



07

**ASSERTIVE AND COMMISSIVE SPEECH ACTS IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE AMERICAN DREAM*: A STUDY**

**Dr. Suresh D. Bhosale**

*Assistant Professor*

*Department of English*

*S.M. Joshi College Hadapsar, Pune, MS, India*

\*\*\*\*\*

**Abstract:**

*The present paper aim is to study and analyze Assertive and Commissive Speech act theory in the play *The American Dream*. The play deals with a satire on American family life, concerns a married couple and their elderly mother. On a particular day, they are visited by two guests who turn their worlds upside down. In pragmatics, speech acts are considered the essence of communication in written or spoken discourse. The speech act theory is applied to the study of language to explore from the user's point of view, the choices he makes, the constraints he faces in using language in social interaction and the effects of language on the other participants. Therefore, the theory of speech acts is an effective tool to infer the unstated meanings of the utterances used by the characters. While analyzing the utterances, the study focuses on investigating how context sometimes forces the addressees to choose one interpretation rather than another.*

**Keywords:** *Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Discourse, Assertive, Commissive, Utterance, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Human beings have certain basic needs. After the oxygen and water there a need of human being is communication. The communication in language cannot take place without society. Society controls the use of language through norms and conditions imposed on the human actions. People make use of language for expressive and communicative purpose. Pragmatics deals with the use of language by the humans while communicating with each other. The use of language in the human society is determined by interrelations of the human beings and the cultural norms in the society. It is Pragmatics which tries to grapple with the problem of actual usage of language in the interpersonal communication in the society.

In Linguistics sentence is hypothetical to be the basic unit of syntax. But in Pragmatics, speech act is the central concept for the pragmatic analysis of any discourse. Speech, rather than writing, acquired importance with the development of linguistic theory, which considered speech to be primary and writing a derivation of speech. Austin developed his theory of Speech Act in his set of lectures published under the title *How To Do Things With Words* (1962).

Searle criticizes Austin's classification of speech acts saying that should be reasoned classification of illocutionary speech acts into certain basic categories or types. He states that Austin's criteria for classifying speech acts are overlapping. Austin, in his classification, emphasizes speech act verbs, but Searle points out that classification, emphasizes speech act verbs cannot be a criterion for such classification. He divides illocutionary speech acts taking out account the illocutionary point such as to get the listener to do something, commit the speaker to do something. With this Searle (1976) he wanted to have a scheme of classification based on felicity conditions, and proposes five basic kinds of actions as given below:



**Assertives (or Representatives):** These speech acts can have the value of being true or false. Here, the speaker asserts a proposition to be true, using such verbs as affirm, believe, conclude, report, deny. This class also includes some stating, suggesting, criticizing, replying, concluding, predicting, denying, disagreeing etc.

**Directives:** As name suggests, these speech acts expect the hearer to do something. These speech acts involve requesting, ordering, questioning, etc. Directive speech acts can be forceful as commands. They can also be asking for information or an indirect command.

**Commissives:** These speech acts commit the speaker to do something. Here, the speaker commits himself/herself to a future course of action by using verbs such as: guarantee, pledge, promise, swear, vow, undertake, warrant etc. They express the intention of the speaker. These speech acts express promises, threats, refusals, etc.

**Expressives:** These are the speech acts in which the speaker expresses an attitude to or about a state of affairs using such verbs as: apologize, appreciate, congratulate, deplore, detest, regret, thank, welcome etc. In other words, they express the psychological state of the speaker's mind in making statements of pleasure, pain, joy, sorrow etc. The feelings of the speaker are expressed by these speech acts.

**Declaratives:** In this speech act the speaker intends to change the state of things or affairs. For example, in police station, the police officers the expressions like 'I resign my job' or 'you are out' are declarative acts.

