

Speech Acts Performance and their meaning: from Jane to Mr. Brocklehurst Performance des Speech Acts et leur signification: de Jane à M. Brocklehurst

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Résumé

Les textes littéraires reflètent directement l'expérience de ce qui se passe dans le monde réel. Parfois, ils reflètent exactement le monde dans lequel nous vivons et notre expérience. A d'autres moments, cela se fait indirectement; il est probable que moins la littérature est directement pertinente pour le lecteur, plus celui-ci doit trouver des moyens de relier les deux. Dans cet article, j'ai essayé d'analyser quelques passages du roman *Jane Eyre*, écrit par Charlotte Brontë. La question est de savoir comment l'écrivain arrive-t-il à construire des ponts entre ses propres expériences et les expériences décrites dans les œuvres littéraires et comment se fait-il que nous les interprétons différemment selon les circonstances. En effet, il existe des règles sociolinguistiques valables pour les actes de langage dans le discours.

Mots-clés: fiction, interprétation, langage, Mr. Brocklehurst, actes de langage.

Abstract

Literary texts directly reflect the experience of what happens in the real world. Sometimes, they are reflecting exactly the world we are living in and our experience of it. At other times this is done indirectly; it is probably the case that the less the literature is directly relevant to the reader, the more he or she has to find ways of linking the two. In this paper, I have tried to analyse some passages from *Jane Eyre* a novel by Charlotte Brontë. One may question himself about how the writer can build bridges between his own experiences and the experiences described in the work of literature and how is it that we can interpret them differently according to the circumstance. Indeed, there are sociolinguistic rules valid for the interpretation of the speech acts in a discourse.

Keywords: fiction, interpretation, language, Mr. Brocklehurst, speech acts.

Introduction

Literature and life go together hand in hand. The aim of this paper is to focus on the fact that writing is an instrument for conveying ideas from one mind to another and the writer's aim is to make his reader comprehend not just the semantic meaning but what is behind it i.e. the most important meaning, the pragmatic one. Even when the writer knows exactly what he or she means and uses a precise language which is clear to him, he is not sure it is equally clear to the reader.

Hence, 'logopoeia' as defined by Ezra Pound (quoted in Leech, 1969:34) is 'the dance of the intellect among words'; that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes account in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its own acceptances, and ironical play. 'It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or music'. Such a notion of poetical language, in words and phrases, in the poem and prose version of the same locutions, exists in literary texts.

This paper is concerned with two speakers: Jane and Mr. Brocklehurst two major characters in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. In a word, we are in presence of a deprived child and an authoritative adult interacting within the same belief. Our main question is: how can a vulnerable little girl defend herself when a 'religious' strong man is dictating what is good and what is bad? Who is devoted to go to hell and who is expected to enter paradise? The motherless girl tries to protect herself by using every language she believes in its veracity. The aim of the study is undoubtedly to reveal some adults' hypocritical speech behaviour. This behaviour serves as a pretext to validate and keep their privileges. Furthermore, concerning one example mentioned, the researcher has tried to go on the footsteps of William Labov (1969, pp.179-218), then to apply his theory to this humble contribution.

1. Literature Review

If we consider other phonological features such as intonation, one could quote Anne Wichmann (2004:230) when she addressed those who study verbal communication; she told them that intonation can convey many nuances of meaning. We may add that when a written instance is presented with a description relating some emotions of the speaker's voice or such correlates, it becomes easier for the reader to imagine the real situation. Thus, some features of the voice are 'direct correlates of the emotional or physical state of speaker, such as tiredness, anger' or being friendly if not rude. This is partly due to the interaction between what is said, how it is said, and the context in which it is said. Wichman (2004) gives the example of the meaning of the word 'please'; she shows how intonation can change this word from a 'routine expression of courtesy

to an urgent plea or an emphatic demand': therefore, intonation contributes to a wide range of meanings.

To make a parallel between this real fact and the language used in Mr. Brooklehurst I am trying to analyse, one may assert firmly that it is vital for writers to mention a whole description concerning the speaker's voice and intonation to be able to 'understand' the intended meaning. Therefore, Gumperz & Hymes (1972) assert that "even a highly skilled writer has difficulty in reproducing natural conversations" (p.23). These conversational discourses depend not only on the linguistic norms but on the social norms as well. Furthermore, "communication is not governed by fixed social rules; because the speaker "decides on the norms that apply to the situation at hand. These norms determine the speaker's selection from among the communicative options available for encoding his intent." (p.15)

Once more following the famous linguist David Crystal one has to wonder if the person performing the speech act has the authority to do so, and if the participants are in the correct state to have that act performed on them. In this case the speech act is expressed by a contradiction between how the other girls should be and how his own daughters are.

One may perhaps wonder about the fancy situations encountered in, for instance, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* published in 1914. The situation is depicted in a novella by the German writer as follows: a man wakes up one morning to find he has turned into a beetle. His family is not surprised by this and continues to treat him in the way they have always treated him. On one level, the situation is impossible; on another level, Kafka could be saying that the family had always treated him as if he were an insect. Kafka is not depicting the situation directly or realistically. But indirectly he could be said to be representing the truth of the situation.

