
Research Papers



A Study of Speech Acts in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan

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Abstract

The present paper is an outcome of keen observation of the language used in Khushwant Singh's famous novel 'Train to Pakistan' and it attempts to visualize the social, religious and cultural structure of the small village on India-Pakistan border, Mano Majra and the situation pervaded during the partition. The language used in the novel is more than just sounds, words and sentences because in the context of the novel the characters do not speak just to say something, but they intend to do something by saying, and speaking does not merely involve physical actions or movements but specific goals and intentions of the speakers.

Introduction

In using language, they intend to convey particular meanings both implicitly and explicitly, and their utterances have a certain force that has consequential effects on their addressee(s). The idea of 'saying something is doing something' lies at the heart of the Speech Act Theory pioneered by the language philosophers like Austin and Searle in the 1960s.

The fictional discourse has been studied and analyzed by various approaches by different scholars but the pragmatic approach is less practiced. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this paper to interpret the selected speech acts in the novel 'Train to Pakistan' by means of pragmatic approach. The paper has been divided into two sections: the first section aims to provide the relevance and significance of the pragmatic approach in nutshell and the second section is entirely devoted to the examination, selection and interpretation of the selected utterances from Train

to Pakistan against the theory of speech acts in particular and the relevant principles of pragmatics i.e. deixis, implicature, presupposition, etc. in general.

Significance of Pragmatic Approach in Discourse Analysis

The word 'discourse' comes from Latin 'discursus' which denotes 'conversation or speech' and refers to wide area of human concerns. The different views of the important factors of discourse such as its structures, its functionality, its social role, its communicative features in its immediate context and culture and so on. According to David Crystal 1992:25, "Discourse is a continuous stretch of language larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit such as a sermon, argument, joke, or narrative". Thus, the fictional discourse can be looked at as a socio-linguistic event. As such, an exploration into the socio-cultural context of a literary text is inevitable. To be precise, the novels can be fully

understood with the help of pragmatic approach. In pragmatics, speech act theory occupies central position. A speech act analysis of Khushwant Singh's 'Train to Pakistan' therefore, is likely to pave the way for use of pragmatics in studying the most popular form of literature i.e. novel.

Speech Act Theory if applied to a fictional discourse helps the reader arrive at authentic interpretation. The socio-cultural context in which the characters of the novel are placed can be best understood through the analysis of speech acts. In addition, interpersonal relations do play an important role in analyzing the speech acts. Utterances of different characters that contribute in creating the cultural reality can be best understood against the backdrop of speech act theory. The socio-cultural factors play a vital role in pragmatic interpretation of literary discourse. Jacob Mey (2001) rightly observes: "Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the condition of society". (p.6) As such, the context of utterances occupies central position in pragmatics. Therefore, the study of pragmatics is vital from the point of view of analyzing, interpreting and judging the work of art.

Analysis of Selected Speech Acts

Speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior. Talking is doing things according to the rules and norms of the society. It goes without saying that one can do things or gets them done either in a direct way or in an indirect manner. The success of one's utterance depends upon who says what to whom, when, where and why. For example, in the following speech act, the speaker, an old woman indirectly begs for her life.

"In the name of God, take what we have, all our jewelry, everything," (P.17)

The utterance is addressed to a dacoit Malli and his gang by one of the older women of Lala Ram Lal's family who being older in the family gets an authority to promise someone. The situation in which the utterance occurs is grave and terrified. The dacoits search for the money lender, Lala Ram Lal but the woman does not provide any information about him because she knows the deadly intentions of the dacoits. On the contrary, by referring God's name, the woman indirectly requests them not to do any harmful or brutal activity and she also allows them to take what they want i.e. jewelry etc. If this utterance is evaluated in the light of the principles of pragmatics, it seems that the woman is violating Grice's quality maxim as she previously lied that Lala is not at home and

he has taken the keys with him. There is a question of her sincerity whether she will allow the dacoits to take what they want. However, the speaker performing above speech act simultaneously intends to do both acts: first she quotes the name of God to give credibility and authenticity to her speech and second she requests the dacoits not to kill any one because they are ready to give everything they possess.

Let us see another striking example in which indirect speech act triggers multiple layers of meaning considering its immediate context and interpersonal knowledge of addresser and addressee in 'Train to Pakistan'.

"Wear these bangles, Juggia. Wear these bangles and put henna on your palms" (P.19)

The utterance occurs in the novel when Malli and his gang passed from Jugga's house while fleeing away after robbing and murdering Lala Ram Lal. The utterance is directly addressed to Juggut Singh by Malli. The implicit force of the above utterance is intermingled with cultural assumptions. In Indian context, when someone wants to comment on somebody's inability, effeminacy, or to insult someone severely, the expressions such as 'wear the bangles' or 'put henna on your palms' are conventionally used. 'Bangles' and 'henna' are closely associated to women and women are considered to be delicate objects of beauty and not the bravery. Thus, the speaker using elements of beautification i.e. 'bangles' and 'henna' implicitly compares Juggut Singh with a woman and challenges his bravery.

An indirect speech act is also an attempt to strengthen the interpersonal relationship between the addressee and addresser and is basically used as shield to save the face of the addressee. For example, in the following utterance, Hukum Chand asks an indirect question to Haseena :

"How long have you been in this profession?" (P.120)

The utterance is directly addressed to a young girl, Haseena Begum, by the magistrate, Hukum Chand. The situation of the utterance is that the girl has been called to fulfill the sexual hunger of the magistrate therefore, he cannot use his power to ask direct question about her illicit relations. Similarly, the hierarchy of the social status of the magistrate and the young girl affects the conversation and consequently restricts the speaker to ask direct question against his designation and forces him to ask indirect question. However, the explicit force of the utterance denotes something which is not stated in

the present utterance. The very intention of the speaker is protected by the deixis 'this' because it is not explicitly pointed by the speaker but implicitly it points to the sex selling profession.

Conclusion

The academic significance of the present paper is to recognize the benefits of speech act theory to facilitate and inculcate the higher order of thinking skills and to develop interpretative mind of the reader. The theory of speech act is a very powerful instrument to interpret fictional discourse and it can be applied to the masterpieces of the world famous fictions, dramas and short stories. The social and cultural milieu in which the characters move can be better understood by employing the important theories of pragmatics. The writers make use of culture-specific terms while writing novels or dramas. Therefore, the deployment of the principles of pragmatics is inevitable for understanding the cultural aspects of the society reflected in the work of art.

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