

## Speech Act Analysis of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*

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### ABSTRACT

The study of literary work should come together with linguistics. "The Seagull" (1896) is one of the famous works of Anton Chekhov[2], a famous playwright, who is very subtle in her portrayal of character. Inspired by the research of the predecessors, my thesis aims to employ Searle's speech act theory to analysis the famous literary work.

It is very common to analyze literary works by means of literary stylistics, while analyzing literary works from linguistics; especially from speech act view is uncommon. Generally speaking, my study explores Speech Act Theory in order to explore the sophisticated personalities of different characters in the play[3]. The analysis of this part begins with the general theme of the play, Anton Chekhov's intention behind writing play is stated and the reasons for Anton Chekhov's writing of the plays are also made clear. Then it establishes the relationship between speech acts and dramatic discourse. Since, there are written dialogues containing speech acts, an effort is made to shed light on the illocutionary forces of typical linguistic utterances and their perlocutionary effect on the hearers [11]. The middle section of it is devoted to the analysis of the speech acts based on Searle's typology of speech acts. The carefully chosen assertive, commissive, directives, expressive and declarative speech acts[13] are thoroughly interpreted against the existing social, economic, political and cultural aspects of Russian society. It is pointed towards the end of this part that the analysis gives authenticity to the characters.

Particularly, using speech acts to analyze literary works is a new way in the appreciation of literary works because it can help readers have a better understanding of the essence of the works[9].

My thesis can be of indispensable significance. In the play, there are lots of conversations and we can clearly feel that the literal meaning and the implied meaning are very different; consequently, it provides us the possibility to appreciate the play from the aspects of speech act.

**KEY WORDS:** assertive (representative), directive, commissive, declarative, expressive.

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### INTRODUCTION

*Anton Chekhov* was the Realist dramatist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Russia. His style of writing made a lot of changes among playwrights and their writings. His name has been linked with those of *Molière*, *Schiller* and *Shakespeare* for the impact his work has had on the history of theater.

Once we mention Anton Chekhov, his four famous works *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, will run into our minds. *The Seagull* is one of *Anton Chekhov's* masterpieces. It is favored by many readers. Commentators have emphasized the role of *the seagull* in ushering in a revolution in the ways plays are composed, staged, and performed.

*The seagull* represents a significant moment in the history of modern drama, for it shows a writer of genius beginning to create a new dramatic form.

This play portrays people, their behavior, their psychology, frailties. The common and main theme the author represents to his readers in the play is dissatisfaction with present conditions accompanied by a perceived inability to change oneself or one's situation. In other words, the play mainly focuses on the hopelessness of characters. As a result, the technique adopted by Anton Chekhov's in the *Seagull* is *indirect action* it means that the affairs among characters occur off-stage.

It is very common to analyze literary works through literary stylistics, but analyzing literary works from linguistics, especially from semantics and pragmatics is uncommon[7].

Generally speaking, the thesis is largely based on the synthesized theoretical frame composed of speech act theory and its sub-theories in speech act theory like five types of speech act (assertive,

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expressive, commissive, directive, and declarative) divided by Searle (1976) are largely used in the utterance analysis in order to make research on the sophisticated personalities of the different characters in the play. In the analysis of the character's personalities has been tried to apply Searle's five taxonomies of speech act theory. Particularly, using semantics and pragmatics method to analyze literary works is a new way in the appreciation of literary works because it can help readers have a better understanding of the essence of the work[8].

In the process of my research I apply the Searle's speech act theory. As we know, the seagull is Anton Chekhov's famous play. Perhaps, there is much analysis and criticism on it, but analysis of The Seagull from pragmatics point of view especially Searle's speech act is rare.

My thesis can be of great significance. These thesis will analysis the characters conversational art of the play by way of Searle's five taxonomies of speech act theory to show how Anton Chekhov depicts the characters expresses the feelings and catches the theme. Through this theory we can explain the implied meanings and have a better understanding of the masterpiece[9].

