

SPEECH ACT LEVELS IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND": A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the levels of speech acts – locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary – present in selected excerpts from Flannery O'Connor's short story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory provides the analytical framework for understanding how characters in the text use language not merely to convey information but to perform actions embedded within social, emotional, and situational contexts. Ten utterances were examined to determine how surface-level phrasing (locution), underlying speaker intention (illocution), and expected or actual effects on listeners (perlocution) interact to create meaning in narrative discourse. Findings demonstrate that even simple sentences encode multiple illocutionary forces, and perlocutionary outcomes are shaped by the emotional tension and moral complexity characteristic of O'Connor's writing. This analysis shows that narrative dialogue is a productive site for studying speech acts, revealing the dynamic interplay between linguistic form, social interaction, and character development.

Keywords

Speech Act Theory; locutionary act; illocutionary act; perlocutionary act; pragmatics; Flannery O'Connor; literary linguistics; discourse analysis.

1. Introduction. Speech Act Theory, first introduced by Austin (1962), suggests that utterances are not merely descriptive but performative in nature. This means that speaking is itself a form of action. Austin distinguishes three layers within an utterance: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. These concepts were later expanded by Searle (1969), who emphasized the role of intentionality and convention in determining the illocutionary force of an utterance.

Scholars such as Leech (1983) and Yule (1996) have shown that speech acts are essential for understanding how humans use language socially. In literature, dialogue functions not only to convey information but to reveal relationships,

tensions, and choices made by characters. For this reason, fictional dialogue provides ideal material for speech act analysis (Yule, 1996).

Flannery O'Connor's (1953) *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is especially rich for such analysis. The story's dialogues highlight complex interpersonal dynamics, manipulation, conflict, and persuasion. Considering these dynamics, the following research questions guide the present study:

How do locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts manifest in selected utterances from the story?

How does context influence the illocutionary force of each utterance?

How do perlocutionary effects serve character development and plot progression?

2. Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in Austin's (1962) tripartite classification of speech acts:

Locutionary act: the literal meaning of the utterance – syntax, semantics, and phonology.

Illocutionary act: the speaker's intended function (e.g., promising, ordering, warning).

Perlocutionary act: the effect an utterance has on the listener (e.g., persuading, frightening).

Searle's (1969) elaboration on illocutionary force is also used, particularly his categorization of speech acts as directives, commissives, expressives, etc.

2.2 Data Source

The data consist of ten selected utterances from O'Connor's (1953) short story. These utterances were chosen because they exemplify diverse speech act functions and occur in socially and emotionally charged contexts.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

Following Yule's (1996) method of practical speech act identification, three steps were applied to each utterance:

Identify the locutionary structure.

Interpret the illocutionary intention using contextual clues.

Describe the perlocutionary effect, either shown directly in the narrative or predictable from typical conversational responses.

This model aligns with qualitative descriptive methods often used in discourse analysis (Leech, 1983).

3. Results

3.1 "Will you all just shut up for one second?"

Locutionary act: Interrogative structure.

Illocutionary act: A directive disguised as a question—consistent with Austin's (1962) argument that grammatical form does not determine function.

Perlocutionary act: The hearers become silent.

3.2 **"Now look here, Bailey... see here, read this."**

Locutionary act: Imperative.

Illocutionary act: A request or command. Leech (1983) notes that imperatives often imply authority or urgency.

Perlocutionary act: Bailey follows instructions.

3.3 **"Where's the plantation?"**

Locutionary act: Interrogative.

Illocutionary act: Request for information and subtle suggestion.

Perlocutionary act: The hearer responds with directions.

3.4 **"We'll all stay in the car."**

Locutionary act: Declarative.

Illocutionary act: A promise or reassurance, aligning with Searle's (1969) category of commissives.

Perlocutionary act: The listener accepts or verifies the promise.

3.5 **"Go bring these people their Co'-Colas."**

Locutionary act: Imperative.

Illocutionary act: Directive (Searle, 1969).

Perlocutionary act: The addressee performs the requested action.

3.6 **"I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!"**

Locutionary act: Negative declarative.

Illocutionary act: Complaint and criticism—an expressive act (Searle, 1969).

Perlocutionary act: Hearer may feel offended or defensive.

3.7 **"It's not far from here."**

Locutionary act: Declarative.

Illocutionary act: Informing or encouraging—consistent with Yule's (1996) concept of informational acts in context.

Perlocutionary act: The listener agrees to continue traveling.

3.8 **"If you don't shut up, we won't go anywhere."**

Locutionary act: Conditional structure.

Illocutionary act: A warning or threat, which Leech (1983) categorizes as a directive with negative consequences.

Perlocutionary act: Hearers fall silent.

3.9 **"Would you mind calling them children to sit down by you?"**

Locutionary act: Polite interrogative.

Illocutionary act: A request masked by politeness – a strategy described by Yule (1996).

Perlocutionary act: The listener complies with the request.

3.10 “I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!”

Locutionary act: Declarative with exclamation.

Illocutionary act: A plea, offer, and attempt at self-preservation—typical in emotionally tense contexts (Leech, 1983).

Perlocutionary act: The hearer considers accepting or rejecting the offer.

4. Discussion

The findings strongly support Austin's (1962) argument that utterances are multifunctional and context-dependent. Across the examples, the locutionary form often differs from the illocutionary intention, such as interrogatives functioning as commands. This aligns with Searle's (1969) notion that illocutionary force is not defined strictly by grammar.

The study further confirms Leech's (1983) claim that politeness strategies influence how directives are delivered. For example, “Would you mind calling them children...?” mitigates force through politeness, yet the illocutionary intention remains directive.

Perlocutionary effects in the story correspond with Yule's (1996) explanation that listener responses depend on social roles, emotional states, and power dynamics. In O'Connor's narrative, warnings, pleas, and commands often carry stronger emotional consequences because of the escalating tension and life-threatening circumstances (O'Connor, 1953).

The analysis illustrates how literary dialogue effectively dramatizes the relationship between language and action. Characters' utterances not only shape social interaction but also contribute to the story's moral themes, power struggles, and climactic conflict.

5. Conclusion

Using Austin's (1962) framework, this study examined ten speech acts from O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and showed how locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts interact within literary dialogue. The analysis demonstrates that:

Locutionary structures alone cannot reveal the full meaning of an utterance.

Context and speaker intention shape multiple possible illocutionary forces.

Perlocutionary effects help drive character behavior and narrative progression.

The findings confirm that Speech Act Theory provides valuable insights into literary discourse, especially in texts where dialogue reveals psychological tension and moral complexity.

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