Speech Act Analysis of Actions in Chris Agbedo's *a Darkling Plain*

By

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Abstract

Speech acts, a staple of man's everyday life, is an area of sociolinguistics that examines how an utterance is made by the locutor, the illocutionary acts of making the utterance and the resultant perlocutionary effect(s) of the utterance made. This paper has been able to study speech act theory in relation to selected actions in one of Chris Agbedo's novels entitled …*a Darkling Plain.* In doing this, Austin's and Grice's speech act theories, which claim that utterances not only state some facts but perform certain functions just for being said, and the cooperative principle which insists that speech participants should make their conversational contribution in a straight-forward, and easy to understand manner were used as a theoretical prop for the analysis. Actions in the novel are discussed in terms of the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary forces behind their use and their ability to maintain the cooperative principle. Three excerpts from the novel were selected and analysed. From the analysis, it was discovered that background knowledge plays a very vital role for a reader or hearer to understand any story.

1.0 Introduction

One of the most powerful theoretical assumptions in pragmatic researches is the idea that a theory of linguistic communication is really only a special case of a general theory of human action. This view upholds that the various sub-disciplines of linguistics such as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics should be seen as the studies of different abstract aspects of underlying communicative actions. For instance, exploring of variation within each sub-discipline should preferably be functional. This is to say that it should relate the properties of the phenomenon being examined to the function of a communicative action as a whole.

In order to achieve this, according to Allwood (1977), there should be a well-defined conceptual framework for the description of action, with enough internal structure to make possible an account of the relationship between linguistic phenomena and action with sufficient detail to be convincing. Two of the most important contributions to the creation of such a framework have been made by Austin 1962 and Searle 1969 in their speech acts theories (with the latter being a modification of the former). No wonder any study on communication must take into account the nature and role of speech acts in a broad context.

Conversation, as pointed out by Moeschler (n.d) has recently become a focus of interest for speech act theory in particular and pragmatics in general and several proposals have been formulated concerning the possible extension of speech act theory to the analysis of conversation. This debate (Searle et al. 1992) has to be interpreted as a reactive move rather than as a natural extension of the domain of speech act theory. Nevertheless, this reaction, either skeptical (Searle 1992) or optimistic (Vanderveken 1992), has brought interesting issues which contrast with the various attempts by linguists at extending speech act theory to the domain of discourse. As observed by Stoll (1996), one major aim of discourse analysis, according to a widely-held view like Sinclair and Coulthard (1975:13) is to investigate "the function of a particular sound situation and at a particular place in a sequence, as a specific contribution to a developing discourse". On this note, the focus of this paper is to analyse selected actions in Chris Agbedo's novel entitled …*a Darkling Plain* using Austin's (1962) and Grice's (1975) theories on speech acts. In order to achieve its aim, this paper has been presented in sections which cover the introduction, an overview of speech act theory which takes care of the literature review; contextual exemplification from Chris Agbedo's …*a Darkling Plain* - our source text.

2.0 Speech Act Theory: An Overview

The Oxford philosopher - J.L. Austin is a major player in speech acts analysis. His 1962 posthumous publication entitled *How to do things with words* is the birth of speech act theory which introduced a popular view on how speech is made, the force associated with the speech and its resultant effect. He uses the terms locution, illocution, and perlocution respectively to describe them. For instance, a mere saying of the word 'fire' is a locutionary act, the force which accompanies the

saying whether a frightened voice or a gesture of fear is the illocutionary act, while the resultant of this fright or gesture of fear is the perlocutionary effect. Austin suggests that there should be a distinction between the locutionary aspect of an utterance and its illocutionary and perlocutionary counterparts. According to Austin, in Allwood (1977),

> Performing a *locutionary act* ... is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which is again equivalent to meaning in the traditional sense. Second, we said that we also perform *illocutionary acts* such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc., i.e. utterances which have a certain conventional force. Thirdly, we may also perform *perlocutionary acts*: what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring and even, say, surprising or misleading, (Austin 1962:108).

