

Speech-Act Theory and Writing

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Speech-act theory is based on the premise that communication is a series of actions or interactions between a speaker (writer) and a hearer (reader). The theory contends that a speaker (writer) in performing the act of utterance (or writing) also performs a second act, the **illocutionary act**, in which he *intends* the utterance to do something. Thus, in making the assertion, "*That dog is dangerous,*" a speaker may not only *intend* to inform his hearer but he may also *intend* to warn his hearer as well. Similarly, I may request you to turn up the thermostat by saying, "*I am cold.*" In fact, all uses of language including much of our daily conversation is composed of such speech acts.

In making a request a speaker assumes that a hearer is both willing and able to perform the act, and the speaker may form a polite request by questioning the hearer's willingness or ability.

1. *Would you mind closing the window.*
2. *Can you close the window.*

It is important to note that these two utterances can be intended as true questions if the speaker feels that the hearer is either unwilling or unable to close the window: "*Can you close the window*" becomes a true question if the hearer has his arm in a cast.

As these examples suggest, meaning depends in part on the speaker's understanding of the feelings and desires of the hearer. When a wife requests that her husband wash the dishes by saying, "*Would you mind washing the dishes,*" he may respond by denying his willingness, "*Yes, I mind —*" while, at the same time, recognizing the intended request, "*— but I will.*" In all our interactions with one another, we assume roles and attitudes for ourselves within certain contexts, and we presume roles and attitudes for others. And meaning is highly dependent on the relationship of speakers and hearers.

In non-fictional writing, the same rules apply, but authors and contexts must be reconstructed by the reader. A good writer will always assist his reader in making that reconstruction, because voices must be clear and contexts well established. In ordinary spoken conversation, speakers and hearers are physically attached to their texts; in written and recorded discourse, on the other hand, writers may be removed from their utterances by both time and distance. When I pick up a week old Detroit newspaper, I am able to read it within the Detroit context of my experience and, furthermore, as a reader, I know that the news events being reported occurred a week ago rather than at the time of my reading. Hence I am able to reconstruct the context of place as Detroit and time as a week ago.

In written acts of communication, a writer must be especially aware of his readers; furthermore, he must make his readers aware of himself as writer. It is important that a reader know not only who the writer of a written text is, but also what the writer's purpose or intention is. According to the precepts of speech-act theory, in writing as well as in speaking, individuals are performing intentional acts. As a writer, one needs to recognize, to be constantly aware of his readers, and to establish his voice and purpose early in the discourse. In written discourse, since the author and the physical context are not present, it is especially important for the writer to establish the context, the purpose, and his identity as a writer as well as the identity of his readers. In the following opening paragraph from his well-known "Letter from Birmingham Jail," note how Martin Luther King, Jr. establishes his identity, his intention, the context, and his immediate readers.

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

King imposes a role on his readers when he calls them "men of genuine good will" whose "criticisms are sincerely set forth." Although his immediate readers are his fellow clergymen, he is obviously writing for a larger audience. However, anyone who reads this essay must read it with the writer's conception of his readers in mind.

In the following opening paragraph from "What Life Means to Me," Jack London establishes his background in an equally forceful fashion.

I was born in the working-class. Early I discovered enthusiasm, ambition, and ideals; and to satisfy these became the problem of my child-life. My environment was crude and rough and raw. I had no outlook, but an up-look rather. My place in society was at the bottom. Here life offered nothing but sordidness and wretchedness, both of the flesh and the spirit: for there flesh and spirit were alike starved and tormented.

Because contextual indicators are seldom physically present in written language, authors must make their intentions

clear either directly or indirectly at the beginning of their essays. Sometimes writers declare their intentions directly in the opening paragraph, but sophisticated writers are often more subtle. Although written or recorded language can and usually does exist in time and place separated from its author and its original context, that fact does not mean that there is no context for their works. Readers will reconstruct contexts, complete with speakers, intended hearers, and purposes. Consequently, authors must make their voices and their purposes clear within their texts or they might be misunderstood. Every effective piece of writing must have what Wayne Booth calls a rhetorical stance.

The common ingredient that I find in all of the writing I admire – excluding for now novels, plays, and poems – is something that I shall reluctantly call the rhetorical stance,

a stance which depends on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interest and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker (Booth, p. 141).

Speech-act theory recognizes that meaning in spoken discourse depends upon the interaction between the speaker and the hearer within a given context. So too, meaning in written discourse is equally dependent upon the interaction between writer and reader. Skillful writers establish the context, the purpose, and the relationship between themselves and their readers within their texts, so that meaning can survive long after the original writers, readers, and contexts cease to exist.