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research applies speech act theory in general and the nature of the subjects will be analyzed and interpreted using Searle's five categories of speech act in particular. Since this research is application oriented, the play The Seagull by Anton Chekhov is chosen for this purpose.

In everyday communication reading between the lines is an important skill, in order to understand what people want to say, Searle has developed five taxonomies in speech acts. The selected speech acts in the plays will be analyzed within the structure of five major speech acts developed by Searle[ ] as follows:

- (i) Assertives (representatives), which commit the speaker to the truth of something (i.e. asserting, claiming, reporting)
- (ii) Directives: which are attempts of the speaker to get the hearer to do something (i.e. ordering, commending, requesting, begging)
- (iii) Commissive: which commit the speaker to do some future action (i.e. promising, offering, threatening)
- (iv) Expressive: which express a psychological state (i.e. thanking, apologizing, complimenting)
- (v) Declaratives: which bring out the correspondence between the propositional content and reality (I.e., appointing a chairman, nominating a candidate, marrying a person, christening).

The above mentioned part is the categories of illocutionary Act presented by John Searle, it is about the underlying meaning in everything we say. The underlying meaning along with the skill of reading between the lines is vital to make communication more efficient and it makes our everyday life function more smoothly.

Drama and tragedies are built up by tension that lines create when you have to attempt to interpret the intended meaning of the character's utterance. Different speech act build up different types of plays, and also build the drama and Suspense in the play.

In order to find out what we actually learn in the lines of scene, I have decided to take a closer look at *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov, and have an in depth analysis of selected speech acts in the play.

This analysis has been done using Searle's Typology of speech acts in general and this typology is applied on the following marked speech acts taken from the play.

## RESULTS

### Speech acts in "The seagull"

According to Searle's theory, which I adopt for this analysis, utterances are assigned to one of five possible speech acts or illocution: assertive, commissive, directive, declarative and expressive. In the framework of these Speech Acts, the selected utterances in "The Seagull"[6] are worth analyzing.

#### A) Analysis of Assertive speech Acts

Assertive speech acts are also known as *representative* [13] speech acts because they reflect the speaker's as well as the narrative belief.

According to Searle the purpose of Assertive class is to commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. That is to say the speaker wants to make the listener believe the truth of what he or she said.

It is the Assertive speech act that most closely resembles Austin's constative utterance[1]. The speaker asserts a proposition that represent a condition or a state of affairs that in principle could be true or false.

Assertive speech acts are statements of fact, getting the viewer to form or attend a belief. Here, the speaker's words reveal his beliefs and he/she is uttering about external world. English verbs that function as explicit assertive include: *report, predict, inform, accuse, testify, confess, state, swear, criticize, complain, etc* [15]. The various verbs differ from one another by force or strength of the assertion. On comes across some examples of assertive Speech acts in the play under consideration. Let us examine the following speech act in the light of Searle's speech act theory.

The following Selected part is the best instance of Assertive Speech acts in the play under consideration. It is the opening dialogue of the play, presents a perfect example of self-obsession[4]. All of the characters in the chain at some time in the play become self-obsessed; some of them never acquire the necessary objectivity to see themselves and others clearly. Study the following speech act:

MEDVEDENKO. Why do you wear black all the time?  
MASHA. I'm in mourning for my life, I'm unhappy.  
MEDVEDENKO. Why? [*Reflects.*] I don't understand. You're healthy and your father's quite well off, even if he's not rich. I'm much worse off than you — I'm only paid twenty-three rubles a month, and what with pension deductions I don't even get that. But I don't go round like someone at a funeral. [*They sit down.*]  
MASHA. Money doesn't matter, even a poor man can be happy.  
MEDVEDENKO. Yes — in theory. But look how it works out. There's me, my mother, my two sisters and my young brother. But I only earn twenty-three roubles and we need food and drink, don't we? Tea and sugar? And tobacco? We can hardly make ends meet.  
MASHA. [*Looking back at the stage.*] The play will be on soon.

