

# *An Analysis of Conversation from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory: Taking Frozen as an Example*

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**Abstract:** Since *Frozen* was on show, it has not only attracted children, but also gained high attention in the research domain. Some scholars have focused on the ideology reflected in *Frozen*, some have studied the translation of *Frozen*. With scholars being more and more interested in pragmatics, they started to combine pragmatics with literature. In this thesis, conversations in *Frozen* will be analyzed in terms of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, broadening the scope of these theories and confirming the usefulness of speech act theory in the study of film text and allowing the public to better understand the moral and essence of *Frozen*.

## 1. Introduction

Austin, a prominent British philosopher of ordinary language, made significant contributions to the field of language, particularly with his speech act theory. His book *How to Do Things with Words*<sup>[1]</sup> marked the establishment of this theory, which has gained recognition in pragmatics and received extensive research. Searle, Austin's student, further developed and supplemented the speech act theory in his book *Speech Acts*<sup>[2]</sup>. In China, linguists and scholars have also studied and made significant findings on this theory.

This thesis aims to apply speech act theory to the analysis of film texts, demonstrating that it can be applied not only in literature but also in films, with a solid theoretical foundation. By employing conversational analysis, a deeper understanding of the psychology and emotions of the characters can be gained. This study offers a fresh perspective for comprehending and appreciating films, particularly children's films. It explores the important role of cartoons in promoting children's language acquisition, personal development, and expression of emotions.

## 2. Literature Review

Speech Act Theory has gained prominence in pragmatics and exerted significant influence since its introduction by Austin. Over time, Speech Act Theory has been refined and expanded upon by scholars like Searle, becoming increasingly valuable and widely applied.

### 2.1. Austin's Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory originated in philosophy, as early analytical philosophers believed that

linguistic misunderstandings and improper language use led to philosophical problems. Austin argued that disagreements among philosophers stemmed from a failure to understand terminology, resulting in irregular language use when discussing philosophical issues. To address this, Austin proposed the phenomenology of language, which examined language use in daily life, contextual factors, and differences in language use. Austin's approach emphasized cultivating awareness of correct language use and effectively solved some philosophical problems, laying the foundation for speech act theory

### 2.1.1. Performatives and Constatives

Austin distinguished between performatives and constatives. Constatives describe states or present facts, making them evaluable as true or false<sup>[1]</sup>. Performatives, on the other hand, do not describe but perform actions. Austin focused on performatives, which involve utterances intended to do something rather than state something. Verbs used in performatives, such as “name”, “apologize”, and “promise”, emphasize the action performed through speech.

### 2.1.2. Three-way Division of Speech Act Theory

Austin further developed a three-way division of Speech Act Theory, as he realized that not all constatives solely describe and some also perform actions. This division posits that when people utter a sentence, they simultaneously perform locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts<sup>[1]</sup>. Locutionary acts express literal meanings through words, phrases, and sentences; illocutionary acts express the speaker's intentions through literal meaning; and perlocutionary acts refer to the outcomes produced by speech<sup>[3]</sup>. The third act is made by the listener. Austin's division still has a solid foundation of the speech act theory and plays an indispensable role in various researches on language.

## 2.2. Searle's Speech Act Theory

Based on Austin's theory, many linguists and scholars have been devoting themselves to the study of this theory among which the most influential being Searle's classification of illocutionary acts and his indirect speech act theory.

While Austin emphasized illocutionary acts, Searle refined the classification into five types: Assertives, Directives, Commissive, Expressives, and Declarations. Assertives describe states or state facts; Directives ask the listener to do something; Commissive commit the speaker to future actions; Expressives convey the speaker's attitudes; and Declarations change the status quo. Searle's classification has had the most influence and forms the basis for this thesis<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2.3. Relevant Studies

Since Austin's introduction of speech act theory in *How to Do Things with Words*<sup>[1]</sup>, it has gained significant attention and held a crucial position. Searle, Austin's student, further enriched the theory in *Speech Acts*<sup>[2]</sup> and *Expression and Meaning*<sup>[4]</sup>. Speech act theory has been increasingly applied in literary criticism, revealing character traits in literary works. Van Dijk<sup>[5]</sup> was the first scholar to combine pragmatics with literature, and first introduced the term literary pragmatics. Praat<sup>[6]</sup> argued that there was a need for a theory that could apply the way people express and communicate in their everyday lives to literary analysis. In the 1980s, literary pragmatics came to maturity and Hickey<sup>[7]</sup> affirmed the benefits of combining pragmatics with literature. Literature can be interpreted in terms of pragmatics as a form of language, because pragmatics is the study of language. Many researchers invoke speech act theory as a basis when studying conversations in real situations. Rossen-Knill<sup>[8]</sup>

suggested that the study of speech acts is important in the study of characterization in literature. As can be seen, speech act theory is of great research value and has been applied to many fields, such as literary studies and conversation analysis. It has gradually become a pillar theory of pragmatics.

