The Literary Speech Act in Double Contexts

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\textbf{Abstract.} Austin's Speech Act Theory gives a lot of inspirations to literary discourse research, but he also denies the force of literary discourse at the same time. Many literary theorists such as J. Hillis Miller, Van Dijk, Jonathan Culler, Richard Ohmann, have deeply analyzed characteristics of literary speech act. Literary speech act manifests not only in the dialogues between the characters in literary works, but also in the author's expressions to the reader through literary creation.

\textbf{Introduction}

Speech Act Theory argues that any discourse is "to do things with words," as Austin in \textit{How to Do Things with Words} says, "That is to say that something is something, or to do something by saying something."[1] A complete speech act can be divided into three categories: Locutionary act, Illocutionary act and Perlocutionary act. When we say "please open the window", this is not only the locutionary act the speaker expresses own requests, but it also implies to command the listener to open the window of illocutionary act, and finally the window opened by the listener, and that's called Perlocutionary act. Is literature also a speech act? The answer to this question is that no inclusion can be reached.

\textbf{Is Literary Discourse a Speech Act?}

Because of the fictional nature of literature, Austin determines that literary illocutionary act is ineffective. As he says, a sentence in the literature of the imperative sentence "Go and catch a falling star", does not convey the requirements of illocutionary acts. If an author can meet the conditions of realization of illocutionary act, he may not write poetry, but write an autobiography. From a fictional point of view, Austin does notice that literary discourse is different from the uniqueness of everyday discourse, but he does not provide an in-depth analysis of the uniqueness of literary discourse. According to the daily discourse of speech acts to measure literary discourse, he ignores the study of literary speech behavior, and classifies as in the list of inappropriate speech acts. His view was strongly opposed by many literary theorists such as Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Van Dijk, Paul de Man, Jonathan Culler and Richard Ohmann. They regard literary discourse as an indispensable object of study in pragmatics. If the study of literature and its context are missing, the study of pragmatics will be imperfect. Literary discourse is also a speech act just like other words. Van Dijk points out that the speech act of literature has its own suitable conditions and it is a unique macro speech act. Literary behavior is simply to make that change in reader's knowledge, beliefs, wishes, emotions and other aspects by reading behaviors.[2]

However, it is clear that this speech act of literature is more complex than everyday discourse. Iser points out that literature imitates illocutionary act, but what it says will not generate illocutionary act. Ohmann also admits that the suspension of literature illocutionary act will make reader's attention shift to Locutionary act and Perlocutionary act. In other words, Illocutionary act of literature does not generate such usual results as illocutionary act, for example, everyday conversation can. Even when a child is reading a literary work, he can immediately understand and follow the contract between the author and the reader. This contract tends to "previous" way to start, and then leads the reader out of the real world into the fictional world. Writers do not use a "real"
What Kind of Speech Act is Literary Discourse?

Most scholars separately put the literary speech act on the two discourse activities: the discourse activities of the characters and narrators within the literary works, and the external discourse activities between the author and the reader. Miller says, Literary speech acts can refer to speech acts expressed in literary works, such as promises, lies, excuses, statements, prayers, forgiveness, and other speech acts written by the characters or narrators in the novel. It can also refer to the possible descriptive dimension of the literary works as a whole. Writing a novel may be a way of acting in words. [3] Culler also states, “A poem is both a structure made of words (a text) and an event (an act of the poet, an experience of the reader, an event in literary history).”[4] In a word, speech act is not only reflected in the dialogue between characters in literary works, but also in the creation of the expression which the author expresses to readers. The former is fictional, while the latter is true.

The views of Chinese scholars are in the same strain with Miller and Culler. Ma Dakang and Wang Wencheng have published articles to discuss the speech act of literary discourse in the Literary Criticism. Ma Dakang proposed that literature has a double-discourse activity and the dialogue of the characters is the second level of discourse behavior in the fictional world within the literature. “These discourse acts also have the ability to carry out the action of the characters in the world of works within the fictional world, organize all kinds of contacts, promote the intensification of the conflict and the progress of the story, participate discourse construction activities in order to conduct the discourse acts as a whole and weave the literature to be an impressive colorful world.”[5] Wang Wencheng divides literary speech act into micro-speech act and macro-speech act, and the interpretation of these two levels is more detailed. “The speech act of literary discourse can be divided into two kinds of speech acts: one is author to make the narrator and the characters to express the speech act within his fictional context which is assumed by the author, another is author to express the speech act through his creation of the entire work to the hypothetical or actual readers outside the context of speech acts.”[6] The former is referred to the micro-speech act of literary discourse, which is collectively referred to the macro-speech act of literary discourse.

The dichotomy above is in fact the differences between the inward-looking and the outward-looking which are said by R. J. Watts. Two kinds of speech acts are carried out in two contexts: one is a textual context or a fictional context within the text and the other is the context of social culture or the creative context. Although the academic circles have different appellations for these contexts, the duplicity of literary speech acts undoubtedly embows the same to the context. The former text is fictional context. As Stanley E. Fish says, “In other words the descriptor does not look to the object as it might exist neutrally in space, but to the object as it exists in a context; the ‘facts which one must possess in order to refer’ are context specific; they are not facts ‘about some independently identified object.’”[7] Austin only sees the fictional speech act in the former context, but does not see the fact that there is still a real speech act in the latter context. Even the fictional speech acts in the textual context still play an important role in shaping the characters and promoting the development of the plot. Although the latter one, the author is delayed to readers in Illocutionary act and Perlocutionary act, we cannot deny the power of literary speech act from the aspects of social function of literature.

A View of Literary Speech Act from the Author and the Reader

It is worth mentioning that there is not much theory about the Speech Act of Richard Ohmann in China and we will introduce it briefly here.
Ohmann separately discusses the literary and linguistic practices from the perspectives of the author and the reader. Ohmann believes that the author's writing behavior is: when a poet expresses a sentence in his work, he does not state it truthfully. So what is the poet doing? All he done is to pass on these words to people’s mouths. And these other people - characters, speakers or narrators - do not exist actually. More precisely, the author gives an imitative verbal act as if they were doing by others. Ohmann analyzes the different genres in turn, for example, in drama, the author follows this formula: He creates characters and gives them verbal actions to execute alternately. These lines which are assigned are a means of shaping the character. So it is in lyric poetry. For example, Yeats's "sailing to Byzantium" gives a series of speech acts. These acts of speech are performed by a single character and creating a character image that sails from one country to another. In addition, Ohmann also analyzes the narrated novels which are omniscience and almighty. In this genre, the narrator himself and his narration of the story are rather special. “Narration is a fictional act.”[8]

Secondly, Ohmann also focuses on the literature from the reader's point of view. He believes that the focus is still the readers. Readers will infer many problems in the process of reading. “Who is this speaker, what role he plays, what society he lives in, whether he is trustworthy, what kind of relationship he tries to establish between him and the reader, what kind of nonverbal behavior he may be involved in and so on.”[9] Readers make judgments through their own tacit knowledge of Illocutionary act on these issues. This is a manifestation of the force of Illocutionary act. In addition, the "fact" stated in the novel is remembered by readers as the fact in the fictional world, which is also the manifestation of the force of Illocutionary act. In Ohmann’s view, the reader’s construction of the fictional world which is based on the literary statements is the way of the occurrence of the Illocutionary act in literature.

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References