

A Pragmatic Study of Dialogues in *Flipped* in Light of Speech Act Theory

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Flipped is a book written by American author Wendelin Van Draanen. It is a novel about young teenagers and was adapted into the famous film of the same name in 2010. The thesis employs speech acts, as pioneered by John Austin and further developed by John Searle, to investigate the influence of dialogues on characterization and plot development in *Flipped*. By exploring the theory of speech acts presented in dialogues between characters, the author deciphers the underlying intentions embodied in the dialogues and demonstrates the importance of the use of speech acts in dialogues in revealing the characters, driving the development of the plot and expressing the theme of the text.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech act theory, *Flipped*, dialogue, literary effect

Introduction

An Introduction to Wendelin Van Draanen

Draanen is a writer of children's and young-adult fiction in America. Since publishing her first book in 1997, her work has been nominated for State Award Master Lists. She published *How I Survived Being a Girl* in 1997 and alleviated the financial pressure by writing. The greatest reward of writing for Draanen is good feedback from her readers. She hopes that readers will be able to grasp the true meaning of life by reading her works. She always tells readers to stand firm in their dreams and believe that they have the ability to achieve them.

Summary of *Flipped*

Flipped is a contemporary young adult novel written by Wendelin Van Draanen. Juli Baker and Bryce Loski are the main characters of this novel, and they are neighbors. This novel presents their different perspectives on the same set of events. The central plot line follows the subtle shift in their feelings toward each other. The book was originally published in 2001, and won the California Young Reader Medal, the Rebecca Caudill Young Readers' Book Award in Illinois, and many other honors. The 2010 film adaptation was directed by Rob Reiner.

Literature Review

In recent years, some studies on *Flipped* have been conducted by some researchers and critics in China from several perspectives. At present, there are three main aspects of domestic research. First, some scholars focus on the characters in the novel. They note that the female characters in the novel are independent and distinctly portrayed. Some scholars also claim that Juli represents a new era of American women because she is brave, independent, self-respecting and self-loving. Second, some put great emphasis on rhetorical techniques in fiction. Some believe that in the novel *Flipped*, the existence of the sycamore tree cannot be ignored. The tree runs through the entire novel, plays an important role, contains rich symbolic meaning, sets off the ups and downs of the protagonist's emotions, and creates a lasting atmosphere. Third, other scholars investigate the novel's broader societal value and significance. They contend that *Flipped* has the power to elevate people's outlook on life.

In the application of pragmatics to literature, Speech Act Theory is a major framework. Scholars at home and abroad employ it to examine social phenomena and conduct interdisciplinary research.

Domestic scholars mostly use speech act theory to conduct some practical social research. Some scholars have studied the effectiveness of public service advertisements, and analyzed the impact of speech act theory on people's behavior and intentions. Other scholars have used this theory to study pedagogy. A small number of scholars have used the theory to analyze the compilation of archives and textbooks. Beyond these domains, some foreign scholars explore religion and physics in light of speech act theory.

Although speech act theory has been widely applied to numerous literary works and social phenomena, the novel *Flipped* has not yet been examined from this perspective. Therefore, this study analyzes the novel's dialogues to explore their role in character development and plot progression.

Theoretical Framework

A Survey of Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory, initiated by John Austin and developed by John Searle, examines how language is used to perform actions. Austin challenged the logical positivist view that sentences must be verifiable to be meaningful, introducing the concept of "performatives." Building on this foundation, Searle later classified illocutionary acts into five categories and introduced the notion of indirect speech acts.

Austin's Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory is an important aspect of pragmatics. It was first proposed by J.L. Austin (1962) in his work entitled *How to Do Things with Words*.

Austin initially proposed a distinction between performatives and constatives. A performative is a sentence used to perform an action without explaining or implying anything. For example, "I name this dog Elizabeth" and "I promise to finish this work in time" are performatives. In contrast, constatives mean utterances which roughly serve to state a fact. For example, "I go to the park every Sunday" and "I teach English".

Austin further developed this theory by introducing three components of a speech act: the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act is the act of creating sounds or words, and sentences that convey literal meaning through syntax, vocabulary and speech; an illocutionary act is what is said is what

is done; a perlocutionary act is what is done through what is said and is the result of what is said (Dai & He, 2018).