### 3. Analysis of Frozen from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

#### 3.1. An Overview of *Frozen*

Frozen, a Disney Animation film, is a popular children's adaptation of Andersen's fairy tale. The story revolves around two princesses, Elsa and Anna, who live happily in the kingdom of Arendelle. However, Elsa possesses the power to control snow and ice, which becomes stronger as she grows older. Due to an accident caused by her powers, Elsa is forced to isolate herself, suppressing her abilities and distancing herself from others.

After their parents' death, Elsa becomes the queen of Arendelle. During her coronation, Anna expresses her desire to marry a prince she just met, but Elsa refuses. This leads to a quarrel where Elsa loses control and reveals her powers, resulting in her being seen as a monster. Heartbroken, Elsa flees to the mountains and creates her own ice kingdom. Anna, aided by Kristoff and his reindeer, embarks on a journey to find Elsa. Through the power of love, they reconcile and restore the kingdom.

#### 3.2. Locutionary Acts

According to Austin, locutionary acts are the meaningful sentences produced according to linguistic conventions. They can be judged as true or false and are classified as phonetic acts, phatic acts, and rhetic acts. Phonetic acts involve making noises, while phatic acts involve ordering those noises correctly according to language and grammar. Rhetic acts go beyond proper sentences and involve producing them with emotion and intention. The reference and sense are keys of locutionary act<sup>[1]</sup>.

Example 1:

*But she won't remember I have powers?*

This example is selected in a context that Elsa's power gets out of her hand and hurts Anna. In order to recover, Anna's memories about this power have to be removed. In this example, the locutionary act is the literal meaning of the sentence, where Elsa is questioning whether Anna will remember her powers.

Example 2:

*See you in two weeks.*

This sentence is produced by Elsa when the King and Queen are going out. The locutionary act in this example is the literal meaning of the sentence, expressing the speaker's intention to meet again in two weeks.

As is shown in these examples, what the speaker wants to convey is its literal meaning and that is the locutionary act.

#### 3.3. Illocutionary Acts

Illocutionary acts, on the other hand, convey the speaker's real purpose or intention. They go beyond the literal meaning of the sentences and rely on context and common knowledge between the speaker and the hearer. Searle classified illocutionary acts as Representatives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives and Declarations<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 3.3.1. Representatives

The purpose of the representatives is to commit the speaker to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition<sup>[4]</sup>.

Example 3:

*Oh, me sore eyes can't wait to see the Queen and the Princess. I bet they're absolutely lovely. I bet they are beautiful.*

According to Austin, "bet" is the verb and "they" refer to Elsa and Anna. In this example, the illocutionary act is the speaker committing themselves to the truth of the proposition that the Queen and the Princess are lovely.

Example 4:

*Really? I'm guessing you don't have much experience with heat.*

In this example, the illocutionary act is the speaker committing Kristoff to the truth of the proposition that Olaf doesn't have much experience with heat.

### 3.3.2. Directives

The illocutionary point of directives is attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something<sup>[4]</sup>. In our daily life, there are mainly two kinds of directives: one is fierce within the verbs are ordering, insisting and another is more moderate such as recommending, suggesting and so forth. The latter seems more polite than the former.

Example 5:

*I recommend we remove all magic, even memories of magic, to be safe.*

This sentence is chosen from the scene that the trolls are advising Elsa's parents to remove Anna's memory of Elsa's powers for safety. Desire is troll's psychological state. It desires to remove those memories. In the sentence, "recommend" is used as an act of recommendation, which is a directive act. Sometimes, imperative sentences without obvious verbs also appear in *Frozen* to be a directive.

Example 6:

*Stop talking!*

Example 7:

*Stop! Put us down!*

From the above examples, it can be seen that these imperative sentences are short and full of strength. Although they don't have obvious directive verbs, the same effect can be achieved through intonation as in sentences containing obvious directive verbs.

### 3.3.3. Commissives

The illocutionary point of commissives is to commit the speaker to some future course of action<sup>[4]</sup>.

Example 8:

*At least we got to say our marriage vows before she died in my arms.*

The sentence is said by Hans, who is not in love with Anna in his heart, but is using Anna's hand to ascend to the throne, so he does not attach importance to the vows made to each other. Thus the noun is used to weaken the degree. On the other hand, actually Anna and Hans have not taken vows of marriage. It is a lie. The noun is chosen to express the speech act because of Hans's guilty conscience or the purpose of weakening listener's feelings.