(Act I pp.6-7)

The above speech act is a factual statement[12]. Here, Medvedenko complains about life. So, he has performed assertive speech act by transmitting information via the words he uses in the context. Thus, via assertive, the speaker wishes to give a piece of information that usually corrects the reader's knowledge and expectations of the word.

Assertive Speech acts are also known as representative speech acts because they reflect the speaker's as well as the narrative's belief.

In the above extract of this play, Masha, as we will learn from the play, is not in mourning for anyone who has died, she is simply in love with Treplev, who does not love her. Both her costume and her speech are excessive responses to what is said but hardly extraordinary occurrence.

## B) Analysis of Commissive Speech Acts

The illocutionary point of commissive speech act is to commit speaker to perform some future action. This kind of speech act even called *intended act*[14]. In conversation, common commissive speech acts are *promise* and *threats*. In message boards, these types of commissives are relatively rare; however, we found many statements where the purpose was to confirm the readers that the writer would perform some action in the future. The class involves *promising, vowing, refusing, threatening, pledging, guaranteeing etc*. Let us look at the following example that shows commissive speech act of threat:

In a scene in Act two, there is a conversation between Nina and Treplev associated himself with the dead Seagull. He threatens to kill himself unless Nina returns his love. Nina returns his love. Nina's response to this immature piece of emotional blackmail is rejected his heavy-handed symbolism, and this should prepare an audience for her later refusal to be identified with this lifeless object.

[TREPLEV *lays the seagull at her feet.*]

NINA. What does that signify?

TREPLEV. I meanly killed that seagull this morning. I lay it at your feet.

NINA. What's wrong with you? [*Picks up the seagull and looks at it.*]

TREPLEV. [*After a pause.*] I shall soon kill myself in the same way.

NINA. You've changed so much.

TREPLEV. Yes, but who changed first? You did. You're so different to me now, you look at me coldly and you find me in the way.

NINA. You're touchy lately and you always talk so mysteriously, in symbols or something. This seagull's a symbol too, I suppose, but it makes no sense to me, sorry.

(Act II pp. 50-51)

Here, Treplev performs speech acts of threat. As it mentioned before threat is one of the common commissive speech acts. But hear threat is not expressed directly but it is indirect and in an ironic form. In some extent we can classify it under the title of commissive of irony: It should be mentioned that in (Act IV) There is a scene like this.

By performing a speech act of threat, Trepler wants to show his love to Nina. The depth of his love to Nina is revealed especially through commissive speech act and also the implication of the words and sentences he expresses. By saying these words Treplev wants to aware Nina of the consequences of rejecting his love.

### **C] Analysis of Expressive Speech Acts**

The illocutionary goal of expressive is to express the psychological state about some affairs. By expressive, the speaker should express his psychological state about some affairs. Typical cases are when the speaker curses, praises, confesses or congratulates, the listener. Let's turn to the play to see some instances that show Expressive Speech Acts.

In Act IV there is a conversation between Treplev and Nina. Here is an overlap of two speech acts: praise and curse.

TREPLIEFF. Nina, I have cursed you, and hated you, and torn up your photograph, and yet I have known every minute of my life that my heart and soul were yours for ever. To cease from loving you is beyond my power. I have suffered continually from the time I lost you and began to write, and my life has been almost unendurable. My youth was suddenly plucked from me then, and I seem now to have lived in this world for ninety years. I have called out to you, I have kissed the ground you walked on, wherever I looked I have seen your face before my eyes, and the smile that had illumined for me the best years of my life.

(Act IV P.110)

The first lines have references to curse. Here, Nina was cursed by Treplev.

A curse is an appeal or prayer for evil or misfortune to befall someone or something. Cursing is such a speech act, which is full of emotions and accompanies an imaginary world or power. This is the act, which always functions negatively when directed towards the addressee. Most of time the person who gets angry with someone, used his word as a sharp weapon.

In the last lines there is a state of praising. Treplev praises Nina. It expresses deep emotional feelings of Treplev to Nina. The illocutionary purpose of praise seems to consist in expressing one's positive judgment. The speaker may or may not wish to please the addressee and may or may not wish to let other people know what his judgment is. But the only invariant purpose seems to consist simply in saying what one thinks.