These tripartite speech acts are summarized by Searle (1969) and Searle and Vanderveken (1985) and repeated by Green (2007) under the following seven-point headings and will be represented here for ease of reference.

i) *Illocutionary point*: This is the characteristic aim of each type of speech act. For instance, the characteristic aim of an assertion is to describe how things are; the characteristic point of a promise is to commit oneself to a future course of action.

ii) *Degree of strength of the illocutionary point*: Two illocutions can have the same point but differ along the dimension of strength. For instance, requesting and insisting that the addressee do something both have the point of attempting to get the addressee to do that thing; however, the latter is stronger than the former.

iii) *Mode of achievement*: This is the special way, if any, in which the illocutionary point of a speech act must be achieved. Testifying and asserting both have the point of describing how things are; however, the former also involves invoking one's authority as a witness while the latter does not. To testify is to assert in one's capacity as a witness. Commanding and requesting both aim to get the addressee to do something; yet only someone issuing a command does so in her capacity as a person in a position of authority.

iv) *Propositional content conditions*: Some illocutions can only be achieved with an appropriate propositional content. For instance, I can only promise what is in the future and under my control. I can only apologize for what is in some sense under my control and already the case. For this reason, promising to make it the case that the sun did not rise yesterday is not possible; neither can I apologize for the truth of Snell's Law.

v) *Preparatory conditions*: These are all other conditions that must be met for the speech act not to misfire. Such conditions often concern the social status of interlocutors. For instance, a person cannot bequeath an object unless she already owns it or has power of attorney; a person cannot marry a couple unless she is legally invested with the authority to do so.

vi) *Sincerity conditions*: Many speech acts involve the expression of a psychological state. Assertion expresses belief; apology expresses regret, a promise expresses an intention, and so on. A speech act is sincere only if the speaker is in the psychological state that her speech act expresses.

vii) *Degree of strength of the sincerity conditions*: Two speech acts might be the same along other dimensions, but express psychological states that differ from one another in the dimension of strength. Requesting and imploring both express desires, and are identical along the other six dimensions above; however, the latter expresses a stronger desire than the former.

Austin's speech act theory did not end here, performativity was also introduced. He outlined his theory of speech acts and the concept of performative language, in which to say something is to do something. To make the statement "I promise that x" (in which p is the propositional content of the utterance) is to perform the act of promising as opposed to making a statement that may be judged as either true or false. Performatives cannot be true or false, they can only be felicitous or infelicitous. No wonder Austin groups words and utterances according to the function they perform hence, performatives and constatives. Performatives, according to Austin, are utterances that are used to do things or perform acts. Kempson (1977:59) calls them 'explicitly linguistic actions'. For instance,

1. I pronounce you man and wife.
   I sentence you to 50 years in prison.
   I promise to take you to Shoprite.

Austin's performatives is similar to Joos's (1959) frozen situation of speaking where a speaker uses language to make things that are not to be. Performatives just like Joos's frozen situation of speech is found commonly in the church among priests during the celebration of mass, wedding ceremonies where a man and a woman are pronounced husband and wife, in law courts for passing judgments, etc. Apart from the frozen situation, Joos also identified the formal, informal, intimate, and casual speech situations where language is used in different ways to achieve different perlocutionary effects on the listener.

Austin believes that performatives cannot be verified as true or false. Many performative utterances also contain performative verbs, that is, verbs that perform a dual function in a sentence in the sense that they name the action while performing it. From example 1, the verbs 'pronounce', 'sentence', and 'promise' make things to happen just by merely being uttered. These verbs are essential for the action to occur. It may be difficult or outrightly impossible for a priest in a catholic wedding, for example, to say "you are man and wife" instead of "I pronounce you man and wife". Not every sentence needs a performative verb in order for the action to be carried out. If we leave out the performative verb 'promise' in the sentence "I promise to take you to Shoprite", the sentence will still perform the intended action. "I'll drive you to church". Performative verbs are usually essential when they are used in the context of ritual behaviours supported by cultural institutions. There are explicit performatives and implicit performatives. A sentence is said to contain an explicit performative verb when it makes explicit what kind of act is being performed as in example 2.

2. The court hereby forbids you from entering your former wife's house.

The information given in example 2 is clear. It is a mandate from the court. An implicit performative, on the other hand, is seen when a sentence does not contain a verb that makes explicit what act is being performed as seen in 3.

3. Is there a bank nearby?

For Austin, what the speaker does is create social realities within certain social contexts. That is, the speaker is nearly always doing something by saying

something. Spenader (2004) summarizes the contexts in which performatives can be used. A repetition is made here for ease of reference.