In this research paper is trying to apply the framework of Pragmatics to the analysis of speech acts occurring in the dramatic discourse. While reading a literary text, the reader, in a way, recreates what the author has written. In that sense it is an innovative process. The speech-acts in the dramatic work can be analyzed in terms of the typology of speech acts stated by Searle. Searle's typology states five major speech acts. Pragmatics is essentially concerned with the use of language. But, both Austin and Searle illustrate the typology of speech acts taking examples of single sentences. I have to pay attention to the contextual aspects or conditions that obtain in the case of speech acts in a dramatic discourse, taking into account the social, cultural aspects and interpersonal relationship between the characters that interact. In view of this, I am going to discuss here only two major speech acts such as Assertives and Commissive occurring in *The American Dream* (1961) of Edward Albee.

**Analysis of Assertive Speech act:** "Assertives represent the speaker's belief of something that can be evaluated to be 'true or false' and commit the speaker in varying degrees to something being the case, i.e. to the truth of the expressed proposition" (Searle, 12). Most of the characters in the plays under consideration tend to assert through their utterances the facts or beliefs which they believe to be true to the best of their knowledge. In other words, by assertion, they represent the world as they believe to be the case.

#### **Utterance One**

MOMMY: "We were very poor! But then I married you, Daddy, and now we're very rich" (Albee, AD, 66).

#### **Speech Situation**

**The Addressee:** Daddy is a pitiful figure emasculated and infantilized by the sadism of Mommy. Under Mommy's reign of terror, Daddy is a negative entity indeed early in the play Mommy reduces his speech to the echo of hers.



**The Addresser:** Mommy is an archetypal bad mother, Mommy is the household's sadistic disciplinarian, dismissing Grandma and infantilizing Daddy at every turn.

**The Context:** The above utterance occurs in the play when Daddy and Mommy discuss about her past family life and conditions which Mommy could complete her desire and wishes and now how she fulfills them with Daddy. Mommy assures that all her conditions are be satisfied. Mommy reminisces about how poor she and Grandma used to be and expresses how grateful she is that she married Daddy, who has allowed her and Grandma to finally feel rich.

**Deictic Expressions:** The person deictic expression 'We' points to Grandma and Mommy and 'I' points to Mommy and 'You' points to Daddy.

**Speech act analysis:** Mommy, in the above speech act, implicitly asserts his belief that Daddy should be know about her past and what her intention behind her marriage and therefore she commits herself to truth of her propositional content. Mommy tries to fit her words to the state of affairs which he believes to be true. Simultaneously, Mommy finds Daddy's weakness and presumptions that Daddy should be cooperate and understand somewhere in the future. Mommy uses a hypothetical form of utterance and states the factual information about her past life and her intention behind marry with Daddy. She informs implicitly that Daddy. She suggests implicitly that Daddy should not understand how they betray him. It seems that Mommy is aware of her roots, and she remembers just how poor she and Grandma once were. She even speaks nostalgically about the many sacrifices Grandma made for her, and the things they did for each other so that the other could survive.

The interpersonal relations of Mommy with Daddy create a complex situation for her to talk about her past openly. Therefore, Mammy wants to express her intention implicitly as she asserts that she makes him emotionally blackmail and used him threaten and dominating way. In other word, it suggests that how they control and pressure on Daddy. The utterance further interpreted as a taken Mommy in to very casual and she neglect his intention. Mommy assures that she would get everything.

#### **Utterance Two**

MRS. BARKER: (*Pulling the hem of her slip above her knees*) "You're lucky to have such a man for a husband" (Albee, AD, 79).

#### **Speech Situation**

**The Addressee:** Mommy is Grandma's daughter and Daddy's commanding wife. She fulfills the stereotypical role of a housewife, and it is strongly suggested that she married Daddy for his money.

**The Addresser:** Mrs. Barker is Mommy's friend. Mrs. Barker is the caricature of the dim-witted socially responsible American housewife.

**The Context:** The above utterance occurs in the play when Mrs. Barker breezes into the living room. Daddy asks her to come back another time, but Mrs. Barker refuses to leave. Daddy asks Mrs. Barker to sit down, and she does. Mommy offers her a cigarette and a drink. Mrs. Barker refuses the drink and the cigarette, the same time Barker observes to Daddy how he works under Mommy and she utters above utterance.

