

A Study of Irony in *The Merchant of Venice* from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

HU Xiao-min, CHEN Zheng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The Merchant of Venice is one of the four classic comedies of Shakespeare. In this work, the author skillfully depicts the characters in the novel with a sharp irony, making the drama plot interlocking. Based on the Austin-Searle's Speech Act Theory, this paper makes a macro and micro analysis of the ironic speech act in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, mainly from the literal irony, situational irony, dramatic irony three aspects of the macro-analysis of speech acts as well as the elaboration, directive, commitment, expressive irony for the micro-analysis.

Keywords: speech act theory, irony, *The Merchant of Venice*

Introduction

The Merchant of Venice is a distinguished and best-known comedy of Shakespeare. The article tells a story of a young businessman Antonio Bassanio, who borrowed some money to prepare for the wedding of his noble friend from Shylock, an unscrupulous creditor. But he didn't return the money on time. Just as he decided to cut a pound of flesh to pay off his debt, his friend's wife, Portia, helped him out with her ingenuity. The work reflected Shakespeare's views on the problems of money, religion and law in bourgeois society. Shakespeare applied different types of irony deftly in the text, making the characters more vivid and leaving a deep impression on readers. Yu (2021) made an image analysis of the hero Shylock, and Wei (2022) discussed the position of the performance of the works and the early drama movement. Wang & Zeng (2021) explored the cross-cultural communication significance of the work. Zhu & Liu (2021) conducted a critical study of theatre networks. However, very few people have studied the ironic discourse in *The Merchant of Venice* under the point of Speech Act Theory.

Irony is a familiar language phenomenon whether in the novel or the reality conversation and it has a significant effect on culture. Therefore, the significance of this study is to lead readers think deeply and grasp the soul and gist of the work by irony. Secondly, it aims to search for the irony speech in act in this work to illustrate how it represents the ingenuity of work and how the irony is used to depict the characters vividly. Thirdly, the

HU Xiao-min, Master of Arts, College of Foreign Language Studies, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Research field: Foreign linguistics and applied linguistics.

CHEN Zheng, Associate Professor, College of Foreign Language Studies, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Research field: Foreign linguistics and applied linguistics

feasibility of Speech Act Theory can be affirmed. Therefore, the language of *The Merchant of Venice* should be paid more attention to analysis systematically.

Theoretical Background

Speech Act Theory and Irony

John Austin (1962) put forward the speech act theory. He pointed out that language is not just used to state, describe and illustrate. A certain kind of behavior can be performed by language. That is, “to say or do something.” Besides, he divided the act theory into three categories, they are locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Basing on the study of speech act theory, Searle proposed the direct speech act and indirect speech act. In the indirect speech act, what the speaker really want to convey is not literal meaning. In other words, the implementation of an illocutionary force is realized indirectly through the implementation of another indirect speech act. So irony is a special kind of indirect speech act. The indirect speech act is sorted by Searle into five classes: imperative, exposition, commitment, expression and declaration. Searle and Haverkate (1990) made further explanation and divided the micro ironic speech acts into four categories, namely, assertive irony, directive irony, commissive irony and expressive irony.

According to the definition of Grice, irony belongs to a kind of implicature which is triggered when the Quality Maxim is violated, making the hearer to realize that the utterance’s intended meaning rather than the literal meaning and then to search for alternative interpretation (Grice, 1975). Dynel (2018) discusses that irony has two intrinsic characteristics, one is that the utterances of irony represent overt untruthfulness and another feature is that the speaker display an implicature of evaluation. Van Dijk classified the macro and micro irony speech act in literary works, arguing that the former determines the whole discourse and situation and the latter is executed by communication of characters in the works. Therefore, the paper discusses the situational and dramatic irony for micro and assertive, directive, commissive and expressive irony for micro.