### 3.3.4. Expressives

The illocutionary point of expressives is to express the speaker's psychological state or his attitude with regard to the state of affairs specified in the proposition<sup>[4]</sup>.

Example 9:

*I'd like to formally apologize for hitting the Princess of Arendelle with my horse...*

When Anna learns that day is the coronation ceremony, she is so happy that she trips over a horse and falls into a wooden boat. The horse belongs to Prince Hans, who apologizes to Anna when he realizes that she is a princess. The proposition that Anna is tripped by Han's horse is presupposed. The performative verb "apologize" express illocutionary act and emphasize a change of mental state, not a change in the objective world. At the same time, it does not emphasize if the speaker account of whether the words expressed are in accordance with the objective world. "Apologize" expresses how Hans feels about.

### 3.3.5. Declarations

Declarations have the characteristics that the successful performance of an act of this class will bring about the correspondence between the proposition content and reality<sup>[4]</sup>.

Example 10:

*She's named you the Official Arendelle Ice Master and Deliverer.*

For the illocutionary act, this example is a declaration. True love has saved Anna's life, and Elsa and Anna are able to resolve previous conflicts. During the process, a man who is always with Anna and helps her is called Kristoff, an ice supplier. Once Arendelle is restored to normal life, he is appointed by the Queen to be the official ice master and supplier of Arendelle. This sentence uses the directive and this announcement is successfully completed. Kristoff becomes a supplier, as the Queen has the power of appointment.

## 3.4. Perlocutionary Acts

Finally, the perlocutionary act will be discussed. In order to understand the concept of "perlocutionary act" it is necessary to have a thorough comprehension of the concept of "illocutionary acts". This is because Austin's discussion of 'perlocutionary acts' is directly linked to his discussion of 'illocutionary acts'.

Perlocutionary acts can be understood as the effect or consequence of what people say, e.g. to persuade, convince, stop, etc<sup>[1]</sup>. For example, if someone says "It is a little cold in this room." and when the speaker says this, the listener closes the window or doors. Therefore, perlocutionary act can simply be explained as the act by which the listener is influenced in some way by the words of the speaker and achieve some effect. For example, by saying "Don't be worried, I'll pay for the educational expenses", the speaker is making a promise to pay for the educational expenses, thus making hearer let go of the psychological burden. Perlocutionary acts can be achieved through non-verbal means: for example, coercion can be achieved by waving a stick or pointing a gun. In this chapter, the perlocutionary acts in *Frozen* will be discussed.

Example 11:

*Do you want to build a snowman? It doesn't have to be a snowman.*

*Go away, Anna.*

In this scene, Anna is trying to connect with her sister Elsa, who has been isolated in her room. Anna's question, "Do you want to build a snowman?" is an illocutionary act, expressing her invitation and desire to play with Elsa. Elsa's response, "Go away, Anna," is a perlocutionary act. It is the effect of her words on Anna, conveying a strong rejection and commanding her to leave.

Elsa's words influence Anna's behavior and create a sense of distance between them.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Frozen* is a famous children's film. The author uses speech act theory to analyze conversation, offering audience a new perspective during the study of *Frozen*. It can also deepen the audience's comprehension of this film. This thesis intends to reach a conclusion that speech act theory can not only be applied in usual conversation and literary books, but also films like *Frozen*.

In recent years, many scholars have studied the translation skills applied in *Frozen*. However, this thesis analyses the conversation with speech act theory from a pragmatic perspective. Three acts of *Frozen* are analyzed: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. According to the study, it has found that *Frozen* has the highest proportion of representatives and directive speech, which facilitate the understanding of the film and enable the characteristic of the animated characters to be better presented through language.

Because of the limited abilities, there is in fact much room for improvement in this thesis. Firstly, there are a large number of conversations can be analyzed in the film, but it is impossible to analyze them all here. Therefore, only typical examples are selected. Secondly, although most people hold that speech act theory is effective and relatively authoritative in the analysis of conversation, it is important to notice that some conversations are relatively complex and may require not only speech act theory but also other pragmatic theories to analyze. Thirdly, the application of speech act theory in film is still immature and needs to be further explored. Here are some suggestions for further study.

At first, there are still many conversations in this film that deserve further analysis. Secondly, when analyzing the conversations, due attention should be paid to other factors, such as the cultural context and the characters' personalities. Thirdly, speech act theory can not only be applied to children's films, but other films watched by adults. Finally, in the process of analysis, speech act theory can be combined with other pragmatic theories. All in all, the application of these theories in the field of film needs to be further studied.

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