



## INTERPRETATIONS OF COMMISSIVE SPEECH ACTS IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE*

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### ABSTRACT

*Commissive speech acts have great potential to build the interpersonal bond between the interlocutors. The characters in Arthur Miller's play 'A View from the Bridge' (1955) often tend to promise, vow, pledge, guarantee, etc to maintain and sustain their interpersonal relations. When the characters 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. Commissive speech acts frequently occur in the play and play a major role in building the interpersonal bond of relations. The present paper aims to analyze the highly marked examples of commissive speech acts selected in 'A View from the Bridge' (1955) and provides a premeditated direction into the study of the social and historical outlook of the competitive American society and helps understand the play considering the contextual significance. The analysis of carefully categorized speech acts, against the backdrop of Searle's (1969) typology of speech acts, offers an effective and useful tool for understanding the play.*

**Keywords:** *Pragmatics, Dramatics Discourse, Speech Acts, Commissives, Context.*

### Introduction

In dramatic discourse, language plays a pivotal role in establishing the interpersonal and social relations of the characters. It is also true that one cannot understand the mindset of the human beings without knowing what goes on in their minds. Therefore, it is very necessary to understand language and its various functions. Pragmatics makes it possible to understand the complex human relation by applying its principles. Similarly, the relationships between interlocutors decide the interpretation of spoken and written discourse. Therefore, Searle's typology of speech acts in particular and underlying principles of pragmatics in general are certainly helpful to unveil the complexity of dramatic discourse and consequently human nature.

There are linguistic interactions galore in Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* (1955) which need to be interpreted in context of the family and social situations. Sometimes, the domestic issues are in conflict with the social issues in Miller's contemporary society. Subsequently, the utterances of characters are to be studied beyond the structural and grammatical boundaries to draw a valuable interpretation. This is possible via studying the principles of pragmatics. Hence, in the present study, the commissive speech acts are analyzed against the backdrop of Searle's typology of speech acts to fathom the depth of emotional and intentional aspects of characters.

The speech act analysis studies the effect of speaker's utterances on the listener. For the systematic analysis, J L. Austin (1962) has proposed a threefold distinction in his posthumously published book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). He defined three separate types of acts that are performed by an utterance within a conversation i.e. an act *of* saying something [locutionary act], an act *in* saying something [illocutionary act], and an act *by* saying something [perlocutionary act].

After the above three fold classification, he displayed a certain amount of anxiety when distinguishing different classes or families of speech act and admitted to being far from happy about the end result, believing that he may well have cross-classified some of them. He has been criticized for being somewhat unsystematic and unprincipled in his approach, but that is unfair considering his own disclaimer. The following is a brief summary of Austin's five classes of illocutionary acts:

1. **Expositives** fit into the course of an argument or conversation, how we are using words or, in general expository, like 'state', 'deny', 'remark', 'inform', 'ask', 'testify', 'accept', 'correct', 'deduce', 'interpret', 'illustrate', etc.
2. **Exercitives** make an assertion of influence or exercising of power. They are the verbs, which exercise. Examples of these are: 'order', 'warn', 'bequeath', 'advise', 'nominate', etc.
3. **Commissives** assume of an obligation or declaring of an intention. Examples of these are: 'undertake', 'promise', 'covenant', 'contract', 'swear', 'bet', 'plan', etc.
4. **Verdictives** exercise judgment. They are the verbs which are used to give verdicts like 'acquit', 'convict', 'rule', 'estimate', 'value', 'calculate', 'analyze', etc.
5. **Behabitives** verbs have the notions of reaction to other peoples' behavior and fortune. Examples of these are: 'apologize', 'thank', 'sympathize', 'resent', 'command', 'welcome', 'bless', etc. (Austin, 1962: 151-163)

## Searle's Theory of Speech Acts

J. R. Searle (1969) systematized and codified the five major types of speech acts that J. L. Austin (1962) had proposed in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Austin was much criticized for overlaps in the classification of speech acts by his contemporaries. Much of Searle's work (1969) embarks on, where Austin left off. In this matter, some argue that Searle is not altogether successful in systemization. Levinson (1983:238) says that his classification of speech acts is less clear than Austin's original. However, in his later work, few could find fault on his systematization of speech acts. He classified speech acts into five different categories: assertives, commissives, directives, declaratives, and expressives.