4. In church during baptism, confirmation, marriage ceremonies, funerals, etc.
   In universities for conferment of degrees.
   In courts for sentencing, swearing oaths to tell the truth.
   During gambling to place a bet, raise stakes in poker, etc.
   In sports for cautioning or sending of players, calling strikes, balls, etc.

Constatives, on the other hand, are utterances that can be verified as either true or false. These utterances were typically in the form of assertions or statements. To verify an utterance or a statement is to subject such utterance to examination in order to find out the truism or falsity of such utterance. No wonder Tarski (1933) in Nneji (2012) modified by Davidson (1967) and supported by Searle (1969, 1993) observes that the meaning of utterances depends on the truth condition of the attributes associated with the utterance. Following this explanation, sentence 5 can only be said to be true when it has been verified if not it is false.

5. The Neckar River sometimes freezes over.

Holmes (2008:1-2) uses discourses 6 and 7 to illustrate the fact that language serves a range of functions; while 6 is between Ray and his mother, 7 is between Ray and his school principal.

6. Ray: Hi mum.
Mum: Hi. You're late.
Ray: Yeah, that bastard sootbucket kept us in again.
Mum: Nana's here.
Ray: Oh sorry. Where is she?

7. Ray: Good afternoon sir.
Principal: What are you doing here at this time?
Ray: Mr Sutton kept us in, sir.

The conversation between Ray and his mother illustrates the fact that language performs a range of functions. Language is used to ask for and give information, express indignation and annoyance, as well as admiration and respect. Ray's response to his mother:

Yeah, that bastard sootbucket kept us in again.

not only tells why he is late but his personal feelings about his teacher and his relationship with his mother which is more intimate and friendly rather than formal, distant and respectful as is the case with his principal. Again one can guess Ray's age, his social identity, exposure, etc in the way he used language.

Speech act theory, considers the types of acts that utterances can be said to perform – locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The underlying theme behind Austin's philosophy, as observed by Masaki (2004) "is that a statement not only describes a situation or states some facts, but also performs a certain kind of action by itself."

J.R. Searle is an American philosopher who modified and extended Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* in 1969. He goes on to expand the thoughts of Austin making attempts to situate the many intuitions of the previous philosophers in a well-developed theoretical framework. According to Wittgenstoned (2011), Searle uses linguistic analyses to isolate sets of rules that govern the use of certain types of illocutionary acts (that is, sentences whose utterance in appropriate circumstances constitute actions). It should be noted however that not all sentences are accompanied by illocutionary forces. Wittgenstoned further notes that Searle also tried to give a speech act analysis of language phenomena such as predicating. In order to do this, however, he used the principle of expressibility which says that for any given meaning X, there is a linguistic element Y, the utterance of which given the right circumstances is sufficient to determine that the utterer, by uttering Y made a specific speech act. In other words, whatever can be meant can be said. The principle sounds quite simple and straightforward, but it will later be shown to be deeply problematic in the light of Searle's later findings (retrieved from *www.* onlinephilosophyclub.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=1&t...).

We should also note that it is not only Austin and Searle that have discussed speech acts in the past. Other scholars have done similar works of which Grice (1975) is one. Grice introduced the *cooperative principle* when he advised speech participants to:

> make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose and direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

From this principle, he formulated the four maxims of cooperative talk which are summarised below.

- Quality: say as much as but no more than is necessary
- Quality: do not say what you believe to be false, or that for which you lack evidence
- Relation: be relevant
- Manner: be clear, unambiguous and orderly

Conceptual Analysis Based on Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory

In this section we have selected actions and analysed them using Austin's (1962) speech acts theories. We present excerpts from the text before analysing them. Background knowledge of the story-line is very important in understanding and appreciating our discussion in this section.

Excerpt 1

> "… So, how did you manage to complete the money for the WAEC registration fees?"
> "It was Uncle Patrick who helped me out."
> Mmeso's face suddenly dropped its boisterous mood and twisted into a fiendish unalterable mask. The cloud of fury that milled on her face did more to stultify the question she snorted. Chiemerie was convinced that he did not get the question but the smoking fury in Mmeso's face robbed him the courage to ask for a repeat and he decided to keep mum until the trembling lips that asked the question parted again, reframing the question and demanding an answer on the instant…
> "You told him about your financial problem eh?" Mmeso asked, her eyes wide on Chiemerie. "No I did not tell him anything."
> "Then, it was mum who told him?" …
> "Look, you may think that you are still a small boy but somebody in SS3 class like you should understand certain things. That man who calls himself Patrick has been coming here and doing all those things because of me but I have told you people in plain words that

> I don't like him for anything and that you should not accept anything from or ask for his favours." (page 32-33)

Background Knowledge: Patrick is a rich man that is asking for Mmeso's hand in marriage but Mmeso is not giving him concession because of her relationship with Eme, the secondary school teacher who takes advantage of everything he sees on skirt.

