

Dynamics of Language: An analysis of Speech Acts in Sour Heart by Jenny Zhang

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ABSTRACT

Jenny Zhang's, *Sour Heart*, debut collection of short stories, is scrutinized with particular emphasis on the author's prose style. This paper delves extensively into the intricate mechanisms of language. The purpose of this study, which is grounded in speech act theory, is to examine how the characters' use of language to accomplish various tasks influences their identities, their relationships, and the stories' central themes. This paper's objective is to investigate the intricate ways in which speech acts influence the meaning of literary works such as *Sour Heart*. Moreover, the analysis has done through a meticulous examination of several narratives.

1. Introduction

Language is a potent instrument that can be employed for purposes beyond mere communication. It may be utilized to generate environments, express emotions, and alter human interaction. Language serves a purpose beyond mere communication. This paper employs the framework of speech act theory to analyse the linguistic transformations that occur in Jenny Zhang's poem *Sour Heart*. This theory was initially developed by John Searle and subsequently refined by J.L. Austin (Fish, 1976). The purpose of the study is to determine how Zhang's characters negotiate their identities, relationships, and personal liberty through the use of speech actions. This will be accomplished by analysing the utilization of language in performances.

Originating in the philosophy of language, speech act theory focuses primarily on the manner in which language is employed to perform. This type of theory examines the manner in which words not only communicate information but also execute actions (Searle, 1968). Through the lens of literary analysis, speech act theory has been applied to examine the ways in which the dialogue of characters influences the plot, relationships, and thematic depth of an entire work. Significant works by Austin "How to Do Things with Words" and Searle "Speech Acts" made this possible (Austin, 1962).

The majority of Zhang's first collection of short stories focuses on immigration and the interior lives of adolescents. When children are left home alone, she composes intricate sequences depicting them engaging in harmful power struggles and sexual encounters. The collection of short stories compiled by Zhang is the first volume to compile her entire body of work. Girls argue in "The Empty the Empty the Empty" and "Our Mothers before Them" regarding who has authority over their bodies and how they prefer to be caressed. These two narratives occur concurrently. "The Evolution of My Brother" is presented through the lens of a young woman whose sibling self-injures while attempting to test the limits of his physical capabilities. The central theme of Zhang's work is the closeness that develops between refugees who have shared a lack of privacy for years. According to the young people narrating these accounts, those closest to them find the traumatized individual "intolerable" due to the stress-inducing circumstances. Zhang is at her most expressive when she transcends the constraints of her youthful appearance. She is referring to the epiphanies that will occur as these individuals' age and come to understand how much they owe their parents. "It was only later, much, much, much later," an individual assert, "that I understood and accepted that my parents paid for me to be free." "It was only later." By employing the first-person point of view, each story maintains a consistent tone when interpreted collectively. Zhang frequently addresses the complexities of immigration, the inevitability of poverty, the various types of matrimony, and even the terror of approaching strangers; however, she is unable to do so through the use of first-person narratives (Zhang, 2018), (Zhang, 2013).

Sour Heart by Jenny Zhang is an anthology of poignant short stories that provide an intimate glimpse into the experiences of Chinese-American immigrants during the 1990s. Significant topics covered in these tales include family, identity, and the experience of being an immigrant. The narrative's intricate use of speech acts, which play a significant role in establishing the characters' and the story's overall connections, is an intriguing aspect. This essay will analyze the significance of speech actions in the film "*Sour Heart*," with a particular emphasis on their impact on character development, interpersonal communication, and the portrayal of cultural subtleties within the film.

2. Aims and Objectives

By analyzing the narratives in *Sour Heart*, this study aims to determine how language functions as a performance instrument. The purpose of the study is to determine how the story's characters utilize speech acts to establish the plot, relationships, and central ideas. Examining how saying acts contribute to the formation and transformation of the characters' personas within the collection is another primary objective. For this reason, comprehension of the manner in which language functions as a means for characters to articulate, challenge, or fortify their personal and collective identities (both individually and collectively) is imperative.

To provide context, the objective of the study is to situate speech actions within the narratives' broader social and cultural contexts. Examine the impact of cultural and social influences on the linguistic choices of the characters in *Sour Heart*, and how those language choices in turn mirror and transform the cultural and social realities depicted in the novel. Thus, this research attempts to enhance our comprehension of the dynamic and performative nature of language within literary narratives, focusing specifically on Jenny Zhang's *Sour Heart*.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach and entails a linguistic examination of multiple stories extracted from the collection of *Sour Heart*. The qualitative method predominantly follows the textual analysis (tkonen, 1980), (Barton, 2003), (Davis, 1995), (Blom, & Trosborg, 1992) of the Zhang's literary work. By examining the selected narratives via the framework of speech act theory, the theory was initially developed by John Searle and subsequently refined by J.L. Austin (Smith, 2003), (Searle, 1975), (Rust, 2005), (Kasper, 2006). This paper aims to identify instances where the characters' language serves as a performance act. Additionally, the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of language use will be examined. This examination will encompass both explicit and implicit forms of communication.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Speech Acts and Identity Construction

The speech acts that the characters in Jenny Zhang's *Sour Heart* employ serve as a significant factor in establishing their identities. This literary work provides an in-depth examination of the adolescent experiences of Chinese-Americans, primarily the daughters of immigrants, as they navigate the complexities of familial obligations, cultural anticipations, and adolescent challenges. The book's entire primary cast consists of the offspring of immigrants. Characters frequently converse in English and Chinese (Mandarin and Shanghainese), alternating between the two frequently. The characters' approach to their heritage and the society in which they find themselves is reflected in their language selection.