**Deictic Expressions:** The person deictic expression 'You' points to Mommy 'Husband' points to Daddy.

**Speech act analysis:** Mrs. Barker illocution of the utterance is an implicit assertion of her belief that it is a flirting gesture on the part of Daddy. She indirectly states her strong resentment about Daddy's attachment with her wife, Mommy. Therefore, she passes the sharply sarcastic comment on Mommy. The speech act, thus, belongs to Searle's assertive category. It is an instance of indirect speech act having ironic interpretation; viz. Daddy need not entertain Mommy. The expression 'You're lucky' has double meaning, and may be, Mrs. Barker, wishes to highlight the other one.



The interpersonal relations of the addresser and addressee are the essential parameters of this speech act. Mrs. Barker very tactfully uses the face saving strategy to express her strong agreement about Daddy attachment with Mommy. The successful performance of speech act depends on the addressee's shared knowledge and ability to decode the intended illocutionary force. The implicit illocutionary force of the speech act suggests that Mommy should be uncooperative while talking to Daddy. She seems to be a rude and adamant while talking to her husband. Mrs. Barker intends to criticize Mommy's behavior and also wants to say that respect and support her husband, Daddy. It is universally acknowledged that behind every successful man there is a woman.

**Analysis of Commissive Speech Act:** Commissive speech acts are frequently used by most of the characters in the plays. When people find it difficult to fiddle with a situation, they tend to commit themselves to the future course of action such as promising, threatening, vowing, offering, refusing, guaranteeing, etc. In the same way, we find many utterances in the play in which the characters commit themselves to the future course of actions.

However, sometimes commissives are also used to suggest that the actions cannot be performed immediately because of the inappropriate circumstances. Commissive speech acts commonly occur in the play and they play a major role in building the interpersonal bond of relations.

### **Utterance Three**

MRS. BARKAR: "I really do feel that I can trust you. Please tell me why they called and asked us to come" (Albee, AD, 95).

### **Speech Situation**

**The Addressee:** Grandma is Mommy's mother. She is portrayed as the most intelligent character in the family. She is the sardonic and witty commentator of the play, Grandma is somewhat marginalized from the central action of the household. Her advanced age allows her to be further isolated from Mommy and Daddy's dialogue due to bouts of (potentially feigned) deafness and senility.

**The Addresser:** Mrs. Barker is a simplified exaggeration of the typical American housewife, with her sense of social responsibility, Mrs. Barker is representative of a society that would place a child (known as the bumble) in a home where it could be mutilated and brutalized. As the back story or history of Mommy and Daddy is pieced together during the play, the connection between Mrs. Barker and the family becomes one of increasingly complex speculation.

**The Context:** The above utterance occurs in the play when Mrs. Barker replies that she is not sure that she would not care for some water. Mommy orders Grandma to the kitchen; having quit, Grandma refuses. Moreover, she has hidden everything. Mrs. Barker declares herself in a near-faint, and Mommy goes for water herself. Mrs. Barker relates her disorientation to Grandma and implores her to give up the secret of her visit. Grandma relishes in being implored and asks her to beg again. After some resistance, Mrs. Barker beseeches her anew.

**Deictic Expressions:** The person deictic expression 'You' points to Mrs. Barker, 'You' points to Grandma and 'They' points to Mommy and Daddy.

**Speech act analysis:** Mrs. Barker explicitly Promise to indirectly point out the absurdity of Grandma and consequently commits herself to the future course of action. The promised act seems to be pending for some time now. Mrs. Barker requests to Grandma trust on her. She therefore, urges Grandma in turn, promises her that the desired action will be soon perpetrated and commits herself to the future course of action.

