

*THE GHOST IN HIS CONTEXT :  
A SPEECH – ACT APPROACH TO SHAKESPEAR'S "HAMLET "*

Samir Abdul Karim Al-Sheikh  
University of Maysan  
College of Education  
English Department

ABSTRACT

Literary texts are dealt with variously within various theoretical backgrounds . The syntactic and semantic theories hinge on the study of verbal works of art as syntactic and semantic variations . The modern insights look into texts to explore their linguistic and aesthetic values ( see Mukarovsky, 1970 ; Halliday , 1970 ). The literary texts , to these theories , are of interrelated syntactic – semantic options . The linguists fundamentally concentrate on the sentence as the most significant unit of language . Therefore , these theories are rarely concerned with the communicative value of literary texts . The literary texts ; however , are not merely illustrations of the linguistic system . They are not merely sets of grammatical patterns . Rather , they are pieces of human experience, of communication . They reflect the verisimilitude of human life . In other words , the complexity of human nature and patterns of man are encoded into these artifacts as types of verbal communication . In this sense , the literary text is " a discourse " of one kind or another .

This paper proceeds on the hypothesis that the literary text is deeply oriented into the communicative practices of the participants. The participants interact in the context . The speech acts of the characters in Shakespeare's Hamlet will be approached in terms of the Speech – Act Theory . The scope of the paper will be limited to Act I , Scene I of the Shakespearean tragedy .

I . Speech – Act Theory : A Bird 's eye View

Before going a step further , it is plausible to distinguish between three linguistic and pedagogical terms : theory , approach and method . A theory , as Crystal ( 1971 : 113 ) , puts it , is " actually an explanation of phenomena or data " . Method , to Bell (1981 : 75 ) , is " an orientation to the problem of language learning which derives from an amalgam of linguistics and psychological insights into the nature of language and the nature of the learning process." Method is " the application of the insights which constitute the approach to the problem of language learning " ( Ibid. ) .

Pragmatics, a linguistic approach , delineates language in context . What matters to this approach is not the sentence meaning , but the utterance meaning . Pragmatics commences with the observation that people use language to perform

different types of acts , broadly known as " speech acts " . Lyons ( 1977 : 171 ) views pragmatics as the study of actual utterances ; the study of use rather than meaning ; the study of that part of meaning which is not parley truth – conditional ; the study of performance rather than competence . To Leech ( 1983: 6 ) , pragmatics deals with meaning as a triadic relation . Thus meaning in pragmatics is defined relative to a speaker or user of the language .

Linguists and philosophers of language are mainly concerned with context as the fundamental aspect of utterance interpretation. The general study of " how context influences the interpretation of meaning " is called pragmatics ( Fromkin and Rodman , 1988 : 159) . In his seminal study " Pragmatics , " Yule focuses on the areas of pragmatics: pragmatics is " the study of a speaker meaning . " Yule goes on to say that this discipline is mainly concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker ( or writer ) and interpreted by a listener ( or reader) .

The speaker's utterances ,however, do not function unless they occur in proper contexts . The pragmatic lesson draws heavily on the language context . Yule speculates that pragmatics necessarily involves the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said . Pragmatics , in this sense is the study of contextual meaning(Ibid.).

The concern that the pragmatic approach deals with is " how listeners can make inference about what is said in order to arrive at an interpretation of the speaker's intended meaning "( Ibid.) . Pragmatics , in other words , is the study of how more gets communicated than is said ( Ibid. ). The other concern for pragmatics is the notion of distance . Closeness , whether it is physical , social , or conceptual , implies shared experience . Pragmatics , in this sense is the study of the expression of relative distance . These pragmatic concerns , in reality , are of significance to the interpretation of Shakespeare's dramatic text , as we shall see .

J. L. Austin was the first to promote the Speech Act Theory . In his " How to Do with Words " .He ( 1962 : 108 ) states that in saying something a speaker also does something " . The human performances fall into three classes : locutionary , illocutionary and perlocutionary . A locutionary act is the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference " ( Levinson , 1983 : 236 ) . Lyons believes that a locutionary act is " an act of saying : the production of a meaningful utterance " ( Ibid. : 730 ) . An illocutionary act , the second class , is " an act performed in saying something: making a statement or promise , issuing a command or request , asking a question, christening a ship , etc." ( Ibid. ) . An illocutionary act , to Levinson ( Ibid. ) , is " the making of a statement , offer , promise , etc. in uttering a sentence , by virtue of the conversational force associated with it ( or with its explicit performative paraphrases) . Searle ( 1975: 90 – 91 ) maintains that the illocutionary acts are the most fundamental kinds of speech acts . They are the basic units of human communication.