"I spoke English. At home, I spoke Shanghainese. Sometimes, the two languages blurred together, and I didn't know which one I was speaking."

The development of filial identities is influenced by verbal communication within the family unit, particularly between siblings and parents. Within the context of the family's customary behavior, the characters exhibit defiance, negotiation, or respect.

"I always addressed my elders with the proper titles. It was a sign of respect, a way of showing that I understood my place in the family hierarchy."

Frequently, speech acts illuminate the disparities that exist between the characters' self-perception and the perception of others. Individuals can develop a stronger sense of self by juxtaposing their personal experiences with those of their acquaintances and family.

"In school, Lily was always trying to impress the popular girls, saying things like she had her own phone line in her room, but I'd always known it was a lie."

Characters during their adolescent years can demonstrate their independence and defiance through the use of speech movements. This may potentially require challenging established beliefs or resisting parental authority.

"My mother said this as if her telling me what to do would actually result in me doing it. But I never listened to her. I did the opposite of what she said."

Through their speaking actions, the characters confront cultural expectations, illustrating the conflict that arises from the desire to maintain one's heritage while also assimilate into American society. Individuals consistently construct their cultural identities, and their linguistic and behavioral choices constitute an integral component of this ongoing process.

"My parents wanted us to be more 'American.' It was like living between two worlds."

Moreover, speech acts reveal the manner in which gender identities are constructed and the expected performance of gender roles within a particular culture. In regard to gender roles, the characters demonstrate the ability to reconcile the desires of their families with the expectations of society.

"A good daughter is like a sticky rice ball—whatever you throw at her, she swallows and still goes down sweet."

Significant disparities exist between verbal expressions and non-expressions in terms of how they influence an individual's personality. Character struggles with identity formation and internal conflicts are illustrated through the dialogue segments that remain silent and the secrets that characters elect not to reveal.

"We never talked about certain things. It was as if mentioning them would bring shame to the family."

Jenny Zhang demonstrates in her piece *Sour Heart* how identity formation can take on a variety of forms through the effective use of vocal movements. She accomplishes this by connecting language, society, familial relationships, and the free will of individuals. The incorporation of the characters' speech acts contributes to an in-depth examination of the complexities and difficulties associated with identity formation at the juncture of national and personal boundaries.

Thus, speech acts in *Sour Heart* are a dynamic, evolving, and multifaceted means of self-expression, negotiation, and identity formation. The inclusion of character voices in Zhang's works serves to further complicate the notions of group and individual identity within the broader thematic contexts that are explored via narration and dialogue.

4.2 Communication Dynamics and Power Structures

In addition to this, the speech actions depicted in *Sour Heart* significantly contribute to the establishment of power structures within families and the immigrant community at large. The bestowed authority upon certain characters, particularly those who are fluent in English, is a source of influence and power. Conversely, individuals who encounter challenges in communication due to linguistic barriers are frequently excluded from social circles and their perspectives are disregarded or misconstrued.

Zhang illustrates the distinctions among members of immigrant families by observing their manner of speech and movement. When newer generations struggle to comprehend the cultural norms and standards that their elders hold for them, such hierarchies develop. Circumstances in which members of distinct groups are unable to communicate with one another are an illustration of this dynamic. When this occurs, the conflict of linguistic conventions signifies more significant challenges that stem from generational and cultural differences.

Power dynamics within households are often reflected in the manner in which parents and children debate. At times, parental authority can be manifested through their language and tone of voice when conversing with their children, which may indicate that they hold a superior position relative to the children. A parent's words, for instance, may be authoritative, instructive, or stringent; each of these speech actions contributes to the establishment of power structures within the family.

"My mother said this as if her telling me what to do would actually result in me doing it. But I never listened to her. I did the opposite of what she said."

A compilation of brief narratives revolving around individuals who are endeavouring to navigate the complexities of their new and old cultures. The characters delve into intergenerational tensions and the evolution of interpersonal communication styles. The power struggles that arise from cultural and generational differences are illustrated in Zhang's stories through the confrontation of traditional values and innovative concepts. The concepts explored in Zhang's stories are contemporary in nature.

"I spoke to my grandmother in the polite, formal Chinese reserved for elders, but she answered me in Shanghainese, the language she spoke to her own children."

