



An Analysis on Irony in *Pride and Prejudice* from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

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Abstract: With the development of pragmatics, many of its important theories, such as speech act theory, have found a successful and wide range of application in literary criticism. Speech act theory, as one of significant theories, has gradually become a study focus in recent years. *Pride and Prejudice*, as Jane Austen's most representative novel, has high literary value and research significance. The most notable feature of this novel is irony, which is employed to depict character images and highlight psychological activities and relationships among the characters. Irony is closely related to speech act theory. Based on the previous theoretical researches, this paper analyzes Austen's irony from both literary and linguistic viewpoints through dialogues and discourse under the framework of speech act theory and tries to focus on the language techniques rather than studying the author of the novel, the ideological contents like most researches did or researches on drama and poetry in actual text analysis, thus to prove the feasibility of application of theory of general linguistics to the analysis of fiction texts and help readers to understand Jane Austen's art of irony and instruct students to grasp language techniques and skills.

Keywords: Irony, Speech Act Theory, *Pride and Prejudice*

Introduction

Jane Austen was an English novelist of the early 19th century. *Pride and Prejudice*, as one of the most successful and the most popular works, was published anonymously in three volumes in 1813. Irony is Austen's main artistic means and her main way of understanding the world. The success of *Pride and Prejudice* lies in irony—the main theme throughout the whole work. Irony is not only a figure of speech, but also a method of suggesting skills and organizational structure. On the basis of the traditional literary irony, Austen has developed a more perfect art of irony. Vivid characters are presented to readers by employing irony in *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel mainly tells a story of five unmarried daughters of the Bennet family and two rich men, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. This paper analyzes the novel with the examples of dialogues and the application of ironic language in *Pride and Prejudice* to clarify the special value of ironic art in novel creation.

Literature Review

Speech act theory was first proposed by Austin, a language philosopher, as a philosophical analysis tool in his William James lecture series at Harvard University in 1955, and gradually took shape in subsequent lectures. The basic propositions of speech act theory can be summarized as follows: "Words are deeds."^[1] Namely, as long as a speaker speaks meaningful words that can be understood by the hearer, he can be said to have carried out a certain behavior, which is called speech act.

According to speech act theory, human being are also carrying out certain behaviors when they speak, including three types: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. A locutionary act is the act of saying something, the performance of an utterance and the ostensible meaning of an utterance. It includes the sounds, syllables, words, phrases and sentences used when saying something. An illocutionary act refers to the central notion which is closely related to Austin's view of the performative and constative utterances in a speech act. It is the speaker expressing the speaker's intention through literal meaning. Act in saying something, for example, gives an order. A perlocutionary act is a speech act which can be viewed at the level of its psychological consequences, it is contrasted with locutionary and illocutionary acts (which are other levels of

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description, rather than different types of speech acts).^[1] It mainly refers to the effect of the speaker's words on the listener. Among the three speech acts, important ones are illocutionary act and perlocutionary act, which are the focus of pragmatics because they are the center of language communication. Austin divided the use of language into two categories: narrative discourse and pragmatic discourse. In pragmatic discourse, words are part of deeds.^[1] Irony can be divided into three levels: the first level is literal irony, which refers to the fact that the meaning of the utterance openly expressed rather than implied by the speaker. Although it always clearly expresses the speaker's purpose, it implies a completely different attitude; the second level is structural irony. This ironic method means that the author introduces structural features with double meanings throughout the article, so that the article forms ironic features in structure. This kind of structural irony is mainly used to the character image-the hero; the third level is dramatic level. A drama or narrative work in which something is clear for readers but unknown to the persons involved.^[4]