### A. Assertive Speech Acts

The illocutionary point of assertive speech acts is to present truthful representations of facts. Assertive speech acts have a word-to-world direction of fit. An utterance "*It is too dark.*" achieves success of fit, if it is really dark.

### B. Commissive Speech Acts

The illocutionary point of commissive speech acts is to assume commitments to carry out a certain course of action. Commissive speech acts have a world-to-word direction of fit. An utterance "*I will lend you hundred rupees.*" achieves success of fit, if the speaker lends the listener hundred rupees.

### C. Expressive Speech Acts

The illocutionary point of expressive speech acts is to communicate attitudes of their performers about certain facts. Expressive speech acts have a null or empty direction of fit. An utterance "*Congratulation!*" presupposes that the addressee has succeeded in doing something. However, the conveying of congratulations relates not to reality but to an attitude of the speaker.

### D. Directive Speech Acts

The illocutionary point of directive speech acts is to get someone else to carry out a certain course of action. Directive speech acts, too, have a world-to-word direction of fit. An utterance "*Sit down!*" achieves success of fit, if the listener really sits down

### E. Declarative Speech Acts

The illocutionary point of declarative speech acts is to bring a change in circumstances. An utterance "*I name this road Abdul Kalam Road.*" achieves success of fit, if the authorized person following appropriate procedure utters the above utters, the road will named as *Abdul Kalam Road*.

### Commissives in *A View from the Bridge*

The present paper attempts to analyze the significant commissive speech acts in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1955) because commissive speech acts are frequently used by most of the characters in the play. According to Mey (2001:120-121), commissives also act like directives and '*operate a change in the world by means of creating an obligation; however, this obligation is created in the speaker, not in the hearer, as in the case of the directives*'. In commissive speech acts, the speaker commits himself for some future course of action. This class includes promising, vowing, offering, refusing, threatening, volunteering, agreeing, guaranteeing, inviting, swearing, etc. These types of speech acts basically belong to the convivial category of Leech (1983) rather than the competitive category because the illocutionary goals of these types of speech acts are complementary to the social goals. Commissive speech acts are always produced to perform some actions in favor of the addressee rather than the addresser. Following are some of the glaring instances of this kind selected in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1955).

Utterance: 01

**Eddie: Beatrice,.....I'll end up on the floor with you, and they'll be in *our bed*. (P. 16)**

The Addressee: Beatrice Carbone is a warm and caring woman and more reasonable than Eddie Carbone.

**The Addresser:** Eddie Carbone is a longshoreman. He lives with his wife, Beatrice, and his orphaned niece, Catherine, in Red Hook Brooklyn. Eddie feels an honor in helping immigrated people from Italy.

**The Context:** The utterance occurs in the play when Eddie Carbone and his wife, Beatrice, talk about the arrival of Rodolpho and Marco from Italy to Red Hook Brooklyn to work and to earn money. Rodolpho and Marco are Beatrice's cousins. They want to stay in Eddie's house for a couple of months. Beatrice consults her husband, Eddie, about Rodolpho and Marco's accommodation in their house. She raises some questions such as whether they could provide better accommodation for them or not, etc. Eddie, in response to his wife, Beatrice, replies in the above speech act.





**Speech Act:** Eddie promises his wife, Beatrice, that he will co-operate her to accommodate Rodolpho and Marco. Eddie explicitly assures his wife of his willingness to make available his own bed for her cousins and commits himself to bring a change in his behavior.

**Analysis:** Eddie promises Beatrice to reduce her worries about accommodation of her cousins, Rodolpho and Marco. Eddie, in order to make his promise more credible and convincing, assures Beatrice that he will offer his own bed to her cousins and he will sleep on the floor with her. The credibility of Eddie's promise depends on his sincerity. If Eddie is not sincere in making a promise, it will be infelicitous and consequently abuse on the part of the addressee.