The Macro Irony Speech Act in *The Merchant of Venice*

The Situational Irony

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare seldom attacks or criticizes certain phenomenon directly, but uses the verbal irony to display. In the play, the author exerts the situational irony in order to arrange the climax of the plot, linking the fate of characteristics and their personalities so that the value of drama can be enhanced. At the beginning, Shylock, a money slave and suffered insult by Antonio, planned to avenge. Thus when Antonio decided to borrow money from money slave Shylock, he promised to cut a piece of meat as the remuneration. Shylock put him into the prison and refused his request to forgive that he couldn’t return the money. Even if the money was three times the amount borrowed, the duke’s entreaties and the voices of persuasion, Shylock still chose to cut off Antonio’s meat. Nothing can wave Shylock’s determination and desire for revenge. He is so confident as if his meat is in the cards. But the end of the play, his avenge plan was not succeed instead he had to devote his property and belief. It seems that it is Shylock’s duty to punish Antonio and get what he should have. The ending should have been absolutely sure, but Shakespeare reversed the plot unexpectedly and rearranged the narrative pattern of original, changed the expectation of audience. This situational irony makes the audience

reshape their views and enhance the comprehension of the center idea of the play. Shakespeare also subtly conveyed his intention and represented his humanism.

The Dramatic Irony

The dramatic irony of this play is a macro irony based on the whole work. It is not aimed at a character or certain utterance, but combined with the hearer and on the basis of reader, on their thoughts and feelings to judge. In the play, Shylock is a very stingy miser who stands for the bourgeoisie, while Antonio is the emerging bourgeoisie exploited by the usury bourgeoisie. The squeezing between the two classes is the irony of cutting meat. In the court, Antonio asked the duke to give the half of the property of Shylock to keep. And another half is passed to Jessica's husband when Shylock is passed away. But actually, Antonio was going to developing his business by using Shylock's fortune, he would give Lorenzo money after he made it so that he can get a good reputation for helping friends. It can be seen that Antonio who thinks himself is brighter than Shylock knows nothing about his classes and attribute. However, he not only abused Shylock, but insulted the whole exploiting class including himself.

The Micro Irony Speech Act in *The Merchant of Venice*

The representation of micro irony speech act is conversation between people, that is communication. Conversation is the main part in the play in order to develop the plot and reveal the theme. Some examples are selected from the text *The Merchant of Venice* to make an analysis with the micro irony speech act.

Assertive Irony

Searle pointed that assertive speech act refers to the attitude for something and making the true of false for expressed propositional content. That is to say, what the speaker describes is the truth what he believes. With this premise, the statement is ironic if the speaker still makes a statement even if he doesn't believe that the proposition is correct. It aims to make the hearer accept his implication. Generally, the irony is used to criticize with praise or to give praise by criticize. What is pointed out is that most of the irony speech act is the assertive irony.

Example (1)

ANTONIO: Well, Shylock, shall we be beholding to you?

SHYLOCK: "Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last; You spurn'd me such a day; another time you call'd me dog; and for these courtesies I'll lend you thus much money?"

(Act 1, Scene 3. Venice. A public place.)

Example (2)

SHYLOCK: I would be friends with you, and have your love, forget the shames that you have stain'd me with, supply your present wants, and take no doit Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me: This is kind I offer.

BASSANIO: This were kindness.

For Example (1), the assertive irony is represented in the reply of Shylock. According to Searle's inquiry condition, the sincerity principle requires that Antonio wishes to obtain some information and the Shylock should respond in a more enthusiastic and concise manner. However, what Shylock said violates the principle and lack sincerity. Therefore the tone of irony in his utterance was achieved. The real intention of Shylock is to state his

dislike and disdain feelings for Antonio. Especially Shylock used the word courtesies to deepen the irony, describing Antonio's insult as the courtesies to express his unwilling and an indictment of his conduct. For Example (2), the reply of Bassanio is assertive irony, Shylock said he wanted to make friends with Antonio out of his own kindness, while Bassanio's repeated his kindness in his reply whose implication is Shylock is cruel who required a pound of meat of Antonio as the repayment and he used the praise to criticize Shylock.