The reality which is depicted is not one of those we see every day. Perhaps we see it only in dreams, or nightmares. So, it is not easy at all to explain or interpret what is being represented in some literary texts that are too far from experiences we can identify with. All this is done with the help of that complex means of communication between human beings which is language. This means that the sentence must be not only correctly performed but also 'felicitous'; one of the types David Crystal mentions is concerned with preparatory conditions.

In this research, our aim is also to confirm that Labov's study about 'child/adult interaction' can be applied to one of the examples from the interviews stated in the novel *Jane Eyre*. Besides, William Labov (this great scholar) "has pointed out that there are a number of rules for the interpretation of conversational discourse that adults have mastered and

that children do not always understand.” (Quoted in Trudgill, 2000, p.111)

2. Some vivid examples from the novel

Perhaps the best example in *Jane Eyre* is that of Mr. Brocklehurst. This character, a caricature of hypocrisy, maintains he abhors pride and vanity, yet when we see him for the second time at Lowood, he is accompanied by his family whose dress and demeanour is anything but humble: ‘they were splendidly attired in velvet, silk and furs.’ Anne Holker (1986: 84) is not the only critic who states that :

his hypocrisy is so monstrous that it blinds him to the terrible destruction

that bad diet and comfortless accommodation are to wreak the Lowood girls.

Many of the typhus victims would have survived had it not been for Brocklehurst parsimony. His ‘Christianity’ is of the most dangerous kind.

In fact, when Mrs Reed asked him about the educational institution Jane was going to, he answered:

Humility is a Christian grace, and one peculiarly appropriate to the pupils of Lowood; and only the other day, I had a pleasing proof of my success. My second daughter Augusta, went with her mama to visit the school, and on her return she exclaimed: “Oh, dear papa, how quiet and plain all the girls at Lowood look! with their hair combed behind their ears, and their long pinafores, and those little holland pockets outside their frocks- they are almost like poor people’s children! and said she, “they looked at my dress and mama’s, as if they had never seen a silk gown before.

Following Labov (1969, p.185) who gave the example of the black child interviewed by an adult. The interview below serves “as a measure of the verbal capacity”(p.185) of Jane; “it must function as her capacity to defend herself in a hostile and threatening situation.” (p.185) This is what William Labov (1969) called “the result of regular sociolinguistic factors operating upon adult and child in this asymmetrical situation.” (p.185). Mr. Brocklehurst threatens Jane with death and asks her: “... *Well, Jane Eyre, and are you a good child?*” It was impossible for the little girl to reply to this in the affirmative since her environment held a contrary opinion; the only alternative for her is to be silent. Here

power and reliance are denoted through age , social class , and affectionate or kinship relations. In fact, Jane has no hope to find somebody who is supposed to defend her in this horrible situation where Mr. Brocklehurst examines her with “two inquisitive-looking grey eyes which twinkle under a pair of bushy brows” as described by Charlotte Brontë herself.

Any sociolinguistic analysis requires to go beyond language. When studying natural conversation sociolinguists are becoming increasingly aware of verbal and non-verbal - linguistic and non-linguistic codes- and rules of co-occurrence. Body motion is essential to interpretation of communicative conduct. It sometimes substitutes for linguistic means according to a kinesics - linguistic exercise which deals with the correlation of the vocalic and the movement stream.

Even the position in the room of the participants i.e. Mrs Reed’s, Mr. Brocklehurst’s and the miserable Jane’s is connotative: Mr. Brocklehurst sits his person in the arm-chair, opposite Mrs. Reed’s and orders Jane to come over; she steps across the rug and he places her ‘square and straight before him’; his face is almost on a level with hers! Every acute detail is there to function as a fence to close any subterfuge ; ‘what a great nose! and what a mouth! and what large prominent teeth!’ Jane thought.

Without any clemency his speech begins like this :

No sight so sad as that of a naughty child , especially a naughty little girl . Do you know where the wicked go after death ?

Jane’s ready and orthodox answer is :

‘They go to hell.’

And what is hell? Can you tell me that?’

A pit full of fire.

And should you like to fall into that pit and to be burning forever?

No, sir.

What must you do to avoid it ? (Brontë, 2002, p.31)

At this moment Jane thinks over for a moment as stated by the writer herself and then her answer when it comes , was objectionable:

I must keep in good health, and not die.

How can you keep in good health? Children younger than you die daily. I buried a little

child of five years old only a day or two since,- a good child, whose soul is

now in heaven. It is to be feared the same could not be said of you, were you to be

called hence.

Once more Jane cannot remove his doubt , instead she only casts her eyes on the two large feet planted on the rug, and sighs, wishing herself far enough away as Charlotte Brontë put it so subjectively. Mr. Brocklehurst added:

I hope that sigh is from the heart , and that you repent of ever having been the occasion of discomfort to your excellent benefactress .