Locution: In the above excerpt, it was Chiemerie that performed the locutionary act when asked by his sister Mmeso how he managed to complete his WAEC registration fees. His response to that question was so innocent and came in the following words - "It was Uncle Patrick who helped me out." (page 32)

Illocution: The locutionary act is performed without any force.
Perlocution: The perlocutionary act in the above excerpt is seen clearly in Mmeso's reaction to Chiemerie's locutionary act. First,

> Mmeso's face suddenly dropped its boisterous mood and twisted into a fiendish unalterable mask. The cloud of fury that milled on her face did more to stultify the question she snorted (page 32).

Obviously, from the above lines, Mmeso was visibly angry by this development but she just allowed Chiemerie to see her anger first through her face before she starts lambasting her. This aim, she achieved because on his own part,

> Chiemerie was convinced that he did not get the question but the smoking fury in Mmeso's face robbed him the courage to ask for a repeat and he decided to keep mum until the trembling lips that asked the question parted again, reframing the question and demanding an answer on the instant…

It is the present state of Mmeso's mind that informed her next reaction when she retorted in the following words.

> "Look, you may think that you are still a small boy but somebody in SS3 class like you should understand certain things. That man who calls himself Patrick has been coming here and doing all those things because of me but I have told you people in plain words that

> I don't like him for anything and that you should not accept anything from or ask for his favours." (page 33)

Both the frown on Mmeso's face and her verbal reaction is the resultant effect of the locutionary act performed by Chiemerie.

Excerpt 2

> "Justine came here while you were away." She stopped to gauge the impact of her message but her husband's countenance betrayed no emotion she could interpret as a hinge to lean on. Nevertheless, she trudged on. "She said she had cone to beg you to ask your sister, that is Mmeso's mother, to keep off her husband." The import of the message jolted him out of his indifferent disposition as he turned to look at Nwoma with a renewed kind of interest.
> "Keep off her husband?" he asked, wondering.
> "Yes o. Let me tell you, Papa Ezinne, it is now the talk of the town."
> "What?"
> "I mean the love affairs between Mama Mmeso and Adolph," she said squirming with delight as if regaling herself on the rumour in town. "Do you know my opinion in this matter?"
> "Who asked for your opinion? Idle gossips," Omeke lambasted her.
> "Well, if you say so, but I still suggest that you advise your sister to really keep off Adolph. That woman behaves like a mad person."
> "Like the rest of you, women!" (page 57).

Background Knowledge: Omeke just came out of a heated argument with his wife Nwoma about Deborah. He even had to abandon his food because the argument is taking a sour and negative turn. Nwoma never minced words in expressing how much he hated Deborah because of her 'pride'. This is proved in the following lines.

> "You have never hidden your hatred for Deborah."
> "Hatred indeed. Do I look like somebody who has time to think about riff-raffs."
> "Nwoma, hold that filthy tongue of yours" Omeke charged. "How dare you refer to my sister as a riff-raff?

She goes to the point of addressing Deborah as a 'riff-raff'. Even when her husband has left the food for her and gone to sit on the bed at the far corner of the living room, Nwoma still had to follow him to make the report in excerpt 4.

Locution: The locutionary act was performed by Nwoma when she reports why Justine, Adolph's wife, came looking for her husband. The act was performed in the following words:

> "She said she had cone to beg you to ask your sister, that is, Mmeso's mother, to keep off her husband."

Illocution: No doubt, the above locutionary act was performed in a sarcastic tone owing to the background knowledge that Nwoma does not like Deborah (Mmeso's mother) in any way. Little wonder, Omeke reacted the way he did after all mouth will not pay another mouth a courtesy call and still go back home with nothing.

Perlocution: first

> The import of the message jolted him out of his indifferent disposition as he turned to look at Nwoma with a renewed kind of interest.