Directive Irony

In the directive irony, the purpose of the illocutionary act that is made by speaker is to urge the hearer to do something. In the directive irony, what is expressed by the speaker is the implied meaning which is different from the literal meaning. At the same time, the proposition proposed by speaker is unreasonable and it is not accordance with the special context and the meaning, letting the hearer realize that utterance is ironic. And there are two preconditions should be considered (Haverkate, 1990), one is reasonableness and another is obviousness. Reasonableness means that speaker can conduct the right directive behavior. The obviousness refers to that the obviously unessential demands are proposed by the speaker and wants listener to understand and achieve them.

Example (3)

POTRIA: The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh:' Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh; But, in the cutting it, if you dost shed one drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate unto the stat of Venice.

SHYLOCK: Is that the law? I take this offer; then; pay the bond thrice and let the Christian go.

(Act 4, Scene 1, Venice. A court of justice.)

In Act Four, Potria agreed with Shylock that he can cut a lump of meat. Clearly, what Potria said belongs to the directive irony. Potria was going to help Bassanio's friend, but she refused to help them directly. On the surface, Potria asked Shylock to do what he wanted to, but the implicit criticism is involved in her utterance. Because in directives, the directive behavior should be reasonable. Obviously, the behavior put forward by Potria is not reasonable. Her real intention was to satirized Shylock's determination and cruelty to Antonio's flesh. The utterance seems like to urge him to do, yet it is a warning for Shylock that he will violate the law of Venice by doing that. Hearing this, Shylock realized the implied meaning of Potria and decided not to cut the flesh of Antonio. Potria used the directive irony to criticize the disgraceful behavior of Shylock. On the other hand, Potria's utterance showed her cleverness and calmness.

Commissive Irony

Commissive refers to the illocutionary acts which aim at making the speaker promise some future behavior (Xiong & He, 2002). Commissives are different from directives. The former asks speaker to implement the performance which has been promised and the directives require the hearer to do the act. There is a prerequisite for commissive that speaker has the ability to fulfil the commitments. The commissive irony comes into being when the speaker is not willing to perform the obligation and the hearer has doubts about the ability of speaker. Acceptability is another prerequisite which means that whether the speaker or hearer realize that the promised performance is beneficial for the speaker and thus the listener can accept the commitment.

Example (4)

SHYLOCK: In such a place, such sum or sums as are express'd in the condition, let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me.

ANTONIO: Content, i'faith: I'll seal to such a bond and say there is much kindness in the Jew.

(Act 1, Scene 3. Venice. A public place.)

The above dialogue happened when Shylock agreed to lend Antonio money. Obviously, Antonio's reply is a commissive irony, Antonio had to borrow money from Shylock and make a commitment that he will say to others that the Jew is kind. However, in fact, Antonio is a Christian who disdains and hates the Jew deeply in the heart. Apparently, Shylock knew the deal he had promised is not in accord with the profit of Antonio and gives the bad impact to him. Shylock also understood that Antonio does not expect he will do that according to what he said, while Shylock still said it and Antonio accepted it. In this sentence, Shylock violated the acceptability and produced irony. Thus the reply is lack of sincerity and it is a typical commissive irony, his real expression is that the Jew is so inhuman and brutal that they wanted a part of human body to please themselves. The commissive irony not only criticize Shylock's immoral act, but reveals the racial and religious discrimination against Jews by Christians.

Expressive Irony

Searle (1979) defined that the illocutionary meaning of expressive speech act is to show a psychological state of the event stipulated by the propositional content with the condition of sincerity. The necessary requisite of expressive is that it must be true about the propositional content expressed by speaker. In the expressive irony, the speaker shows the feeling or attitude to the hearer, and it is incongruity between the real meaning and the proposition, thus ironic implication achieves. What's more, the speaker needs to have a specific background information about the thing that makes people pleasure and unhappy. In this case, the key for judging expressive irony is whether the hearer can infer from the context whether the speaker is using sarcasm.