The effect exerted on the hearer or the addressee by the speaker's speech comes to be known as a perlocutionary act . To Lyons ( Ibid. ) , the perlocutionary

effect means its effect on the beliefs , attitudes or behavior of the addressees and , in certain cases , its sequential effect upon some " state – of – affairs " within the control of the addressees . A perlocutionary act , as Levinson ( Ibid . ) puts it , is " the bringing about of the effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence such effects being special to the circumstances of the utterance " . Pragmatic studies link the speech act theory to communication . Lober ( 2002 : 14 ) refers to the speech act level as communicative meaning .

Relevant to the Speech – Act Theory is the notion of deixis. Deixis is mainly concerned with words or expressions whose reference relies absolutely on context , such as " I " , "now " , " here " , " there" , etc. Deixis , in brief , is " pointing via language "( Yule ,1966: 9 ) . The formal categories of deixis are : person deixis ( " me " , ' you " ) , spacial deixis ( " here " , " there " ) and temporal deixis ( " now " , " then " ) . Of deixis are cataphora and anaphora .The first term means the coreference of one expression with another expression which follows it , whereas the second term means the coreference of one expression with its antecedent . Levinson ( Ibid . : 89 ) refers to " social deixes " . The term implies the aspects of sentences which reflect or establish or are determined by realities of the social situation in which the speech act occurs." Levinson ; however , restricts the term to those aspects of language structure that encode the social identities of participants ( properly , incumbents of participant – roles ) , or the social relationships between them , or between one of them and persons and entities referred to . Emphatic deixis is the rhetorical manipulation of deictic elements to realize emotional or other psychological " distance " or " proximity " between a speaker and a referent ( Ibid.).

The speech acts in any dialogue are performed by the interlocutors. The interlocutors , in this respect , should be cooperative : they should follow certain maxims , as ( Quantity , Quality . Relation and Manner ) . That conversational process is called The Cooperative Principle ( CP ) . Politeness , on the other hand , is social deixes that expresses a low degree of solidarity between the speaker and the addressee . The process which is known as The Polite Principle ( PP ) provides insights into person – to – person interactions . Albeit these notions and principles are significant to the pragmatic theory , this paper fundamentally deals with the speech acts as structured in Shakespeare's Hamlet .

## 2 . The Ghost in his Context

Shakespeare's Hamlet ( Act I , Scene I , lines 1-175 ) opens with the changing of the guards on a dreary chilling night at the castle of Elisnore . The cold dead silence is hunted by the apparition of the late king's ghost . Socially , the audience of Shakespeare's age believed in ghosts and supernatural phenomena . The apparition , however , creates a sense of restless anxiety inward and outward the characters .

Pragmatically , the scene starts with a highly conventionalized utterance that ought to be used . Francisco , the guard in the post , orders Bernardo , the relief at the change of the guards , to show the code-phrase for the watch :

Bernardo : Who's there ?

Francisco : Nay , answer me .Stand, and unfold yourself .

Bernardo : Long live the king ! ( I . I . 1 -3 )

This illocutionary act , i.e. issuing a command is followed by another speech act regarding the situation throughout the " bitter cold " that makes the guard " sick at heart " .

Bernardo : Have you had quiet guard ?

Francisco : Not a mouse stirring . ( I . I . 9 – 10 )

Semantically , Francisco's answer has nothing to do with Bernardo's yes – no question . In other words , the coded meaning of Francisco's sentence is significant; yet , it is inadequate to determine the proposition implied in the utterance . Francisco provides the relevant answer via an implicature or non-coded proposition . It is not difficult to realize from Francisco's answer his assertive answer in this interaction . The conversational implicature or extra meaning makes elucidation to the setting without much recourse to the literal expression . This can only be reached by and through the use of language in context . In producing his meaningful utterance , Francisco is also performing a speech act . The act is that Francisco passes information to his relief . Depending on the context in which Francisco has used his utterance , it could be said that he has proved the state of tranquility during his guard in the post . The interlocutors are actually guards ; they are friends . So the assertion , here , is one of the acts performed by the guards' utterances .

