

# Speech Acts Analysis of Richard Matheson's Button, Button

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## Abstract

Current study aims at to analysis a short story titled 'Button, Button' keeping in view the perspective of speech acts theory (1962) by John Austin. He classified speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. To him, utterances are of two major type constative which is used to describe the things as they are and performative that performs or describes a speech act. Analysis indicates that declarative, representative, expressive and commissive as classification of speech acts at diction level and direct and indirect at structural stratum have been unlined. As far as the functions of speech acts are concerned they are numerous i.e. distinctiveness, social stratification, personal and communal grooming and amusement (Flor, 2010). In order to amply attain the task a qualitative method has been kept in mind during analysis.

**Keywords:** Speech act, utterances, declarative, representative, expressive, direct, indirect

## 1. Introduction:

The story taken as a sample or data for analysis was written by Richard Matheson and published in playboy in 1970. The story is about a mysterious looking gadget followed by an offer which makes no sense or logic to Mr. Arthur. But his wife somehow was curious to know the consequences of what an insurance agent Mr. Steward was telling them. He offered them to press the button attached to a mysterious gadget and they will be able to get 50,000 US dollar. He further assured them they it will bring no harm to them as someone in the world will die but none of their acquaintance. During the conversation Steward seemed to persuade them to take a chance by pressing the button and had a handsome reward.

Norma's husband was not in a favor and deemed it as immoral by declaring it as '*murder*'. But Norma being ambitious and greedy woman wanted to have that money to spend a life of puff and luxury which she till now has been deprived of. In spite of her husband disgust and uncertainty prevailing in her mind about the genuineness of the offer she somehow impulsively decided to take the risk. She called Steward, confirmed about the offer and money she will have after pressing the button and she pressed the button which her husband restrained her to do. After pressing the button she received a call from the hospital and came to know about the death of her husband in an accident. Even then she was least impressed except the reward from Steward and the insurance money which is going to be double after Arthur's death.

## 1.2. Research Questions:

The scrutiny of the story aims at to answers the subsequent questions

- What types of speech acts do we identify in the story Button, Button?
- What functions do these speech acts perform in the text Button, Button?
- Do these acts aid in better comprehension of the story?

## 1.3. Research Significance:

This study will benefit both the researcher and readers alike on diverse ground. The researcher will be able to have a critical understanding of the theory along with the application of that theory into practice. The readers will be able to have an approachable access to the story on one hand and the functions these utterances have as far as conversational analysis is concerned among three participants namely Norma, Arthur and Steward on the other hand. In addition, it will inspire researcher to go further deep into this field of analysis.

## 2. Theoretical Framework:

In order to aptly conduct the study speech acts theory has been kept in view as a theoretical framework. This theory at one hand provides linguistics rules to speakers to produce utterances and on the other hand leads him or her to utilize language aptly and accurately to achieve certain communicative objectives i.e. giving information, persuading someone, giving command or making request (Cortazzi & Jin, 2008). This theory was initiated by John Austin in 1962. Latter it was developed by John Searle in 1969. Since then it is considered as one of the most influential theory which elaborates how language can be used to perform actions (Green, 2007). To Bowe and Martin (2007) this theory has an influential contribution in the field of interpersonal communication in social interaction.

Austin being the founder of the theory proposed that utterance can be of two sorts i.e. *constative* and *performative*. First type of utterance merely describes the thing as it is while latter one depicts how language carry out an action. Moreover, he classified speech acts into three classifications. He further elaborated these acts

as to him locutionary act “includes the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction and the utterance of them with a certain ‘meaning’” (Austin, 1962, p. 94). While illocutionary deals with the social function or intend of what is being said by the speaker and perlocutionary is all about the consequences or effects of what is being communicated by the speaker.

Hsieh (2009) claimed that speech act theory can help a great deal while investigating language, its function and communicative panorama because it gives hand in the illustration of how sentences can be formed for utterances keeping in view the situation in which the speaker is in. As we know the utterances considered polite and modest in one culture may have quite opposite connotation in another culture (Scollon, 2001). While chatting about intercultural values of interaction Gay (2000) deemed it as a phenomena that is “dynamic, interactive, and irreversible contextual”. For successful communication at intercultural level one need to be polite, decent and adequate verbal exchange is highly necessitated and essential between the participants involved (Fielding, 2006). Sullivan, (2002) talked about the communicative flexibility while conversing at cross cultural level to be an effective and precise level interaction.