Following this tripartite distinction, Austin delved deeper into the illocutionary act. He categorized the general functions of speech acts into five types based on their illocutionary force: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, expositives, and behabitives (Lu, 2016). Searle later refined the classification of illocutionary acts.

Searle's Development of Speech Act Theory

Searle further refined speech act theory by classifying illocutionary acts into five major categories: declaration, representatives, expressives, directives, and commissives (Odeh et al., 2021).

Declaratives change reality through utterance. For instance, "I declare the meeting open or I sentence you to death." Representatives commit the speaker to the truth of proposition. For example: "I bought a book yesterday." Expressives express the speaker's psychological state. For example: "I am sorry to interrupt you." Directives are intended to get the hearer to do something. For example: "Come to pick me up at 7:00 pm." Commissives commit the speaker to a future action. For example: "I promise to love you forever."

Building on this taxonomy, Searle also made a crucial distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. A direct speech act has a straightforward relationship between sentence structure and function, while an indirect speech act conveys meaning through a different structural form, allowing the speaker to imply more than what is literally said (Lu, 2010). For instance, "Can you pass the salt?" is structurally a question but functionally a directive.

Analysis of Characters in Light of Speech Acts

Austin's Speech Act Theory and Characters in *Flipped*

When speaking, a speaker may be executing three speech acts at the same time, according to Austin's model of speech acts: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. The pragmatic analysis of *Flipped* from the perspective of Austin's speech act theory can help readers find out the characters' traits and achieve a certain literary effect.

Example (1)

"Oh. Well, how about this one? We should push it together!" (Draanen, 2018, p. 2)

"No, no, no! Why don't you run along home? Your mother's probably wondering where you are." (Draanen, 2018, p. 2)

The first exchange between Juli and Steven is somewhat awkward. Eager to be helpful, Juli offers to carry a box for her new neighbor, unaware of his aversion to her dirty shoes. Her utterance constitutes a locutionary act. Its illocutionary force is that of an offer, while its intended perlocutionary effect, Steven's acceptance, fails to materialize. Steven's rejection, in turn, functions as an illocutionary act of refusal, driven by his concern that she might damage his belongings.

From the above analysis, we can see that Juil is a little girl who is eager to help others. Steven, on the other hand, is an adult, but the way he speaks and acts is somewhat impolite or even rude.

Searle's Speech Act Theory and Characters in *Flipped*

According to Searle, speech acts are broadly categorized into five categories, with specific acts in each category having the same speech pattern but varying in intensity. Indirect speech acts can be effectively utilized in fictional dialogues, which play an important role in character development. This means that the dialogue between the characters not only drives the plot, but also reflects the personalities of the characters in the story. Searle's taxonomy is applied to analyze the dialogue in order to study the characterization of Mr. Baker, Mrs. Loski, Steven, and Bryce.

Example (2)

"I want the spirit of that tree to be with you always. I want you to remember how you felt when you were up there."
(Draanen, 2018, p. 43)

"Don't cry, Julianna. I want it to help you, not hurt you." (Draanen, 2018, p. 43)

"The illocutionary point of expressives is to express the psychological state specified in the utterance" (Dai & He, 2018). In this context, Mr. Baker performs an expressive illocutionary act to convey his concern, comfort, and encouragement to his grieving daughter. Juli's beloved sycamore tree has been cut down, and she will never see such a magnificent sight again. She is very sad and has been grieving for two whole weeks. Mr. Baker is very distressed about his daughter and paints a picture of a sycamore tree for his daughter. His words, such as "I want it to help you, not hurt you," directly fulfill the expressive function of outlining his psychological state of care and his desire to alleviate her pain. He hopes his daughter comes out of the low mood. Mr. Baker is a person with admirable qualities, and he always respects Juli's ideas and protects her pure and nice views of the world. He is a wise man who loves his daughter deeply and guides her to grow up happily.

Plot Analysis in Light of Speech Acts

Austin's Speech Act Theory and Plots in *Flipped*

In the first half of the novel, Juli climbs a tall sycamore tree, where she learns that it is significant to see things holistically. Furthermore, in her time with Bryce, she becomes more determined to treat people from a holistic perspective as well, setting the stage for the change in her attitude toward Bryce that follows. The chat with Bryce's mom and Bryce regarding the eggs causes his handling of the eggs into failure, which paves the way for the breakdown of Juli and Bryce's relationship below. Bryce is full of prejudice against Juli, but Grandpa is able to look at Juli objectively. After Grandpa speaks directly about Bryce's prejudice, he prompts Bryce to seriously reflect on himself. Therefore, the following examples will use Austin's speech act theory to analyze these three key episodes and their effect.