Benefactress ! Benefactress ! said Jane inwardly : they all call Mrs. Reed my benefactress ; if so, a benefactress is a disagreeable thing.

It goes without saying that the word ‘ benefactress ‘ has a totally different meaning depending on the speaker; used by Mr. Brocklehurst, its sense has to please Mrs. Reed’s point of view and feelings whereas uttered by Jane it expresses the root of all her sadness and despair.

Jane’s interrogator continues :

Do you say your prayers night and morning?

Yes, sir.

Do you read your bible ?

Sometimes .

With pleasure ? Are you fond of it ?

I like revelations and the book of Daniel , and Genesis and Samuel , and a little bit of Exodus , and some parts of Kings and Chronicles , and Job and Jonah .

And the Psalms ? I hope you like them .

No , sir .

No ? oh , shocking ! I have a little boy , younger than you , who knows six psalms by heart ; and when you ask him which he would rather have , a gingerbread- nut to eat or a verse of a Psalm to learn , he says : Oh ! the verse of a Psalm ! Angels sing Psalms ; says he , I wish to be a little angel here below ; he then gets two nuts in recompense for his infant piety . (Brontë, 2002, p.32)

When denying the Psalms Jane is demonstrating her sincerity and her honesty . There is no such recompense for her whether she likes or not the Psalms. However, for Mr. Brocklehurst’s son, his reaction to this religious kind of literature is hypocritical; he keeps telling his father about his preference for Psalms in order to get twice his favourite nuts. His speech is the opposite of what he thinks i.e. he does not mean what he says. Here we are reminded of the typical situation described by Carroll (2012) where Alice finds

herself in her wonderland (See the appendix). His father is probably aware of this crafty language; however, he tries to hide his feelings since his purpose is to spoil his son. Using his children as the best and most pious while Jane serves as an illustration for what is bad and forbidden, this language reflects his selfishness and ‘wicked heart’ to use his own expression qualifying Jane. In fact he addresses her with this phrase when she gives her own opinion concerning Psalms: Jane: Psalms are not interesting.

Mr Brocklehurst: That proves you have a wicked heart ; and you must pray to God to change it : to give you a new and clean one to take away your heart of stone and give you one of flesh.

The poor girl is in “an asymmetrical situation where anything” she says “can literally be held against her” (Labov, p.185). Yet, she has learnt a number of devices to use in such situations just in order to defend herself since she is sure nobody will do it for her.

One may observe the intonation patterns which Jane uses for the first time with Mr. Brocklehurst when she is asked a question. The answer is obvious to that man but totally different for that little girl. Although the reader has just a printed paper in front of him or her, s/he is quite aware of these intonations since either the narrator or the writer are omnipresent to clarify and add the necessary details to the quality of the production of speech. This is done in such a way that it helps to create the actual situation like in a film adaptation. This is what we really feel when we read a piece of writing: it can never be inanimate, for it appears in our mind as if it were performed.

Furthermore, many scholars believe that the disordered, disjointed movement of the prose through colons, semi-colons and simple sentences, is perhaps one of the most immediately striking things about *Jane Eyre*, expressing the disorder of its heroine’s emotions. These sociolinguistic factors control speech even in a non-verbal behaviour occurring in a relatively favourable context for adult-child interaction . Hence, Jane’s answer is quick , ingenious , and decisive . One may note the speed and the precision of Jane’s mental operations. She does not wonder, or insert meaningless verbiage. It is often said that children find it difficult to deal with hypothetical and abstract questions, but in this case, Jane manages to exercise her wit and logic on the most improbable and problematic matters as in her ‘interview with Mr. Brocklehurst.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has tried to highlight a certain kind of verbal behaviour, some speech acts and their meaning: a child's speech produced by Jane as a reply to an adult's questions and interrogations uttered by Mr. Brocklehurst. Moreover, the concentration is on the most acute scenes during Jane's childhood. We can feel Jane's suffering when she alternatively speaks to defend herself, then remains silent and suffers. Consequently, we witness her vulnerability in front of what the society calls 'a benefactor' (Mrs. Reed) or 'a man of religion' (Mr. Brocklehurst).

No one can read this novel without being convinced that s/he is in the presence of a skilled speaker with great 'verbal presence of mind,' who can use the English language expertly for many purposes. When Jane is finally overthrown by the situation which obliges her to leave her aunt's home to go to the charity house, her behaviour and her idiolect change completely; the monosyllabic speaker who has nothing to say about anything and cannot remember what she did yesterday has disappeared. Instead, we have a girl who has so much to say that she keeps interrupting Mrs Reed. In addition she seems to have no difficulty in using the English language and to produce meaningful speech acts she had never uttered before.

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Appendix

'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least--at least I mean what I say--that's the same thing, you know.'

'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is

the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'

'You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, 'that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as

'I get what I like!'

'You might just as well say,' added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, 'that'

'I breathe when I sleep" is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe'.

'It is the same thing with you,' said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party

sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn't much. The Hatter was the first to break the silence.

(Lewis Carroll, 2012, p.98)