Eddie intends to perform two tasks simultaneously. The first, he wants to help the illegal immigrants i.e. Rodolpho and Marco by accommodating them in his own house and the second, he intends to reduce some tension of Beatrice.

Utterance: 02

**Catherine: Okay, I won't say a word to nobody, I swear. (P. 24)**

The Addressee: Eddie Carbone feels an honor in helping the illegally immigrated people from his homeland, Italy.

**The Addresser:** Catherine is an orphaned niece of Eddie and Beatrice Carbone and lives with them. Catherine is a good-looking Italian girl and is well-liked among the boys in the neighborhood. Catherine freely talks at home and in the neighborhood. She doesn't seem to be serious at all.

**The Context:** The utterance occurs in the play when Eddie tells Beatrice and Catherine the news of the arrival of Beatrice's two cousins, Rodolpho and Marco, at his house. He tells them that the cousins would stay in his house for a couple of months. Beatrice and Catherine raise some questions over Rodolpho and Marco's security in the neighborhood because they are entering illegally in America. They may get arrest if someone identifies them and informs about them to the Immigration Bureau. Eddie, in response to the doubts of Beatrice and Catherine, endorses that he is not worried about what the society says. He just wants to follow the unstated laws of his motherland, Italy, to help Rodolpho and Marco. Catherine shows her agreement over Eddie's endorsement in the above speech act.

**Speech Act:** Catherine assures her uncle Eddie Carbone that she won't reveal about the dwelling of Rodolpho and Marco in his house to anyone in the neighborhood. Catherine



endorses her intention as she swears explicitly and makes her assurance more convincing and authentic.

**Analysis:** Catherine uses the expression 'okay' to show her agreement over Eddie's endorsement. She makes a promise and swears to be trustworthy. Catherine is an orphaned niece of Eddie. Eddie is a guardian to her. Therefore, she neither wishes to hurt nor to contradict him.

Catherine, being a member of Eddie's family, intends to maintain the pleasant atmosphere in the family. In the same way, she also wants to protract her relations with her uncle, Eddie, more healthy and blissful.

Utterance: 03

**Tony: [indicating the house]: I'll see you on the pier tomorrow. You'll go to work. (P. 26)**

**The Addressee:** Marco and Rodolpho. Marco is the elder cousin of Beatrice Carbone from Italy. He comes to America to work and to make money to send back to his wife and children in Italy. Rodolpho is Beatrice's young, blonde cousin from Italy. He desires to be an American and also desires to have all the privileges of Western society including wealth and fame. Marco and Rodolpho enter into America illegally and intend to work at Red Hook Brooklyn.

**The Addresser:** Tony is the friend of Eddie Carbone. He assists Marco and Rodolpho off the ship and brings them safely to Eddie and Beatrice's home.

**The Context:** The utterance occurs in the play when Tony, the friend of Eddie Carbone, brings safely Marco and Rodolpho to Eddie and Beatrice's house around ten o'clock at night. While departing, he assures them that their need will be fulfilled. The adverb 'tomorrow' postulates the time, a day after the time of the utterance.

**Speech Act:** Tony promises Marco and Rodolpho to see them at the pier. He promises to undertake the guarantee of work and makes them believe in his words. Thus, Tony, by promising and guaranteeing, commits himself to the future course of action.

**Analysis:** Tony explicitly commits himself to meet Marco and his brother, Rodolpho, at the pier. However, implicitly he assures that their desire will be fulfilled i.e. they will get a work at the pier. He uses the words such as 'pier' and 'tomorrow' to make his promise more credible. The noun 'pier' points to the place where Marco and Rodolpho intend to work; and



the temporal adverb 'tomorrow' is a forward pointing marker. It assists to locate the definite time of the promise to be fulfilled in the future.

Tony intends to relax Marco and Rodolpho in the difficult situation because they are novices in Red Hook Brooklyn. In addition, they have entered this land illegally therefore, they seem under the tension and indefinite about the job.

