

## Pragmatics and the Teaching of Literature

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### Abstract

*Scholars have been working, for decades, on examining literary discourse via new techniques among which pragmatics. Accordingly, and within a pragmatic appreciation, it can be suggested that literature constitutes a speech act on its own at the global level functioning as a macro-speech act. At the same time, the literature can be seen as a text consisting of several sentences, each of them may be taken as a possible speech act. Such speech acts are called micro-speech acts (van Dijk, 1981: 249). The present study is a call to teach literature, and novel in particular, by following a pragmatic analytical and systematic framework by applying pragmatic aspects including Speech Act Theory, Conversation analysis, and Conversational Implicature. What is proposed here is not an alternative but rather a complementary step towards achieving a better and deeper understanding of literature and towards integrating both literary and linguistic approaches in teaching literary texts especially for the EFL and ESL learners in an attempt to approach the intuition of native speakers. The researchers conclude that the familiarity of such procedures to students of English as a foreign language is not normally a difficulty but it needs the syllabus designers to reconsider teaching English as a foreign language as a communicative act that can be approached via literature which is an act of communication. In other words, using literary texts in class is 'useful for developing pragmatic competence' (Richard, 1996:157), which will enrich the quality of SL/FL teaching if considered part of the teaching plan.*

**Keywords:** *Pragmatics, pragmatic competence, written and spoken discourse, methods of teaching literature.*

### Introduction

Over the last two hundred years, the novel, as a genre, has become the dominant form of literary writing in most literate societies; in quantity, thousands of titles are published every year; readership consumption in that verse and drama are to be considered minority pleasures; and in cultural sensitivity, novels are said to rapidly and significantly reflect the socio-economic realities of their consumers (Fowler, 1977:1).

Fowler also states that the novel has become the most significant form of literary writing the growth of which has coincided with the establishment of an age of literary criticism in which literature has become an established cultural institution and criticism is a massive secondary institution obligatory in universities, publisher's lists and newspapers (ibid:1-2). Then, a great amount of effort has been exerted to the linguistic analysis of fiction in an attempt to establish a basis of interpretation of the literary text from within the text itself rather than establishing viewpoints about the literary work depending on the factors affecting the creation of the work whether social, religious, psychological, et. Accordingly, a massive body of literature has been built within this area.

It is well-known that literature may have practical pragmatic functions. It can be taken as an assertion, warning, congratulation, request, etc., depending on both the meaning of the text itself and the structure of the context including intentions, interpretations of readers, social norms, etc. (van Dijk, 1981: 253). This phenomenon can be explained in terms of the notion of 'an indirect speech act' which can be accomplished by establishing one of its conditions. For instance, I may make a request by asserting my reason like in "I'm hungry", or an advice like in "that's a stupid book".

### **Approaches to Teaching Literature**

Parkinson and Thomas (2000), in their discussion of what can teachers and learners do with literature, introduce a number of approaches for teaching and explicating literature, some of which are called 'traditional' and others are 'modern'. Among the traditional methods we have Rote learning and summary of content, Reading aloud, Translation and Reworking of secondary literature. While modern activities include Reading for pleasure, Reading for content, Reading solely as foreign-language practice, Linguistic analysis, Personal response, Games and 'fun' activities, Prediction and related guessing activities, Performing a literary work and Creating one's own text.

But Allwright (1991) has written of the 'death of the method', and he and others have shown that

what happens in classrooms cannot be explained by a finite number of method but only by the interaction of many variables, only some of which can be directly observed, and many of which go beyond linguistics and literary theory into highly subjective realms of personality and emotion (cited in Parkinson and Thomas: 27)

In addition to the above methods, the researcher in this paper proposes a 'pragmatic study' of literature in which the literary text is treated as 'an act of communication' to reach a better understanding and a more comprehensive explication. Pragmatics can be used to provide tools especially for students at the advanced level as they interpret literature and novel in particular since it is representation of real life.