The sense of suspense and anxiety is aroused when the dramatic characters, i.e. Francisco , Horatio , and Marcellus , start giving clues to " this thing " that " appeared again tonight " . The illocutionary act comes in a sequence of interrogative forms so as to elicit the perlocutionary effect :

Marcellus : Who hath relieved you ?

Francisco : Bernardo hath my place .

Give you good night .

Marcellus : Holla! Bernardo !

Bernardo : What , is Horatio there ?

Horatio : A piece of him .

Bernardo : Welcome , Horatio . Welcome , good Marcellus .

Marcellus : What , has this thing appeared again tonight ?

Bernardo : I have seen nothing . ( I . I . 18 – 22 )

The sequence of the interrogative interlocations and the negative perlocutionary is performed in form of staccato questions and answers which are laden with mystery . According to Adams ( 1985 : 46 ) the conventional speech acts are greatly influenced by the circumstances in which speech acts occur. The interlocutors are in a state of doubt whether " this thing " is " truth " or " fantasy" . This type of deixis is anaphora since it refers to the antecedent of the ghost apparition . It is also a social deixis since that sentential aspect is determined by a certain reality in that social situation . Marcellus's indirect speech, " Horatio says 'its but our fantasy", ( 23 ) is of

significance in this context . As a scholar , Horatio at first denies the story of the apparition stated by the guards . However , Horatio, on entering of the ghost , tries to cross it when Marcellus gives his request , " Question it Horatio " ( 45 ) . So Horatio :

What art thou , that usurp'st this time of night ,  
Together with that fair and warlike form  
In which the majesty of buried Denmark

Did sometimes march ? By heaven I charge thee , speak ! ( I . I . 46 – 49 )

But speaking to the majestic image of the last King in that humiliated way makes the image " stalk away " , so Marcellus directly comments , " He is offended . " ( 50 ) Still Horatio insists on going on with that tone of order , " Stay ! Speak ! I charge thee , speak ! " ( 51 ) Pragmatically , Horatio's speech acts do not suit the appropriateness of conditions under which these acts are uttered . To issue a command to the late king in that style means to violate the pragmatic aspect of the rules which are inherited into the social conventional system . Having seen the ghost at that mysterious night , Horatio stresses the apparition :

Marcellus : Is it not like the king ?

Horatio : As thou art to thyself .

( I . I . 59 – 60 )

Once more , Horatio's assertion takes the form of a conversational implicature . What Horatio means is more than what is literally expressed by the conversational sense of his utterance . The previous quoted lines show that Horatio , a dramatic character , impinges on the Cooperative Principle ( CP ) and the Politeness Principle ( PP ) as well . Horatio should be cooperative when he interacts with that majestic vision . It is an impolite human behavior to give an order to the kingly ghost since politeness is " social deixis " that expresses a low degree of solidarity between the speaker and the addressee . The communal practices are not only rooted in real – life situations but also in literary texts since these texts are pieces of communication .

At this stage of the dramatic tension , Horatio is given the chance to comment on the socio – political situation in Denmark . The authorial purpose , however , is that Shakespeare has thus made it possible for his audience to learn something of the recent history of Denmark , of events which took place before the action of the play begins ( see Lott , 196 .8 : 4 ) . The dramatic interest of the guard change in the first lines is turned into the observable socio- political circumstances.

Our last king ,

Whose image even but now appeared to us ,  
Was , as you know , by Fortinbras of Norway ,  
Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride ,  
Dared to the combat ; in which our valiant Hamlet –  
For so this side of our known world esteemed him –  
Did slay this Fortinbras ; who, by a sealed compact ,  
Well ratified by law and heraldry ,  
Did forfeit, with his life , all those his lands  
Which he stood seized of , to the conqueror ;

Against the which , a moiety competent

Was gaged by our king; . . . ( I . I . 80 – 91 )

These codes are manifested in terms of the character's relations. These codes are realized by the other participants . Horatio, in reality , manipulates the language resources effectively so as to recall to the minds of the hearers the political image of the country at that critical time . In other words , he manipulates all his pragmatic competence to express his intentions . The functional side of the pragmatic aspect is to show how the linguistic forms are used by the character in communication . The pragmatic view of performatives and of illocutionary force endeavors to interpret the value of the statements in their actual situations . It is the function of the pragmatic approach to manifest the propositional content , i. e. the locutionary force . Still, the visible is intertwined with the invisible . Horatio's performatives give clues to the possible reasons of the apparition.