### **D) Analysis of Directive Speech Acts**

A Directive speech act occurs when the speaker expects the listener to do something as a response. For example, the speaker may ask a question, make a request, or issue an invitation. Many Directive sentences are posed as questions so they are easy to identify by the presence of a question mark. However, the language here is informal and often ungrammatical; so many directives are posed as a question mark. Furthermore, many directive speech acts are not stated as a question but as a request for assistance. Finally, some sentences that end in question marks are rhetorical in nature and do not represent a directive speech act. This class includes *commands, suggestions and orders*.

Let us consider the example of the play:

In Act IV events happen in the following part belongs to Directive speech act:

TREPLIEFF. I am quite alone, unwarmed by any attachment. I am as cold as if I were living in a cave. Whatever I write is dry and gloomy and harsh. Stay here, Nina, I beseech you, or else let me go away with you.  
NINA quickly puts on her coat and hat.  
TREPLIEFF. Nina, why do you do that? For God's sake,

Nina! (*He watches her as she dresses. A pause.*)  
(Act IV P. 111)

In the above directive speech act Treplev using the verb "beseech" requests Nina to stay with him, again, this kind of expressing request is a politer way of saying something. On the other hand, the request is impersonal, in formal and self-assured.

### E] Analysis of Declarative Speech Acts

Searle defines Declarative speech acts as statements that bring about a change in status or condition to an object by virtue of the statement itself. For example, a statement declaring war or a statement that someone is fired. As soon as addresser utters the words, the very utterance brings about a change in the hearer's world. The prelocutionary effect is immediately felt on the hearer. The class includes *betting, declaring, resigning, passing a sentence, answering, appointing, nominating, applying, etc.* These speech acts are uncommon. Therefore, the frequency of the use of these speech acts is very less.

Now let's look at the conversation between Treplev and Sorin:

TREPLIEFF. As a matter of fact, it is time to begin now.

I must call the audience.

SORIN. Let me call them—and all—I am going this minute. (*He goes toward the right, begins to sing "The Two Grenadiers," then stops.*) I was singing that once when a fellow-lawyer said to me: "You have a powerful voice, sir." Then he thought a moment and added, "But it is a disagreeable one!" (*He goes out laughing.*)

(Act I p.15)

The context of the above utterances in the conversation above is that Treplev wants to convince Sorin to call the two Grenadiers. He abides on his speech and does it finally. He wanted to announce the start of the play to the audience. At last, he does it and makes a declaration that the play has been started. The above declarative speech act of Sorin brings change in the world of listener (two Grenadiers) as a result of which two Grenadiers become informed.

### Conclusion

After making a comprehensive review of the studies on *The Seagull*, this article finds it necessary to study the play from the view of Speech Act Theory (SAT) in order to understand the famous play thoroughly.

As we all know that, *The seagull*, as one of most well-known Russian play in the world, is mainly featured within the framework of major speech Acts. It is also explained how the functions of various speech acts are vary from speech act to speech act in the context in which the characters move. This article has adopted the speech act theory to analyze the play, aiming to show that the speech act theory is a very powerful instrument to study discourse in literature in general and drama in particular. This thesis analyzes conversational implications in the conversations in the selected speech acts of the given play. It has revealed the hidden intentions, motives, etc. of characters through the analysis of the conversations. We get to know that the characters in this play realize their communicative aims through different speaking manners. Here, five classifications are used just like, assertive, expressive, directives, and declarations. Each major speech act contains a wide range of sub-acts that can't distinguish from one another by looking at felicity conditions they fulfill within the context which they are employed. Analyzing the play from the view of speech theory is to have better understanding of Chekhov's intention in the play, and know why most people like to speech indirectly.

It is no denying that is still something unsatisfying in the thesis. This paper focuses on Searle's taxonomy and shows how we can apply it to literary works. It is also possible to apply views to study many other aspects of language in *The Seagull*. Last but not the least, we may also extend speech act theory to other plays, novels and poems.

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