Another excellent linguist, John R. Searle contributes a lot to speech act theory after Austin. Searle argues that the smallest unit of linguistic communication is a speech act, not a word or sentence as is commonly acknowledged.^[5] He proposed five illocutionary points that speakers can achieve on propositions in an utterance, namely: the assertive, commissive, directive, declaratory, expressive and declarative illocutionary points.^[5] Speakers achieve the assertive point when they represent how things are in the world, the commissive point when they commit themselves to doing something, the directive point when they make an attempt to get hearers to do something, the declaratory point when they do things in the world at the moment of the utterance solely by virtue of saying that they do and the expressive point when they express their attitudes about objects and facts of the world.^[9] Based on five categories above, irony can be classified as assertive irony, directive irony, commissive irony and expressive irony.^[6]

Van Dijk once pointed out that: "What we need to pay more attention to is not the specific speech act, but the overall macro speech act of the text."^[10] Therefore, the paper will analyze the ironic characteristics of the novel from the perspectives of macro and micro ironic speech acts.

Macro Ironic Speech Act

1. Literal Irony in *Pride and Prejudice*

Literal irony, as the name implies, mainly refers to the meaning expressed by the speaker in front of people is not what he really intends to express, which is relatively common in irony. For example, a classic line in which Collins proposes to Elizabeth: Almost as soon as I entered the house, I chose you as the companion of my future life. Mr Collins's proposal to Elizabeth is one of the most humorous points in the novel, which reflects his personality due to the fact that Austen presents it in a ironically

humorous way. Readers know Elizabeth will refuse his proposal, but Collins is still confident to make the proposal and she will accept him. Successful application of irony is highlighted when readers see the divergence between Collins' ideas and actual actual situation. Another example of irony is when Mr Collins assumes that all young 'modest' girls refuse a proposal from men that they intend to accept, "I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application", and so takes Elizabeth's refusal speech as encouragement and continues to persuade her with his literate proposal. At the same time, Jane Austen uses this opening to directly show the main content of the novel, namely, how middle-class girls get married to rich aristocrats, and sets the main tone of the whole novel. The author of the novel clearly satirizes the concept of marriage based on money and status, and also reminds readers to comprehensively observe the development of the plot in the subsequent reading, so as to grasp the characteristics of all the characters with the support of ironic use of language.

Jane Austen expresses her ironic attitude by the words and psychological activities of characters. "She continued to rail bitterly against the cruelty of settling an estate away from a family of five daughters, in favor of a man whom nobody cared anything about."^[2] Although Mrs. Bennet is a stupid woman with uncertain temper, she expresses her attitude towards unfairness of the time in which people pursue only money and social status.

2. Irony in Arrangement of Plots

From the beginning of the novel, readers could hardly predict that the hero and heroine would love each other. The author even set up many obstacles to prevent their romantic relationship. Although Elizabeth is the smartest girl depicted in the Bennts, Austen uses the dramatic arrangement of plots to highlight traits of characters. The novel is suffused with wry humor from Elizabeth's being deluded by Wickham's good manners and physical appearance to prejudice against Darcy, ending up with falling in love with Darcy.

The novel begins with: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Mrs. Bennet's thoughts are evident, as if a single man in possession of a good fortune should marry her own daughter. This puts the feelings of readers and the author against Mrs. Bennet. But it is ironic that the novel ends with her dream coming true.

The marriage of Collins, a cousin of the Bennet family, which is a farce, completely in line with the readers' imagination of the content in the novel. Mr. Collins egged on

and admonished by his patron, Lady Catherine, is anxious to marry. When he arrives at Longbourn, he proposes twice in three days, and is rejected by his cousin Elizabeth, but he soon acquired the marriage successfully and quickly from Miss Lucas, a neighbour of the Bennets. Readers can immediately understand the Austen's ironic intention: a

marriage without love is a body without feelings, Miss Lucas married Collins for money, and she could get nothing but material satisfaction.