Example (3)

"Remember? You and Dad spent an hour watching them hatch at last year's science fair?" (Draanen, 2018, p. 49)

"Well, how do we know there're not...chicks inside these eggs?" (Draanen, 2018, p. 49)

Hens begin laying eggs and Juli believes it is necessary to give Bryce some eggs. Bryce's mother is puzzled by the basket of eggs and asks Bryce what happened. What Mrs. Loski said is a locutionary act as it conveys a literal question about the origin and nature of the eggs. In addition, the sentence is an illocutionary

act because it reflects the real feeling of Bryce's mother: unless she knows that there are no chicks in the eggs, she does not dare to eat them. The perlocutionary effect of Mrs. Loski's words is immediate and significant. It causes Bryce and his family to question the safety and nature of the eggs, leading to their discussion, Bryce's disgust at the coop, and ultimately, his decision to throw the eggs away. Thus, this single illocutionary act sets in motion a chain of events that drives a wedge between Bryce and Juli, directly driving the deterioration of their relationship and the development of the storyline.

Searle's Speech Act Theory and Plots in *Flipped*

The conflict between Juli and Bryce culminates at the end of the novel, when Juli hears Bryce insulting her uncle and she becomes completely disappointed with Bryce, and she starts to give up her liking for Bryce. On the other hand, Bryce's grandfather continues to inspire Bryce, making Bryce realize that Juli is an extraordinary friend. This propels the development of the episode in which Bryce confronts his feelings for Juli. The following section will analyze the dialogues and their roles in these two key plots using Searle's speech act theory.

Example (4)

"Some of us get dipped in flat, some in satin, some in gloss...But every once in a while you find someone who's iridescent, and when you do, nothing will ever compare." (Draanen, 2018, p. 96)

"It was nice walking with you, Bryce. I enjoyed myself very much." (Draanen, 2018, p. 96)

"Me too." (Draanen, 2018, p. 96)

Disgusted by Bryce's treatment of her untidy yard, Juli herself started neatening the yard. Grandpa admires Juli's behavior and perseverance and offers to go help Juli with the lawn. At dinner, Grandpa mentions the real situation of Juli's family—their house is rented, and they are not obligated to mow the lawn in the first place, and that Juli has an uncle who is mentally handicapped, and they have to spend a lot of money on his medical care. Hearing that, Mr. Loski, instead of sympathizing with Juli, says a lot of rude words to belittle Juli's family, and he manages to anger everyone. To alleviate the awkwardness, Bryce's grandfather, Chet, invites him out for a walk.

Grandpa is performing an illocutionary act of representative in this discussion, delivering a message that he believes. At the same time, the utterance also implies that Bryce should learn to discern between right and wrong and cherish the iridescent person.

After this conversation, the relationship between Grandpa and Bryce is eased. Bryce begins to think about what would happen if he lived Juli's life. The meaningful conversation affects Bryce's growth and maturity and advances the plot of the novel: Bryce's family begins to invite Juli's family to dinner and Bryce begins to consider his feelings for Julianna seriously.

Conclusion

Major Findings

The study of this paper mainly draws conclusions in two aspects. Firstly, just like conversations in everyday life, dialogues in literature sometimes do not directly show the real purpose of the speaker. It is then up to the listener to analyze the speaker's real meaning in the light of the particular context. Secondly, pragmatics can be used to study literary works and generate certain literary effects. Speech act theory can help

readers to better understand the major themes, features of characters and plots of *Flipped*. In short, analyzing literary works underpinned by linguistic theories is very helpful for us to understand literary works.

Limitations of the Thesis

Though a detailed analysis of dialogues selected from *Flipped* in light of speech act theory has been achieved, there are some limitations. Firstly, due to limited vocabulary, the author neglects the diversity of words used in the paper when organizing the language. Secondly, due to the author's limited knowledge base and weak analytical skills, only the most typical dialogues from *Flipped* were selected for in-depth analysis. Thirdly, speech act theory has gone through a long stage of development. Due to the limited space in this paper, the author has chosen to analyze this novel only in terms of the better-known speech act theories. Therefore, this paper is not the most comprehensive theoretical analysis of this novel.

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