### 3. Research Methodology:

In order to aptly, equally and inclusive deal the task and to accomplish the objective of the study a qualitative method of study has been derived. Keeping in view the spectrum of study a purposive sampling technique has also been put into practice by the researcher during the course of the analysis. Data has been sampled keeping in mind the level and dimension of the study. After data being analyzed results have been drawn keeping in view John Austin speech acts theory followed by the discussion and conclusion.

### 4. Data Analysis:

After the story being examined bearing in view speech acts theory it has been noted that the text contains three strata of speech acts.

#### 4.1. Speech Acts’ Classifications:

As stated above John Austin classified speech acts to *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* in terms of its role, function and dimension. *Locutionary* is meant to indicate the literal or surface meaning of what is being uttered by speaker *illocutionary* is about the social function of the utterance means how that utterance is being treated at socio level and *perlocutionary* is suggestive of the aftermaths or consequences of what is being uttered or spoken. In the story at the arrival of Steward Norma said “*I’m rather busy*” surface level connotations indicate that she has something else to do instead of attending Steward, *illocutionary* level may suggest her as rude and un-etiquette fellow and *perlocutionary* level indicate the intervention of her husband in the whole scenario whom she might like to avoid as a consequence or aftermath.

When Norma Challenged Steward of “*Monetarily*” values at *locutionary* level it may be suggestive of the fact that she is in need of money at *illocutionary* it is taken as an indicator of her greedy and selfish nature and at *perlocutionary* level it resulted in a disastrous proposition. When Arthur remarked “*What does that means?*” at Steward’s proposition literally it can be taken as his inability to comprehend the situation, at social level he may be termed as incompetent fellows but at consequential level he was absolutely on the spot and aware of the consequences that offer may involve. When Arthur was disappointed with Norma’s intents he “*stared at her in dismay*” at literal level it shows her disgust towards her wife plan, at societal level it suggest the gap between two perspective of thinking and at consequential it brings about a disastrous consequences in the form of Arthur’s death.

When Norma interrupted her husband during interaction at literal level it indicates her frankness with her partner at communal level it suggests that she doesn’t care her husband and doesn’t bother to costume any value to him and at effectual level she lost her husband in the bargain. When she remarked “*A chance to take trip to Europe....to buy a cottage on the island*” at surface level readers may deem her as an opportunist at social level she may be taken as a greedy, selfish and egocentric woman but at consequential level she paid a huge bounty for the her ambitious and uncontrolled nature. Steward utterance “*All we guarantee is that you don’t know them*” *locutionary* level indicates the genuineness of his offer or proposal at *illocutionary* it indicates the hollowness of the people who are unconcerned except themselves and at *perlocutionary* implies the fact that in spite of living together in a matrimonial relation for years people don’t know each other.

#### 4.2. Diction or Mode of Speech Acts:

The analysis of the story *Button, Button* leads our direction towards the diverse forms of speech acts consumed by different participants during their interaction while talking and arguing about the gadget attached to a button. In this regards analysis bears the following consequences;

##### 4.2.1. Declarative:

Hasty glance of the story points toward it as a narration of an event so most of the dialogues between the

conversers are in declarative form which is usually consumed to make a statement. It is meant to utter statements regarding what is going on, what has happened or what the situation is all about. Declarative mode of speech dominates the entire proceedings when we compare it with other modes of speech i.e. representative, expressive and commissive.

#### 4.2.2. Representative:

It is meant to use by the speaker either to confirm his beliefs about something or to negate certain stated facts. So it is to assert, describe, conclude or state a fact. When Steward came about Norma straight-away knew and believed that *"it was a sale pitch"*. He stated the fact when he said *"inside here is a key to the bell-unit dome"*. Steward while putting his offer stated the facts as *"If you push the button....someone in the world you don't know will die....in return you will receive a payment of 50,000 dollars"*. While pacifying Norma he assured her with conviction by saying *"That's natural"*. The most neutral fact was that when after their hesitation he remarked *"Nonetheless, that is the proposition"*.