3. Irony in Characterization

Characters in *Pride and Prejudice* described have their own characteristics. The most surprising character description is Lady Catherine. In Collins's description, Mrs. Catherine is an amiable and generous lady, but when Elizabeth is invited to visit Lady Catherine, she turns out to be a proud, hypocritical, self-righteous and ridiculous woman. When she comments on the education of Elizabeth sisters, she says: "No, governess! How was that possible? Five daughters brought up at home without a governess!-I never heard of such a thing."^[2] The manner of Lady Catherine's comment is disagreeable. She appears to be a woman of great wisdom and knowledge, but in reality she knows little or nothing about high art. She says: "Of music! It is of all subjects my delight. I must have my share in the conversation, if you are speaking of music. There are few people in England, I suppose, who have more true enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste."^[2]

Mrs. Bennet, who is often looked down upon by readers and the writer of the novel, and associated with a number of derogatory terms. Jane Austen is good at characterizing, and she introduces Mrs. Bennet to readers in the first chapter of the novel with hundreds of words of dialogue. She is described by the writer as "Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married"^[2] The use of three adjectives "mean, little, uncertain" easily outlines a vulgar and uneducated mother and leaves readers with an impression of multiply words and non-stop complaining. In the middle of the novel, the elopement of Lidia, a daughter of her is naturally attributed to her mother's improper education.

Micro Ironic Speech Act

1. Assertive Irony

Assertive speech acts mainly include statements, depictions, reports and explanations, and so on. Searle points out that the fundamental condition of assertive speech acts are to make the speaker make a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed, which means he has to believe that what he is saying is true.^[5] An utterance is ironic if the speaker himself does not believe in the truth of the proposition at the time of utterance. For example, a dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. "My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?" Mr. Bennet replied that he had not. "But it is." returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it." Mr. Bennet made no answer. "Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently. "You want to tell me, and I have no objection to

hearing it." This is invitation enough.^[2] This is a typical example of an assertive ironic speech act.^[12] Mr. Bennet violated the principle of simple co-operation. According to Searle's basic condition of good faith, a speaker who wishes to obtain relevant information should give his wife a brief answer. However, Mrs. Bennet's remarks are not sincere, for she can not wait to tell Mr. Bennet the good news that a wealthy single man has arrived in their community. In addition, this ironic speech act reminds readers to pay attention to Mr. Bennet's sarcastic attitude toward his wife.

"I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women, I rather wonder now at your knowing any."^[2] Darcy honestly answered Elizabeth's question, but Elizabeth is suspicious of what he stated that he only knows six of women who are accomplished. She says "never", "no longer" to take her stand and to mock Darcy's arrogance to female in an assertive way.

2. Directive Irony

Directive irony is that the speaker expresses something with the intention of making the listener do something.^[7] Among them, the speaker expresses different or opposite meanings from his speech act through prescriptive irony. Although the speech act of the speaker sounds unreasonable, in a specific language environment, the listener can realize that the speaker is making sarcasm through the speech act.^[8] In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth has a strong feeling of dislike for Darcy after they met for the first time, which leads to Elizabeth constantly satirizing and mocking Darcy on various occasions. In the western society of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the principle of interpersonal communication between the two parties should be a certain amount of communication during dancing, but Darcy remained silent. Disgusted and annoyed by Darcy's silence, Elizabeth makes an ironic remark to Darcy and asks Darcy to talk, saying that she has talked about dancing and Darcy should talk about the size of the dance floor and the number of partners. This speech act is the directive irony, which is also Elizabeth's sarcasm on Darcy's behavior with the use of the directive words, and the irony of Darcy's silence on this occasion.

"Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces."^[2] Mr. Bennet conceals from his wife the fact that he has visited Mr. Bingley, and mentions Mr. Bingley several times that irritates Mrs. Bennet. She begins to scold Kitty for her coughing in order to vent her emotions. She uses the directive irony to give vent to her anger. Her exaggeration of her feelings represents her anxiousness of what her husband said and did. But when she learned that Mr. Bennet has visited Mr. Bingley, her anger instantaneously dissipated. At this moment, Mr. Bennet sends Kitty instruction "you may cough as much as you choose".^[2]