Lezbery and Hilferty believe that the progress in conversation is not only of value in understanding the world of the novel and the characters but also it introduces EFL students to a variety of options in conversation control. Such options are often encouraged to observe outside the classroom simply to enhance the students' ability to function and communicate effectively within the total university experience since university is the only horizon open to students to practice language freely.

It is possible to say that the main functions of language are to make statements, to issue commands and to ask questions and these functions are subsumed under the presentation of forms in grammar-based textbooks (Lezbery & Hilferty, 1978:48). But in preparing EFL learners for successful communication with both faculty and peers at the university and in preparing them to understand more fully the implications of their reading and verbal exchanges within the target language, i.e., English, other aspects of language usage must be taken into account especially the domain of an 'utterance' which is the core of pragmatics which can be studied within the normal flow of conversation in the novel rather than the conversations situated in the textbooks which are designed to reinforce the learning of a particular grammatical form.

### **Pragmatics and Literature**

To be a communicatively competent speaker of any language, one must develop pragmatic competence in that language. Pragmatic competence can be defined as "the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts and finally, knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular languages' linguistic resources" (Barron, 2003:10). Accordingly, pragmatic competence is directly related to the knowledge of speech acts, speech functions and their appropriate usage in certain contexts. In a sense, speech acts constitutes the core of pragmatic competence and this feature of speech acts has made them the focus of many studies conducted in the Applied Linguistic field. Among such studies, there are some which applied the speech acts to the study of fiction like Short (1995), Rossen-Knill (1995), Chen (2007), and others.

Kasper (1997:2) claims that “in order to communicate successfully in a target language, pragmatic competence should be well developed” and it is not that easy to develop. EFL learners usually have difficulty in developing pragmatic competence in the target language. Therefore, pragmatic competence, which consists of knowledge of speech act functions and sociolinguistic competence, should be taken in the EFL teaching/learning environments. Basically, pragmatic competence is part of language competence and as shown in the following figure:

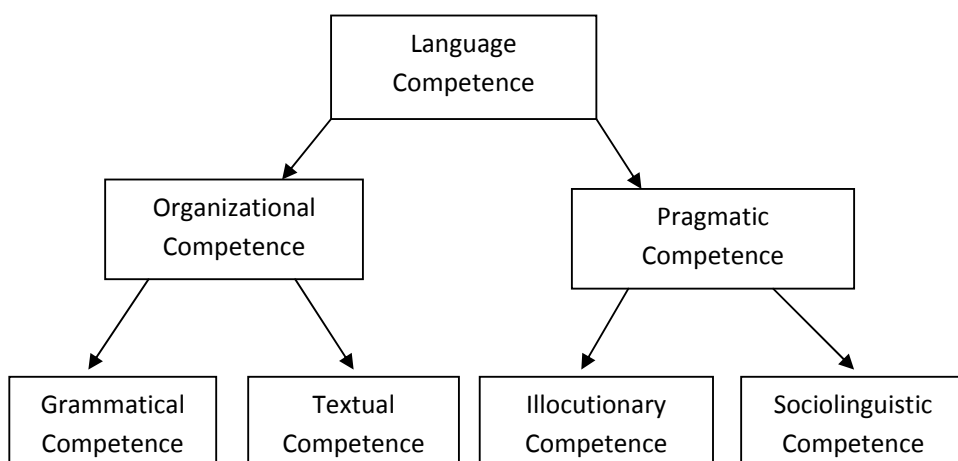


Figure 1: Bachman's model of communicative competence (Safont, 2005:53).

Sociolinguistic competence, being part of the pragmatic competence, refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to the text and this includes the ability to select communicative acts and the appropriate strategies to implement them depending on the contextual features of the situation.

The main focus of this study is on the pragmatic competence regarding the knowledge of speech acts: how they are produced and interpreted in a literary work (novel). Speech acts are one of the most important components of pragmatic competence (Searle, 1969). They are also defined as the minimal units of linguistic communication (p.16).