#### 4.2.3. Expressive:

As the very title suggests it is meant to express or giving vent to emotions of the characters or speakers i.e. sorrow, joy, wonder or happiness. To portray the participants as life like and genuine Matheson depicted their emotions times and again in the course of the action in the story. When Norma was persuading Arthur he enquired *"Murder someone?"* Which disgusted Norma as she said, *"Murder?"* When her husband was not convincing she uttered her inner portrayal by sighing *"well, she gestured vaguely..."* when Arthur was at a lost to restrain her from pressing button he *"stared at her in dismay"* which indicates non-verbal emotion. After the venture and call from the hospital she voiced as *"No", she couldn't seem to breathe. She struggled to her feet and walked into the kitchen numbly"*.

#### 4.2.4. Commissive:

Through subsequent speech act the speaker either states his or her future plan, promise or indicates threat, refusal or an offer. The scrutiny of the data underlines the fact that this speech act is also included by the author in the text. Steward put a very attractive and handsome offer though mysterious in nature but genuine all the while. When he uttered *"that is the proposition"* it is indicative of his offer and plan. Moreover, he promised them to have an amount of 50,000 dollars followed by the assurance *"someone you don't know will die"*. When Arthur was unconvinced and uttered *"what's the difference who you kill? It's still murder"* it is suggestive of the refusal on his part to both Norma and Steward's offer. Lastly, Steward put his plan in the form of offer and assurance by remarking *"All we guarantee is that you don't know them"*.

### 4.3. Structure of Speech Acts:

Apart from direct interaction between conversers we have rest of the interaction between the participants in indirect speech form which leads to the culmination of speech acts analysis. As the story is an interaction between Norma, Arthur and Steward being the only participants so time and again we have and instances of direct speech method. Few examples can be quoted as a reference subsequently.

*"I'll get it", Norma Called from the kitchen.*

*"Mrs. Lewis?" he inquired politely.*

*"Oh, yes." Norma repressed a smile.*

*"I'm rather busy" Norma said.*

*"What are you trying to sell?" she asked.*

*Arthur looked at Norma "up to you"*.

*"What's it for?" asked Arthur.*

*"I think you'd better leave" Arthur said.*

*"Why won't you talk about it?" Norma asked.*

*"It offends me" Arthur said.*

*"Because it is immoral" he told her.*

*"Nonetheless, that is the proposition" Mr. Steward said.*

*Norma interrupted "A chance to take that trip to Europe we've always talked about"*.

*"This is the Lenox Hill Hospital"*

*"My dear lady," Mr. Steward said. "Do you really think you knew your husband?"*

### 4.4. Result and Discussion:

After analyzing the story *Button*, *Button* critically keeping in mind John Austin's speech acts theory it has been brought to light that at structural level we have two types of speech acts i.e. direct and indirect though indirect speech dominate the text yet the number of direct speech is quite a notable. At mode or diction level we have four types of speech acts i.e. *Declarative*, *expressive*, *representative* and *commissive*. As a narrative text declarative mode or diction occupies the interaction but the quantity of other modes is also very much frequent and worth mentioning. At expressive level certain emotions of the participants have been brought to light

especially that of Norma and Arthur. At representational level Steward put forth facts about the button gadget and asserted his offer as genuine. At commissive level we may notice Steward was putting offer at one hand and promising them the guarantee on the other hand.

In addition to it, we have three major categories of speech acts in the story i.e. *locutionary illocutionary and perlocutionary*. The first has dealt in with the surface or literal level concept of the utterances, second engaged in the societal level function of the utterances and the last one engrossed in the consequences of the utterances. During analysis it has been brought to light that there are numerous utterances which carry tri-level concepts or meanings during the interaction between the participants i.e. Norma, Steward and Arthur. Additionally, it has been noted that two types of utterances i.e. constative which indicates happenings and performative which suggests the actions accomplished through utterances has been consumed by the author to achieve his objective in a precise and purposive manner.

## 5. Conclusion:

As a conclusion, it can be indicated that Richard Matheson in the story *Button, Button* consumed several speech acts techniques to attain his goals and objectives. It can also be put into picture that he doesn't merely consumed his utterances to describe a state of affair during a incident or interaction rather by means of performative utterances he has utilized the concept of carrying out actions via utterances. By ways of exploiting these speech acts he is able to attain diverse level objectives i.e. endowing sense of identity to participants, grooming literal, societal and consequential level of interaction by giving vent to their emotions, plans, ambitions and psychoanalytical portrayal.

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