The second entrance of the ghost gives rise to another set of illocutionary acts . On seeing the ghost once more , Horatio tries to cross it . He again gives orders to the late king's image, but this time to foretell the unknown future of Denmark:

Stay ,

illusion !

If thou hast any sound or use of voice ,

Speak to me .

If there be any good thing to be done,

That may to thee do ease and grace to me ,

Speak to me .

If thou art privy to theycountry's fate ,

Which, happily , foreknowing may avoid ,

O , speak !

(I . i. 128 – 137 )

The character's speech act is rather a request than an order since the function of the speech act , here , is to foretell the ambiguous future of the land . Albeit Horatio's utterances do follow both linguistic conversations and conventions of use, they do not follow highly institutional conventions, as the king's at his court. His utterances are but psychological fists of fear and surprise. In other words, the dramatic character uses words which suit the purpose. The language he uses is context dependant. The characters realize from their knowledge of social situations what speech acts take place . Speech acts , in other words , are but acts of communication. To communicate is to express a certain attitude . The characters in the play as dramatic visions or the audience in reality identify the attitude that the speaker expresses in that context .

Up to the end of the scene, the illocutioners interact with each other on one serious topic , i.e. the apparition of the ghost . Horatio , in fact , performs three classes of speech acts : he makes statements by commenting on the present and the past of the country , he asks questions so as to elicit information from the " illusion " , and he orders that illusion to identify itself . These classes of performances are not culture specific. Rather , they are universal . Lyons ( 1981 : 187 ) argues that

these three classes of illocutionary acts are basic in two senses : first , no human society could exist in which acts of this kind have no role in play , and , secondly, many , if not all , culture – specific illocutionary acts can be seen belonging to a more specialized subclass of one of the three basic classes . In this

sense , the speech acts are cultural universals . They are organically rooted into the cultures of communities.

#### Concluding Remarks

The powerful presence of the speech acts in Shakespeare's Hamlet , as the study has shown , gives the literary text a sense of universality. These performatives have proven that Shakespeare's dramatic text is not merely a network of interrelated syntactic and semantic options Rather , it is a world of communal practices inherited into the human culture . Moreover , the study has demonstrated that the characters' speech acts are acts of communication acknowledging the characters' intentions in a certain socio political context .

#### Cited Works

- ❖ Adams , J . ( 1985 ) Pragmatics and Fiction . Amestrdam : John Benjamin Publishing Co.
- ❖ Austin , J.L. ( 1962 ) . How to Do with Words . Oxford : Oxford University Press .
- ❖ Brown , P. and S. Levinson ( 1978 ) . " Universals in Language Usage . Politeness Phenomena " . In E. Goody , (ed.) . Questions and Politeness Strategies in Social Interaction. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- ❖ Bell , Roger J. ( 1981 ) An Introduction to Applied Linguistics : Approaches And Methods in Language Teaching . London : Batsford Academic And Education Ltd.
- ❖ Crystal , D. ( 1971 ) . Linguistics . London : Penguin Books Ltd.
- ❖ Fromkin , V. and R. Rodman (1988 ) . An Introduction to Language . Fortworth: Holt Rinehart and Winston .
- ❖ Lebor , Sebastian ( 2002 ) . Understanding Semantics . New York : Oxford University Press .
- ❖ Leech , Geoffrey ( 1983 ) . Principles of Pragmatics . London : Longman Group Ltd .
- ❖ Levinson , S. ( 1983 ) . Pragmatics . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press .
- ❖ Lott , Bernard ( 1968 ) . Introduction to William Shakespeare, " Hamlet ". London : Longmans Green & Co. Ltd .
- ❖ Lyons , J. ( 1977 ) . Semantics . Vol.1 . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press
- ❖ Searle , J.R. ( 1975 b. ) " A taxonomy of illocutionary acts " . In K. Gunderson ( ed. ) . Philosophy of Science . Vol. 1 , pp. 344-369 .
- ❖ Shakespeare , William ( 1968 ) . Hamlet . Bernard Lott ( ed. ) . London : Longmans Green & Co. Ltd .
- ❖ Yule , George ( 1996 ) . Pragmatics . Oxford : Great Clarendon Street .