In this study, the researcher will focus mainly on the role of speech acts in expanding our understanding of the literary text. The literary texts can be considered the environment in which learners can find what they lack in terms of pragmatic competence in the target language. In other words, analyzing literary texts pragmatically can help learners to develop target language pragmatic competence.

This is actually the core of the communicative approach to language teaching. It is the communicative competence theory that influenced the emphasis of what is taught from teaching language as a grammar system towards teaching language for usage in social contexts (Nuun, 2006).

### **How Can Teachers Approach Literature Pragmatically?**

One of the challenges of pragmatics is that of developing an approach to written discourse that not only takes account of its differences from the spoken discourse, but also takes account of the sameness between the two as well. That's why this area is said to have no coherent body of research.

The current interest in speech act theory and pragmatics on the part of literary scholars is due mainly to the fact that these approaches give a new perspective on a central concern of literary theory, namely, the relations between reader, author and text. In other words, the literary text is no more seen as an object but as an act of communication between a writer and a public (Traugott and Pratt. 1980:255).

There are many ways or methods of using pragmatics in the teaching and discussion of literary texts. Among such ways, we have Cook's schema theory (1994) which "offers daunting flowcharts to show how a reader's prior knowledge and expectations interacts with a text". Sperber and Wilson (1986) seem to be in line with this when they emphasize shared knowledge, inference and the assumption of communicative intention. Hence, pragmatics is equated with the knowledge of the world. (Parkinson and Thomas, 2000: 47).

The functional approach is also recommended for the study of literature in which real examples of language in use can be classified according to the functions they have, for instance the function of 'informing', 'persuading', 'apologizing', 'promising'...etc. for example, the utterance 'the window is open' can be interpreted as a request to shut the door, and saying 'I haven't been to the cricket lately' can be interpreted it as a suggestion, a request or even as an invitation (ibid).

### **Literature as an Act of Communication**

When the act of communication is done between the text and the student, we can say that literature can encourage in students the ability to infer meaning by interacting with the text. In this case, the student's job is not that easy since he has to move both backwards and forwards, in and across and outside the text in search for clues to help make sense of it (Brumfit & Carter, 1986:14). When literature is used in this way, it can be much more enjoyable and stimulating for the learner. Therefore, it can be said

that a focus on literature as discourse can have an important contribution to make to language study and learning and can help students appreciate more fully the nature of literature as literature.

The study aims at showing the extent to which linguistics contributes to literature study and teaching. Literature is not read for factual truth or information but for enjoyment since it is an act of communication. This is a call for teacher of English to teach the literary text from the inside. In other words, this call means studying the structure of the text to get it interpreted rather than reading about it, i.e., the traditional way of directing students to read it depending on many sources of criticism (Brumfit and Carter, 1986: 227). The researcher is not against the idea of reading some criticism, but still finds it also beneficial to analyze the literary dialogue via explaining some pragmatic aspects like speech acts.

It seems fair enough not to expect non-native speakers to approach literary texts in English with the same intuition of a native-speaker. Instead, such speakers can be encouraged to approach such texts with increasing command of different levels of language organization so that they can systematically work out the expressive purpose a writer might embrace in fulfilling or deviating from linguistic expectations (Brumfit& Carter, 1986:20).

In spite of the general belief that literature is used to assist the development of competence in the language and to teach culture or enable students to understand the foreign culture more clearly, Brumfit and Carter (1986:25) state that:

...it is unhelpful to view literary texts as either naturalistic pictures of British or American life, for purposes of cultural study, or as examples of the best use of the English language, for language courses.

We mentioned earlier that there is a call to study literature from the inside. This goes hand in hand with the way we analyze conversation. Cook (1994:74) suggests that conversation shares many features with literature in that process models used in its analysis are also recommended in literary theory. So, both are seen as developing processes rather than products. This means that we enjoy both while events are developed; we don't wait until events get to an end to evaluate as a product. Accordingly, literature is seen as a piece of conversation liable to analysis since it is a product of communication.