3. Commissive Irony

Commissive irony is when the speaker promises to do or not do something in a sincere tone, but with the intention of being ironic. This means that promises made by speakers are ironic if they don't really want to keep them or don't have the ability to keep them. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet always argue about their daughters' marriage. A dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet: "...Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him, if you do not." Mr. Bennet: "You are over scrupulous surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying which ever he chooses of the girls..."^[2] Mr. Bennet's "send a few lines" is a kind of commissive ironic speech act. Mrs. Bennet couldn't have done it by the social conventions of the time, so the promise made by Mr. Bennet "drop by and a few lines" is just out of the question. By making half-hearted promises, Mr. Bennet retorts his wife who is only interested in visiting and dating a single rich man for her girls.^[11]

When Mrs. Bennet learns that Elizabeth has refused Collins's proposal, she turns to Mr. Bennet, hoping that he will force her daughter to accept the proposal. So Elizabeth was requested to to his study, so Mrs. Bennet could say "that you insist upon her marrying him". After questioning Elizabeth carefully to verify what Mrs. Bennet once said, which implied his distrust of her. Mr. Bennet makes the final decision: "An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Collins, and I will never see you again if you do."^[2] Mr. Bennet's promise "I will never see you again" is directed to his wife. At beginning, what Mr. Bennet has done by asking Elizabeth to be present in his study and question her about marriage brings Mrs. Bennet hope and makes her believe that he takes her side. So the irony is even more stronger.

4. Expressive Irony

Expressive speech act refers to the speaker expressing his feelings, greetings, congratulations, welcome, apology and so on.^[4] However, the important condition of expressive irony is that what the speaker says is not his real psychological state. The main purpose of this irony is to praise or belittle the behavior of the listener. When Mr. Darcy arrogantly proposed to Elizabeth for the first time, he was rejected with stern words. With bitter prejudice, Elizabeth accuses him of ruining his sister Jane's happiness and depriving Wickham of his rights. By recalling Darcy's insolence at the first ball, she said flatly: "From the very beginning, from the first moment I may also say, one of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your selfish disdain of the feelings of others... and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed to marry." After hearing the reply, Darcy was shocked, and walked swiftly back and forth in the

room, and said: "and this is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me! I thank you for explaining it so fully."^[2] "I thank you..." is an example of expressive irony^[3]. Darcy has always believed that Elizabeth is of inferior birth, and that he is degrading himself, and that his superior social status and economic condition would ensure a satisfactory answer to his proposal. At that moment, he is suddenly accused and rejected unexpectedly, and he is deeply shocked and depressed. His body language and his lack of sincerity "thanks" makes readers fully understand his mood at that time. This ironic speech act made this scene become the most intense conflict since the beginning of the novel.

Conclusion

To sum up, the author introduces Austin and Searle's speech act theory and the study of Jane Austen's writing feature of the novel—irony in *Pride and Prejudice* from the perspective of macro speech act and micro speech act. By analyzing examples of dialogues and discourse from the novel, the researcher finds that it is necessary to analyze the inherent relationship between speech act theory and irony in the novel. Firstly, irony has the "indirect" feature, therefore, it is a type of indirect speech act. Secondly, irony can help the speaker to achieve the expectant intention and produce strong perlocutioanry effect. Thirdly, there will be contrary meaning between literary and real ones, therefore, irony should be comprehended from its illocutionary act. Fourthly, the analysis is not only a new angle of view to appreciate literary works and Jane Austen's writing techniques and skills, but also a way to improve that the feasibility of application of theory of general linguistics to the analysis of fiction texts. If the study of literature does not pay attention to the study of language, it cannot be an in-depth study in the text. The analysis of the speech act theory of literary text can reveal the author's real intention behind different kinds of speech acts, and at the same time, it is also an appreciation of the characteristics of literary creation. The paper only focuses on the analysis of Austen's ironic language from the speech act theory, and chooses some of the examples from the novel, therefore, the depth and breadth of research are insufficient. The researcher is looking forward to further research from different perspectives.

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