Utterance: 04

**Rodolpho:** [steps closer to her]: ..... **Once I am a citizen I could work anywhere and I would find better jobs and we would have a house, Catherine. (P. 61)**

**The Addressee:** Catherine is an orphaned niece of Eddie and Beatrice Carbone. She lives in Eddie and Beatrice's house. Catherine falls in love with Rodolpho and wants to marry him.

**The Addresser:** Rodolpho is Beatrice's young, blonde cousin from Italy who is unmarried. He intends to marry Catherine and wants to be an American.

**The Context:** The utterance occurs in the play when Rodolpho and Catherine express their love for each other and they resolve to get married soon. Catherine asks Rodolpho about his future plan and wishes to go to Italy after their marriage to live there permanently. Rodolpho, in response to her demand, politely rejects her proposal and assures her a better life, here, in America.

**Speech Act:** Rodolpho explicitly predicts about the future opportunities for him in America but, implicitly, he offers Catherine a blissful and hopeful life. He deliberately visualizes opportunities for him in the near future and assures Catherine that he would be a good match for her.

**Analysis:** Rodolpho intends to marry Catherine and wants to be a citizen of America. He indirectly shows his agreement to marry Catherine as he says 'we would have a house'. Rodolpho commits himself to the future course of action because he is insecure in the present. In order to sustain his assurance, he shows his enthusiasm to work hard anywhere in America.

Rodolpho lives with many dreams in his mind. He knows that if he marries Catherine, he would automatically become a citizen of America. Therefore, he intends to offer an optimistic life to her to make her believe in his offer.

Utterance: 05



**Rodolpho:** *No; I will not marry to live in Italy. I want you to be my wife, and I want to be a citizen. (P. 61)*

**The Addressee:** Catherine is a young and beautiful girl. She is Eddie and Beatrice's orphaned niece and lives with them.

**The Addresser:** Rodolpho is Beatrice's cousin from Italy. He loves Catherine and wants to marry her to be an American and also wants to enjoy the entire facilities of American citizen.

**The Context:** The utterance occurs in the play when Catherine expresses her desire to Rodolpho to settle permanently in Italy after their marriage. Catherine loves the beautiful scenes in Italy but she is totally unaware of the opportunities for Rodolpho in Italy. Rodolpho knows that there is no point in going back to Italy. Therefore, he immediately refuses Catherine's proposal in the above speech act.

**Speech Act:** Rodolpho explicitly refuses his beloved, Catherine's proposal to live in Italy after their marriage. However, he offers her a new proposal of the marriage i.e. he intends to marry her and wants to be a citizen of America.

**Analysis:** Rodolpho quickly refuses Catherine's proposal to live in Italy after their marriage by uttering a single word 'No' and later, he justifies that his refusal '*he will not marry her to live in Italy*', is not intended to hurt Catherine. The inference of Rodolpho's propositional content can be derived such as 'he wants to marry her but he does not want to live in Italy'. Thus, he voluntarily offers her a modified proposal in which he desires to marry her and wants to live in America.

Rodolpho, on the one hand, intends to refuse to marry Catherine to live in Italy permanently after their marriage and on the other hand, he offers her a new proposal to bridge the gap grown between them.

Utterance: 06

**First Officer:** *Look, girlie, if they're all right they'll be out tomorrow. If they're illegal they go back where they came from. (P. 75)*

**The Addressee:** Catherine goes against her guardian, Eddie's wish and wants to marry Rodolpho.





**The Addresser:** First Officer. He is from Immigration Bureau of America. He arrests Rodolpho and his brother Marco for immigrating illegally in America and living in Eddie's house at Red Hook Brooklyn.

**The Context:** The utterance occurs in the play when the two officers from Immigration Bureau come to Eddie's house and arrest Rodolpho and his brother, Marco. Rodolpho and Marco are Beatrice's cousins from Italy and they entered Red Hook Brooklyn [a business locality in the America] illegally. Catherine loves Rodolpho and she wants to marry him soon. However, Eddie himself secretly loves her and does not welcome her marriage with Rodolpho. Therefore, he informs the Immigration Bureau of America and helps their officers in arresting Rodolpho and his brother, Marco. Catherine tries to step into the matter to protect her fiancé, Rodolpho, and his brother but the First Officer refuses to set them free.