The other point conversation share with literature is in being resistant to definition. The boundary between conversation and other discourse types, like that between literary and non-literary discourse, is a fuzzy one. There are many

intermediate cases. Conversation may also change schematic knowledge in a way similar to literature. (Cook: 47).

### **Is the language of literature similar to that of everyday interaction?**

It is worth saying that there has been considerable debate concerning whether the interaction within the literary text should be examined in the same way that linguists examine the interaction of speakers and hearers in naturally occurring conversation or not. The pragmatic approaches to styles of fictional conversations are not only valid but also of great practical and theoretical significance. This view point has been raised by many linguists and scholars as well. Zou (2010) argues that fictional conversations enable to approach texts as objects situated in the real world rather than as independent aesthetic artifacts. No account of literary work will be complete without an account of literary communication between fictional characters in context.

Buck (1997: 89) also argues that it is not assumed that the language of conversation is identical to the language encountered in literary dialogue, but since writers create the illusion of naturally-occurring conversation, they require that the reader makes meaning of the characters' utterances as if the characters were producing and negotiating their utterances in real-time; indeed, writers make the knowledge of our communicative competence manifest.

Though pragmatic aspects work much better within oral discourse, written discourse has proved to be no less practical in this respect, and this is applicable to drama and fiction as well. Traugott & Pratt (1980:260) mention some of the points at which writing differs from face-face speech as far as pragmatic aspects are concerned. First of all, writing tends consistently towards greater formality than speech; the written message is addressed to a public audience; in writing there is a pressure of avoiding forms whose meaning depends on intonation factors, facial expressions or gestures; the speaker/hearer relations are extremely depersonalized in that the speaker/writer is unknown or even known only by name to the hearer/ reader and the hearer, on the other hand, is unknown to the speaker; the written composition is produced over a much greater time span and is subject to change, correct or revise by the speaker unlike the oral composition which is spontaneous which makes it rather difficult to correct or revise on the spot or while the exchange taking place. Zou (2010) has a view point here that such differences between reading and writing have so great impacts on the differences between spoken and written texts. Many people tend to overemphasize the gap between the two and ignore the sameness. On a second thought, Zou states that:

In fictional written conversations, pragmatic particles such as "you know" and "kind of", repetition, hesitation, ungrammaticality occur frequently, which is similar to spoken conversation. Therefore, oral language and literary language are not mutually exclusive types. (p.160)

Ungrammaticality always goes along with informal words in informal situations, unlike grammaticality which goes hand in hand with formal words in formal situations between speakers whose relationships are not so close. Grammaticality also appears in conversations between people of intimate relationships for certain purposes (ibid, 161).

### **Pragmatics and Writing Discourse**

In the last few decades, humble and daring attempts were initiated to apply pragmatic aspects to fiction. In spite the rejection of so many to the idea of applying pragmatic aspects to fiction, still there are calls by others to legalize this type of analysis saying that the conversation within a fiction work or novel is liable to this type of analysis similar to that within the play. Traugott & Pratt (1980:255) shed light on the new state that:

the current interest in speech act theory and pragmatics on the part of literary scholars is due mainly to the fact that these approaches give a new perspective on a central concern of literary theory, namely, the relation between reader, author, and text.

Moreover, literature is seen not as an object but rather as an act of communication between a writer and public; but what type of communication do people undertake to accomplish in novel? To Traugott & Pratt, some scholars argue that the communicative act involved is that of projecting oneself into an imaginary world, others to produce pleasure and approval in the audience, others to produce shared understanding and evaluation and for Horace is to teach and delight (p.259).

In spite of the many attempts to limit the application of pragmatic aspects to drama rather than fiction, still many others tried to justify the application of pragmatic aspects referring to the positive correlations exist between fictional and naturally-occurring discourse. Such an argument is found in some writers like (Watzlawick, Beaven, and Jackson, 1967; Burns, 1972; Pratt, 1977; Turner, 1980; Gudas, 1983).