Power differentials can also be observed in interpersonal communication, regardless of whether they stem from social status, popularity, or another factor. Characters engage in speech acts to demonstrate their superiority over others or to withstand peer pressure. Power differentials among individuals within their social circles manifest themselves in their speech patterns and interpersonal exchanges.

"In school, Lily was always trying to impress the popular girls, saying things like she had her own phone line in her room, but I'd always known it was a lie."

There are other ways to demonstrate power relations besides discourse. To maintain authority, characters may also conceal information or emotions. By means of this, silence and the unspoken may also expose power structures. You can demonstrate your strength by intentionally avoiding certain topics or by remaining silent. These two strategies complement one another well.

"We never talked about the things that happened behind closed doors. We just pretended everything was normal."

Variations in income have the potential to influence interpersonal communication, as evidenced by the ways in which characters from diverse backgrounds employ language to either affirm or contest authority. As the protagonists in this collection progress from one social class to the next, the various forms of language they encounter are portrayed in the short stories.

"In our apartment, the words 'mold' and 'lead' didn't exist. We didn't have those problems. Those were the problems of Americans, rich people. Not us."

The book *Sour Heart* by Jenny Zhang demonstrates how a shift in interpersonal communication impacts the development of relationships and the revelation of power dynamics within the narrative. These are critical segments of the narratives pertaining to the operation of the information and electrical systems. Zhang adeptly employs interpersonal discourse patterns to illuminate power dynamics within familial units, intergenerational circles, and friendships. Whether or not the characters express them, their speech acts assist us in understanding what power and choice entail within the context of their intricate lives.

4.3 Cultural Nuances and Speech Acts

There are also speech acts in *Sour Heart* that show the subtleties of Chinese society and how they affect the characters' relationships with each other. Zhang really does a great job of adding these cultural details to the story. Honourifics, politeness, and using them in speaking are all important parts of Chinese communication. Characters are able to share their cultural heritage through spoken acts, which shows how important language is for keeping customs alive and passing them on.

Jenny Zhang's story *Sour Heart* is full of cultural details that shape the way people talk and interact. The characters in this book are Chinese-American, and the story is about their lives and how they connect with each other within the cultural setting.

The people in *Sour Heart* talk in a lot of different languages and registers of speech. The fact that people in the Chinese-American society speak Mandarin, Shanghainese, and English shows how culturally diverse the community is.

"In school, I spoke English. At home, I spoke Shanghainese. Sometimes, the two languages blurred together, and I didn't know which one I was speaking."

There are a lot of cultural references, symbols, and idioms in speech acts that have special meanings for the players based on their own cultures. By using cultural references, authors help readers better understand both the characters' pasts and the meanings of the words they use.

"My mother used to say, 'A good daughter is like a sticky rice ball—whatever you throw at her, she swallows and still goes down sweet.'"

People in China speak in ways that show the struggle between Western ideas and traditional Chinese values. There are ways for characters to express themselves that are both in line with

traditional norms and question those norms. It can be hard to balance keeping cultural traditions alive and adjusting to a new cultural setting. Speech acts provide a space for negotiating this contradiction.

"My grandmother always insisted on the traditional ways, but my parents wanted us to be more 'American.' It was like living between two worlds."

Speech acts are used to stress the cultural importance of family relationships by showing things like respect for elders and filial piety. Using formal language, showing respect, and being polite are all cultural values that show up in the way people talk or act in the family.

"I always addressed my elders with the proper titles. It was a sign of respect, a way of showing that I understood my place in the family hierarchy."

There's a chance that some topics are cultural taboos, which can lead to pauses or carefully chosen words in some speech acts. This shows that the characters are aware of how sensitive the situation is to different cultures. The parts of conversation that aren't said show how hard it is to talk to people whose cultural expectations are different from your own.

"We never talked about certain things. It was as if mentioning them would bring shame to the family."

The speech acts that show how the characters' Chinese background and their experiences in the United States connect are used to explore their layered identities. The characters have a hard time figuring out how to describe themselves in the context of the different cultures that make up their identities.

"I was neither fully Chinese nor fully American. I was something in between, and my speech reflected that duality."

Jenny Zhang skillfully adds cultural detail to her characters' speech and actions so that the reader can get a full picture of what it's like to be Chinese-American. Communication through language is a very powerful tool that can help people show who they are, understand how different cultures work, and connect people from different places.

5. Conclusion

Through the use of speech acts in *Sour Heart*, Jenny Zhang shows how speech acts can be used for more than just talking. From this point of view, we can look into the complicated issues of identity, power, and societal differences. People reading this book in the 1990s can really understand the complicated experiences of Chinese-American immigrants by looking at the choices the characters make with language. These choices show the characters' inner struggles. *Sour Heart* not only becomes a great work of literature, but it also becomes a cultural inquiry that deals with the universal problems of who we are and where we fit. A careful study of saying acts is used to achieve this. This paper endeavours to contribute to the broader comprehension of how speech acts influence the act of reading. Through this

perspective, one can discern the diverse methods through which characters navigate their respective worlds by employing language.

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