Syntactically, the utterance is in the present progressive form but the propositional content and its illocutionary force make Mrs. Barker to commit herself to the future course of action. She believes that the committed action will assure Mrs. Barker that the future is bright than the present. According



to the propositional content, one could infer the meaning such as Grandma was neither happy in the past nor would be happy in the future with her daughter (Mommy) if she acts according to their wish. Mrs. Barker intention is that to know the secret what they asked and called her. Hence, Mrs. Barker makes a literal promise in the words 'I can trust you' which does not need much interpretation because its explicit and implicit illocutionary force is clear.

#### **Utterance Four**

MOMMY: "Nonsense, Grandma! Just wait until I get my hands on you. You're a troublemaker ... that's what you are" (Albee, AD, 102).

#### **Speech Situation**

**The Addressee:** Grandma is Mommy's mother. She is portrayed as the most intelligent character in the family, and is the only character to physically break the fourth wall.

**The Addresser:** Mommy is the cruel, domineering, self-centered driving force at the center of the play. She berates and belittles her live-in mother, Grandma, and constantly threatens to have her carted away by "the van man" to live in a nursing home.

**The Context:** The above utterance occurs in the play when Grandma concludes her story; Daddy calls from upstairs and says that he can't find the television. Mommy shouts back that she can't find any water. Grandma laughs, muttering that she'd tried to warn them that everything was hidden. Daddy shouts that he can't even find Grandma's room. Mrs. Barker admires Grandma's ability to hide things. Mommy comes back into the room and chides Grandma for being a "troublemaker," but Grandma assuages her by telling Mommy that she'll soon be "out of here." Mommy says that she's "sick and tired" of Grandma, and just might send her away in a van.

**Deictic Expressions:** The person deictic expression 'I' points to Mommy 'You' points to Grandma.

**Speech act analysis:** Mommy directly threatens her mother and implicitly directs her to fight with her not consent for argument with her. In other words, it is implied that Mommy is the mastermind behind the torture of the "bumble" torture Mommy to her mother. Otherwise, she threatens to leave the house. At the surface level, Mommy commits herself to the future course of action but at deeper level he emphatically denies her mother's suggestion.

Mommy knows the significance of the interpersonal relations of the daughter and mother. Therefore, she deliberately makes a final attempt through Mommy's main interest is to remain in control and make life convenient for herself, which means, among other things, getting rid of outspoken and quarrelsome Grandma, who has become a nuisance. Moreover, in the socio-cultural context, the implied suggestion of leaving home is similar to break up the interpersonal relation. Thus, Mommy not only threatens her mother but also punch to her. Mommy and Daddy want to stick their heads in the sand and hide from the mistakes of their past so Grandma hides some things from them as a way of retaliating.

Thus, the analysis of the selected utterances in *The American Dream* has revealed that every utterance is a goal oriented or purposeful activity. The characters, by performing an intended act, usually perform other acts as well, because each major speech act contains a wide range of sub-acts such as stating, informs, suggests, threatening, hypothesizing, commenting, promising, and so on. It is noticed that in the analysis of explicit meaning of the selected utterances in the play, the characters do not convey more than what they say. However, in the analysis of implicit level, the pragmatic meaning of the character's utterance conveys more than what is said. Therefore, there is a possibility of having more than one interpretation, in other words, the utterances produced by the characters in the play consist of more than one layer of meaning.



### References

- Albee, Edward. *The Zoo Story* (1958) and *The American Dream* (1961). New York: Signet, 1960. Print.
- Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to do things with words*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. Print.
- Blakemore, Diane. (1992), *Understanding Utterances: An Introduction To Pragmatics*. Oxford (UK) & Cambridge (USA): Blackwell. Print.
- Levinson, S.C. (1983), *Pragmatics*, Cambridge: CUP. Print.
- Mey, Jacob. (2001) *Pragmatics: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell. Print.
- Searle, J.R. (1969) *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: CUP. Print.
- Yule, George. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP. Print.



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

**To Cite the Article:** *Bhosale, Suresh*, “Assertive and Commissive Speech Acts in Edward Albees’s *The American Dream: A Study*”. *Literary Cognizance*, III-3 (December, 2022): 38-43. Web.