Even though Omeke had no more interest in talking with his wife on issues regarding Deborah that night, he did not have any other choice than to eke out more information on this from his wife who is very willing to offer discrediting information about Deborah as much as possible so that her husband will see reasons with her. But Omeke was determined to defend his sister to any length especially before his wife who is clear rival to Deborah. Little wonder why he replied her the way he did – "who asked for your opinion? Idle gossips" - when Nwoma requested that her opinion be heard.

Conceptual Analysis Based on Grice's (1975) Speech Act Theory

Excerpt 3

> "Can't you see the rustic nature of Mmeso's village? The people are so primitive and backward. Even in this twenty first century, there are still people living in mud houses and go about half naked." ... "Yes," Patrick said, smiling, "but I don't see anything so peculiar

> about this village. After all, the whole of Africa was like this until only very recently when the white man arrived.
> "It is not true, Pat. My own village is well developed. At least, we have all the basic amenities one can think of. It is not this forest of a village. Didn't you see how they were looking at us as if we were strange creatures that landed from another planet." (Pages 116-117).

Maxim of Quantity: Following the cooperative principle, Oninye has violated this maxim. She uses all her strength to castigate Mmeso's village before Patrick just because she is looking for his attention. She calls Mmeso's village 'rustic' on page 116.

Maxim of Quality: Onyinye also violates this maxim when she claims that her village is more beautiful maybe because a university is situated there.

> "I am not saying that my village is London but you cannot compare any village in my State, *Home for Everybody*, to this bush and their bushmen. You have lived all your life in my State and you know what i am talking about... To talk about civilization..., what could be a better catalyst for development than a university?"

Maxim of Relation: What she is saying is not relevant to the context because driving to Mmeso's village and not seeing here there, her priority should how best to help Patrick see Mmeso and not what she is saying. Patrick himself is not even interested in what she is saying; he gladly answers Onyinye when she changed to topic of discussion with a question – "Tell me. Are you still bent on marrying Mmeso?" He did not mince words in giving her his answer "If you want my honest answer, yes. I am just waiting for her consent."

Maxim of Manner: Onyinye did not use ambiguous words to show her resentment for Mmeso's village. She was clear enough and even orderly in trying to make Patrick see reasons why he should not bring his millionaire friends to Mmeso's 'rustic' village for the *Igba Nkwu.* To this effect, we can say that she maintains this maxim.

> "How would you feel bringing your family members and millionaire friends to that ancient cave on the *Igba Nkwu* day?.. It does not occur to you that you stand the risk of being misunderstood."
>
> .

Summary and Conclusion

By way of summary, we wish to reiterate that we have been able to examine some theories of speech acts notably that of Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and Grice (1975). It is the social orientation of sociolinguistics that stresses on the relationship between language and society that informs such studies as speech acts and other society-oriented studies. In this paper, therefore, we have been able to analyse selected actions using Austin's (1962) tripartite speech act theory – locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts and that of Grice (1975). We have been able to discover that though tripartite, not all speech discourses contain all the Austinian speech acts. Excerpt 1 on pages 4-5 is between Chiemerie and his younger sister over the spill of Chiemerie's urine in the sitting room while the mother, Deborah tries to intervene between the two of them. In excerpt 2, we see Nkiru telling her mother that Mmeso her elder sister is back from the compulsory NYSC. This can be seen on page 19 of the source text. In excerpt 3 (pages 32-33), we see Mmeso quarrelling with her younger brother Chiemerie over collecting money from Patrick (a wealthy man who is asking her hand in marriage) to complete his WAEC registration. The discourse in excerpt 4 is between Omeke (Deborah's brother) and his wife Nwoma discussing the illicit romantic relationship between Deborah and Adolph which made Adolph's wife Justine to come and entreat Omeke to tell his sister to leave her husband alone even though he was not at home when she came. The final excerpt 5 is a discourse between Mmeso and Patrick where the former informs the latter that she has been invited for a job interview in an oil company in Port Harcourt and the latter's sudden interest in performing the marital rites between the two of them. This is seen on pages 127-8.

As for Grice's (1975) speech acts, which lay emphasis on the cooperative principle, we used excerpt 6-8 to discuss it. In excerpt 6, which involves Mr Omeje, Chiemerie and Chimee, Mr. Omeje violated all the maxims. The discourse in excerpt 7 takes place between Adolph and Deborah, we see that Adolph maintains

all the maxims while in the last excerpt between Patrick, Mmeso's suitor, and Onyinye, Mmeso's friend, Onyinye violates all except the maxim of manner.

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