Ragan and Hopper (1984:311) state:



Fiction represents a valid representation of behavior; fictional talk and naturally-occurring talk are more similar than disparate; both fiction and reality are constructions....

And Fernando Poyatos (1981) examines the nonverbal communication in the novel and relates it to realism.

Stucky elaborates more when he states that the use of fictional data in the study of personal relationships provokes disagreement from other scholars, like Banfield (1982), Beson (1984), Ulrich (1986), who questioned the claims whether the language of fictional dialogues is like real talk or not (1998:23).

Some pragmatic aspects like CA are said to be hard to apply to novel for it was basically originated for the analysis of naturally-occurring conversation, but CA itself doesn't explicitly deal with all aspects of naturally-occurring talk like rhetorical argument and persuasion; rather it concentrates on such features like turn-taking, adjacency pairs and sequences. So the same justification should be given when applied to novel where the focus is mainly on the features of dialogue or character relationships (Stucky, 1988:25).

In line with the above point comes Zou's argument that in fictional conversation, language users or characters, like people in everyday life, also have different personalities, perspectives, problems, thoughts, activities, visions and so on. Such characters hold various professions, have their social interactions, frequently affected by the environment when get in contact with each other, have ups and downs in their life, caught victims to life hardships, have their own problems etc. This is on the one hand, on the other, they perform the kind of speech acts appropriate with all felicity conditions as people usually do in naturally occurring conversations (2010:160).

Our objective is also to extend the understanding of the literary fictional discourse and to reach a better appreciation of the literary work by developing the students' pragmatic competence and by making it part of the teaching plan how to enrich the quality of foreign language teaching. To exemplify this point, the next section will analyze pragmatically an extract from Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*.

### ***Anne Of Green Gables From A Pragmatic View Point***

Here the researcher will examine an extract from chapter Two from Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* when Matthew Cuthbert brings Anne with him to Green  
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Gables. On their way, Matthew and Anne have a very long and interesting conversation in which Anne seems to be the dominant part due to her talkative nature. The analysis will show part of Anne's character and also how the adjacency pair "question/answer" works in a natural flow of conversation unlike those artificial conversations introduced in textbooks since what is happening in novel is imitation of real life.

Let's now consider the following extract:

(10) Anne: "Isn't that beautiful? What did that tree ... make you think of?"

(11) Matthew: "Well now, I dunno"

(12) Anne: "Why, a bride of course- a bride all in white with a lovely misty veil ... and what does make the roads red?"

(13) Matthew: "Well now, I dunno."

(14) Anne: "Well, that is one of the things to find out sometimes...isn't it splendid to think of all the things that are to find out about? ....There would be no scope for imagination then, would there? But am I talking too much...? .... If you say so, I'll stop. I can stop when I make up my mind to it, although it's difficult."

(15) Matthew: "Oh, you can talk as much as you like. I don't mind."

(16) Anne: "I'm so glad....And people laugh because I use big words. But if you have big ideas you have to use big words to express them, haven't you?"

(17) Matthew: "Well now, that's seems reasonable."

(18) Anne: "Mrs. Spencer said that my tongue must be hung in the middle .... Is there a brook anywhere near Green Gables?"

(19) Matthew: "Well now, yes, there is one right below the house"

(20) Anne: "Fancy! It's always been one of my dreams to live near a brook.... What colour would you call this?"

(21) Matthew: "It's red"

(22) Anne: ".... What is an alabaster brow? I never could fine out. Can you tell me?"

(23) Matthew: "Well now, I'm afraid I can't."

(24) Anne: ".... Have you ever imagined what it must feel like to be divinely beautiful?"

(25) Matthew: "Well now, no, I haven't."

(26) Anne: "I have, often. Which would you rather be if you had the choice- divinely beautiful or dazzlingly clever or angelically good?"