**Speech Act:** First Officer explicitly makes a conditional promise to Catherine and implicitly refuses to set Rodolpho and his brother, Marco, free. He also threatens her that if Rodolpho and Marco find guilty, they will be sent back to where they come from.

**Analysis:** First Officer attempts to conclude Catherine's urge to liberate Rodolpho and his brother, Marco, as he addresses her '*girlie*'. Similarly, he, in order to get her attention, implicitly directs her to obey him respectfully by uttering the word '*Look*' [*directive speech act*]. He also assures her by making a conditional promise of setting them free, if they aren't guilty. Here, the First Officer commits to the future course of action i.e. a day after the time of the utterance. He, by making a conditional promise, intends to suggest her that he is not the authorized person to pass on a verdict on the fate of the immigrants.

First Officer intends to send away Catherine. Therefore, he makes a conditional promise and assures her that there won't be any injustice with Rodolpho and Marco if they aren't guilty. He also implicitly wants to warn Catherine not to interfere in the legal matters.

Utterance: 07

**Eddie: [over the first officer's shoulder, to Marco]: I'll kill you for that, you son of a bitch! (P. 76)**

**The Addressee:** Marco is Beatrice Carbone's cousin from Italy. He illegally enters America with his brother Rodolpho and stays in Eddie and Beatrice Carbone's house. He works at the pier to make money and sends back to his wife and children in Italy. Marco's brother, Rodolpho loves Eddie's orphaned niece, Catherine, and wants to marry her.



**The Addresser:** Eddie Carbone is a longshoreman. He secretly loves his orphaned niece, Catherine, and does not like her marrying Rodolpho. Eddie, being jealous about her getting married with Rodolpho, informs the Immigration Bureau and helps their officers in arresting Marco and Rodolpho.

**The Context:** The utterance occurs in the play when the two officers from the Immigration Bureau of America, as per Eddie's information, come to Eddie's house and arrest Marco and his brother, Rodolpho. Marco comes to know that Eddie has helped the Immigration Bureau in this arrest. Consequently, he spits on Eddie's face and insults him by abusing him as animal. Eddie, in response to Marco's insulting act, utters the above speech act.

**Speech Act:** Eddie Carbone vows and threatens Marco that he will kill him. However, he does not specify the time of the future action. Eddie, in order to intensify the act of threatening, uses the abusing words such as '*a son of bitch*' for Marco.

**Analysis:** Eddie Carbone breaks the ethics of his homeland community due to his secret lust for Catherine. Eddie contravenes the principles which were too dear to him a few days ago. He wants to dissuade Catherine from marrying Rodolpho. Therefore, he informs the Immigration Bureau about Rodolpho and Marco and commits himself a serious offense against his own society. Eddie realizes that his community will never approve of his harboring a secret lust for Catherine. Therefore, he quits the issue of Catherine's marriage with Rodolpho and openly challenges Marco to restore his tarnished image in his community. Accordingly, Eddie explicitly threatens Marco. To intensify his threat, Eddie abuses Marco by calling him '*a son of bitch*'.

Eddie intends to restore his mottled image in his own community due to the secret lust for his orphaned niece, Catherine. Therefore, Eddie intends to threaten Marco to take revenge of spitting on his face and insulting him.

### **Conclusion**

Commissive speech acts play an important role in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1955). Promises, offers, volunteers, vows, threats, guarantees, etc have been widely used by the characters to perform the various acts to maintain their images. Promises have frequently been used by the characters to show loyalty, love and care to the hearers. Guarantees are expressed to get sympathy from the hearers and to express the belief and conviction of the characters about something. Refusals have been expressed to show the dislike and distrust of the characters to the hearers and also to save them from the bad effects made by the hearers or to avoid conflicts with the hearers. Threats have been uttered to express the negative

feeling and anger of the speakers to the hearers and also to intimidate the hearers as a form of the speakers' intention to show the higher power and status.

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