL. How do you know?

HASMUKH. I know my son better than you know him. (Dattani 468)

Hasmukh's statement "I say there's no need to make parathas" is in declarative form. The use of a declarative form suggests that he is probably well aware of the choice of his son. But, the question that arises is with regard to the use of an exclamatory remark at the beginning of his statement. This implies that he is in a commanding position and does not want his wife to make any *paratha* for his son. Hence, these thoughts of Hasmukh are represented by this blend of the exclamatory and the declarative.

Sonal's reply "Aju wants them" is basically a representative which affirms her knowledge of the choice of her son and leaves no room for any doubt. It should be remembered that representatives are speech acts which commit the hearer to the truth of the expressed proposition. However, a careful analysis of Hasmukh's next speech act reveals that he does not agree with the truth of the proposition expressed by Sonal. Hasmukh's second speech act, which is an expressive, not only vocalises his disbelief in Sonal's proposition but also shows his commanding attitude. Hasmukh tells his wife that Ajit does not want any *parathas*. However, he does not mention the reason behind his saying so. The perlocutionary force of his illocutionary act can be considered as a command and it also confirms his disbelief in the proposition expressed by Sonal.

Sonal's next speech act, which is interrogative in structure, is an information seeker. Her question becomes necessary on account of the authoritative nature of her husband, Hasmukh, who does not allow her to

do as she wishes. Sonal's speech act, therefore, expresses the emotive connotation of despair and deprivation. She asks her husband how he knows whether Ajit wants *parathas* or not. To which, Hasmukh replies in affirmative claiming that he knows his son better than his wife. Hasmikh's attitude towards Sonal shows that she has been exploited by her husband's authority.

The above analysis seems to suggest that Hasmukh and Sonal do not share a healthy familial relationship. While answering Sonal's question, Hasmukh seems least interested in providing any kind of detailed information. His replies indicate his apparent indifference to what Sonal is asking for. For Hasmukh, his wife is nothing more than a faithful servant. Overall, this analysis points out the subordination and victimisation of Sonal by her husband which ultimately brings unhappiness in her life.

The third conversational passage has been extracted from Act II of *Where There's a Will*. In this piece of conversation, Ajit and Kiran can be seen interacting with each other. The doorbell rings. Ajit gets up and goes towards the main door. Kiran enters carrying a large suitcase. She notices Ajit and stops. She puts down her suitcase and sits. Then, after a brief introduction, the following conversation between them starts.

Conversational Passage Three

AJIT. Yes. He didn't mind?

KIRAN. Who?

AJIT. Your husband. He didn't mind?

KIRAN. What?

AJIT (*uneasily*). You know.

KIRAN. No. I don't... (*Realising*)... Oh, that! No, of course, he didn't mind. He had his reasons for not minding... (Dattani 490)

Ajit's first question is not a typical interrogative one with its normal grammatical structure. It looks more like a statement than a

question but the sign of interrogation shows its status as a query from Ajit. He repeats this question once more in the text with the same syntactical pattern. It is a hybrid expression. Many questions are asked in the play but they are not answered on most occasions probably because of being constructed in such a manner. Such order or arrangement of linguistic units to make an utterance demanding the needed information shows that Ajit is timidly asking questions to Kiran because of her superiority over him. Kiran answers Ajit's questions irrelevantly which confirms her superiority over him.

In his turn, Ajit performs an action by means of a performative act. His speech act, which is a directive, seeks information from Kiran. This illocutionary speech act is in need of its perlocutionary act from Kiran, but she does not provide any direct answer. In this way, it is a deviation of speech act. As Elam points out, a speech act "cannot be successfully performed unless the speaker gets the listener to recognise his illocutionary intentions" (163). Ajit fails in conveying his message to Kiran so it can be considered as "non-securing of uptake" (Elam 164).

Kiran's next speech act is interrogative in structure. As we have its contextual study, we come to know that her illocutionary speech act has the perlocutionary force of a question in need of Ajit's reply. Accordingly, Ajit replies to her questions and thereby conforms to the superiority of Kiran. The last utterance of Kiran "...Oh, that! No, of course, he didn't mind. He had his reasons for not minding..." is marked for analysis because of its hybrid construction. After one utterance of Kiran, we find the sign of exclamation. She says that her husband does not mind her adultery and he has his own reasons for this. Her utterance expresses her emotion of excessive pride which is mixed in her declarative. Therefore, the exclamatory sign that is used at the

beginning of her sentence presents Kiran as a self-centred woman.

The above analysis shows Kiran as shrewd, money-minded, scheming and empowered person. But the noteworthy element of her character is that she is capable of doing what she likes. She is depicted as a very sharp and open-minded woman who has maintained her relationship with Hasmukh only to satisfy her need. She has no emotional attachment to him. Thus, it can be said that she is truly a self-centred and a self-empowered woman.

To conclude, it can be said that the present paper has analysed the selected

conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's play *Where There's a Will* by applying the theory of 'Speech Acts'. The theory of 'Speech Acts' has helped to a great extent in understanding Dattani's *Where There's a Will* in a better way. It has also helped us in drawing inferences from the selected conversational passages. The discourse analysis of the selected conversational passages has helped to demonstrate various important aspects like male-egoism, the subordination of female characters and women empowerment in Dattani's *Where There's a Will*.

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