(27) Matthew: "Well now, I- I don't know exactly."

From the above exchanges, it is clear that the adjacency pair "question /answer" is the one domineering in chapter two. This tells us that there is a sort of mutual understanding and acceptance in the way Matthew and Anne give and take. Anne on her part is given the chance, and may be for the first time in her life, to speak and question freely. Matthew, on the other hand and much to his surprise, is enjoying

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Anne's company. He has never expected to enjoy the society of a little girl. What is really amazing in this extract is that Anne talks freely using very long turns, some of them exceeds the fifty lines (which are shorten here for shortage of space), then she ends her long turns with a question, partly to enjoy the society of Matthew and partly to find answers to open questions or subjects in her mind.

In turn (10) she asks him a question which embraces two interrogatives; a "yes/no" question followed by "What did that tree make you think of?" When he answers negatively, she elaborates with the help of her imaginative mind to give a "58 line" response, which ends up with a question "What does make the roads red?" To which he also has no answer.

In turn (14) Anne asks a rhetorical question, "But am I talking too much...?". To Freed (1994) a rhetorical question "refers to information the speaker already knows" and "it orients the hearer to the speaker's point of view" (p. 631). That's why she says "I can stop when I make up my mind to it, although it's difficult.", and he replies "you can talk as much as you like".

In Turn (16), Anne asks Matthew a tag question to get his approval to go on with her talkative nature. It is well known that tag questions are not real questions but mere attempts to instigate the other party to agree positively or negatively, and to confirm our viewpoint, i.e., to elicit agreement from the other party. Here she asks a negative question to let him confirm the idea that "big ideas need big words to express them" and in doing so, she gets his consent to go on. Another example is turn (20) when she asks about the color of the rose. The minute he answers, she comments "Yes, it's red.", and then the narrative tells us that she says it resignedly which means accepting something that is unpleasant and cannot be changed and here there is a good reference to her red hair which she abhors a great deal.

In other situations, Anne's questions are real seeking answers from Matthew, like in turn(13) which ends up with the question " What does make the roads red?", for which she gets no answer as Matthew himself doesn't know why, unlike her question at the end of turn(18) when she asks " Is there a brook anywhere near Green Gables?", for which Matthew answers positively " Well now, yes, there is one below the house" and in saying so , one of Anne's dreams is achieved. Another situation in which Anne seeks an answer is when she asks "What is an alabaster brow?". Anne goes on, with her imaginative mind, asking Matthew about his preference in what she is saying "Which would you rather if you had the choice-divinely beautiful or dazzlingly clever or angelically good?", turn (26). Then, here comes the most important question that Anne has ever asked" Has Mr. Barry any little girl?", and this

girl, Diana, will be the only girl Anne will befriend later in the coming chapters of the novel.

Shooting of questions by Anne is quite normal since it is part of the child's linguistic behavior is to ask questions and seek answers. In other words, children, usually when given the chance, have a strong desire to hold turns and to ask endless questions especially with their parents or intimates.

The focus in this extract is on the speech act of 'asking' whether the illocutionary force is to get real answers or to confirm certain aspect of talk. The perlocutionary effect is done when Matthew answers her questions, whether real or not. This can function as a good activity for students on how to handle questions in a conversation and how to answer positively or negatively. In other words, this activity can likely happen in real life and it can be used as "a useful source for learning through imitation or psychological identification with the characters" (Halbach, 2001: 5).

### **Summary**

The shift of methodology in literary criticism and linguistic criticism has encouraged the use of literature in the FL class. Accordingly, if we learn a language to handle reality, and literature is an imitation of reality, it becomes of great value to use literature in learning a language. This is very true when learning English as FL or SL. Studying fictional discourse utilizing the students' pragmatic competence leads to a better appreciation of the literary work. In return, the literary discourse can help develop the students' pragmatic competence when it is considered as part of the teaching plan to enrich the quality of foreign language teaching.

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