Example (5)

SHYLOCK: A pound of man's flesh taken from a man is not estimable, profitable neither, as fesh of muttons. I say; to buy his favor, I extended this friendship: if he will take it, so; if not, adieu; and, for my love, I pray you wrong me not.

ANTONIO: Hiethee, gentle Jew!

(Act 1, Scene 3. Venice. A public place.)

Example (6)

PORTIA: It must not be; there is no power in Venice can alter a decree established; twill be recorded for a precedent, and many an error by the same example will rush into the state: it cannot be.

SHYLOCK: A Daniel come to judgement! Yea, a Daniel! A wise young judge, how I do honor thee!

PORTIA: Shylock hath refused it in the open court: He shall have merely justice and his bond.

GRATIANO: A Daniel, still say I, a second Daniel! I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word.

(Act 4, Scene 1. Venice. A court of justice.)

In the Example (5), "Gentle Jew" is an expressive irony reflected in Antonio's answer. The utterance was intended to criticize Shylock's scandalous behavior. On this occasion, Antonio had to accept Shylock's condition and he was so powerless that he can't do anything except for agreeing with Shylock's plan. Thus Antonio had to say "Gentle Jew"! The utterance is a critique of Shylock's cruelty and it implies a sense of helplessness of Antonio. It also forms a great contrast with Shylock going bankrupt and Antonio inheriting his property, through

which Shakespeare represented deep contradiction between the commercial bourgeoisie and the usurer in the early stage of capitalism. And in the case 6, the conversation happened among four people, when Portia mentioned some evidence than is beneficial for Shylock, Shylock said “Daniel” excitedly, while she quickly moved to another evidence which makes Shylock throw his entire family’s savings. The utterance makes Gratiano alive and copy the word “A Daniel”. It is an expressing irony to satire Shylock’s venality and his stony heart. At the same time, Portia represents a learned carefully, has the tutelage of a new era of woman, shining the dawn of the female.

Conclusion

As Shakespeare’s masterpiece, *The Merchant of Venice*’s main feature is irony. Through the above detailed research and analysis, the application of the irony speech act theory in *The Merchant of Venice* has an crucial effect on understanding the wonderful plot and shaping the classic characters. Shakespeare expressed the conflicts between the character detailedly by using the irony, pushing the development of plot of the play. The paper mainly discusses irony in the play from the macro and micro ironic speech acts. It indicates that irony is a category of indirect speech act. The reader can be more scientific and systematic for the play and irony from a new angle. Thus, it is a better appreciation to other literary works which are featured irony. The paper proved the feasibility of combining the Speech Act theory with the literary works. The paper also provides an effective method to interpret and explain irony. With the direction of Speech Act Theory of Austin-Searle, irony can be interpreted powerfully. The paper has its own limitations. The limitation of this paper is lack of empirical support, and it may involve the author’s subjectiveness. The author hopes that the further study can be analyzed from empirical research making the study more objectivity.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dijk, A. T. (1976). *Pragmatics of language and literature*. Amsterdam; Oxford: North-Holland; New York: American Elsevier, North-Holland Publishing Company.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics*. New York: Academic Press.
- Haverkate, H. (1990). A speech act analysis of irony. *Journal of Pragmatics*.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (2001). *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- 王巨锋 & 曾衍文. (2021). 跨文化传播视域下中国戏曲对外国戏剧的改编——以粤剧《豪门千金》为例. *四川戏剧*, (03), 33-37.
- 魏策策. (2021). 《威尼斯商人》演出的三重立场与早期戏剧运动. *社会科学战线*, (05), 180-187.
- 余靓. (2021). 莎士比亚戏剧《威尼斯商人》中夏洛克形象的再思考. *四川戏剧*, (04), 155-158.
- 朱安博 & 刘畅. (2021). 莎士比亚戏剧网络翻译批评研究. *外语研究*, (01), 76-84.