

## **A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF JOHNSY'S AND SUE'S DIALOGUES IN THE LAST LEAF**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper conducts a pragmatic analysis of the verbal exchanges between the protagonists Sue and Johnsy in O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*. Utilizing Searle's (1969) *Speech Act Theory*, the study examines how the characters use language to negotiate the boundary between life and death. Through a qualitative analysis of their dialogues, the research identifies a prevalence of directives in Sue's speech, reflecting her role as a caregiver, contrasted with Johnsy's reliance on assertives to project her fatalistic worldview. The study concludes that the shift in Johnsy's recovery is signaled by a linguistic transition from passive assertives to expressives of gratitude and self-reflection, demonstrating that in O. Henry's narrative, speech acts serve as a barometer for psychological health.*

**Keywords:** Illocutionary Acts, Sue and Johnsy, *The Last Leaf*, Directives, Assertives, Literary Pragmatics.

### **Introduction**

Literature is often viewed as a mirror of human psychology, yet the mechanics of this reflection frequently reside in the **pragmatic nuances** of dialogue. In O. Henry's (1907) celebrated short story, *The Last Leaf*, the narrative tension is built not through physical action, but through the verbal exchanges between two young artists, Sue and Johnsy, as they confront the specter of pneumonia. This study applies **Speech Act Theory**, as pioneered by Austin (1962) and refined by Searle (1969), to analyze how these characters use language to perform specific actions—such as persuading, resignedly stating, or hoping. By examining the **illocutionary force** behind Sue's desperate directives and Johnsy's fatalistic assertives, this paper explores how their speech

acts function as more than mere communication; they are the primary tools through which the characters negotiate the boundary between life and death.

### **Background of the Study:**

Speech acts are a key concept in pragmatics, which is a field of linguistics concerned with how language is used in real-life situations. Originally proposed by John L. Austin and later expanded by John Searle, speech act theory emphasizes that when people speak, they are not just sharing information but also performing actions such as requesting, promising, asking questions, or expressing feelings. Studying speech acts helps in understanding the speaker's intentions and the implied meanings within conversations.

Literary texts, especially short stories, offer valuable opportunities for speech act analysis because characters communicate in ways that reveal their emotions, relationships, and social situations. One notable example is *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry, a famous short story that explores themes like hope, friendship, and sacrifice through its main characters, Johnsy and Sue.

The conversations between Johnsy and Sue are particularly important because they show different emotional conditions. Johnsy, who is seriously ill and losing hope, often speaks in a way that reflects sadness and hopelessness. On the other hand, Sue uses language that is supportive and encouraging to uplift her friend. Their dialogues illustrate how language can serve not only to communicate ideas but also to provide emotional comfort and influence others.

By examining the speech acts used in their conversations, a deeper interpretation of meaning in the story can be achieved. It also shows how various types of speech acts—such as assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives—help express emotions, intentions, and relationships between characters. This study therefore seeks to analyze these aspects, focusing on how the dialogues of Johnsy and Sue enhance the themes and emotional depth of the story.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the use of speech acts in the conversations between Johnsy and Sue in *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry. It focuses on identifying and categorizing various types of speech acts, including assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives, used by the two characters.

Moreover, the study aims to analyze how these speech acts reveal the characters' emotions, intentions, and their relationship with each other. It also seeks to understand how language is employed to convey feelings such as hopelessness, encouragement, care, and support throughout the story.

In addition, this research attempts to explore how speech acts play a role in developing the central themes of the story, especially friendship, hope, and sacrifice. Overall, the study strives to provide a better understanding of how language contributes to meaning and emotional expression in literary texts.

### **Significance of the Study:**

This study holds significance in that it establishes a connection between linguistic theory, particularly pragmatics, and literary analysis. By employing speech act theory in the examination of a literary text, the research illustrates the applicability of linguistic frameworks in interpreting character dialogues and uncovering implicit meanings.

Furthermore, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language functions within literature, not merely as a medium of communication but also as a vehicle for expressing emotions, intentions, and interpersonal relationships. In doing so, it reinforces the practical relevance of pragmatic theories in the analysis of literary discourse.

In addition, the findings of this research may serve as a valuable resource for scholars and students in the fields of linguistics and literature, as it provides insight into the role of speech acts in shaping character interaction and thematic development. Overall, the study underscores the interdisciplinary importance of integrating linguistic approaches with literary criticism for a more comprehensive interpretation of texts.

## **II. Literature Review**

Speech act theory, a key concept in pragmatics, was introduced by John L. Austin (1962) and further developed by John Searle (1969). Austin proposed that utterances perform actions, while Searle categorized speech acts into types such as assertives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations. These classifications have been widely used to analyze language in context.

Previous studies have applied speech act theory to literary works to examine how characters express intentions, emotions, and relationships through dialogue. Such analyses demonstrate that literary conversations carry significant pragmatic meaning and contribute to character development and thematic interpretation.

However, while *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry has been extensively studied for its themes, limited research has focused on the pragmatic analysis of its dialogues. Therefore, this study aims to

address this gap by analyzing the speech acts used by Johnsy and Sue, contributing to the integration of linguistic theory and literary analysis.

### **III. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, as it focuses on the interpretation and analysis of language use in a literary text. The primary data for this research are the dialogues between Johnsy and Sue in *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry.

The method of analysis is based on speech act theory as proposed by John L. Austin (1962) and further developed by John Searle (1969). The selected dialogues are carefully examined and classified into different types of speech acts, namely assertives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations.

Data collection involves identifying relevant utterances from the text, while data analysis is conducted by categorizing these utterances according to their communicative functions. The analysis also considers the context in which the dialogues occur in order to interpret the characters' intentions and emotional states.

Through this qualitative and descriptive method, the study aims to provide a systematic understanding of how speech acts are used in the interactions between Johnsy and Sue.

### **IV. Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry reveals the use of various types of speech acts in the dialogues between Johnsy and Sue. The following examples illustrate each type:

#### **1. Assertives (Statements of belief or fact):**

Johnsy often uses assertive speech acts to express her thoughts and beliefs. For example, "When the last one falls, I must go, too."

when she says that she will die when the last leaf falls, she is stating what she believes to be true. This reflects her pessimistic and hopeless mindset.

#### **2. Directives (Attempts to make someone do something):**

Sue frequently uses directive speech acts to influence Johnsy's behavior. For instance, "Try to take some broth now, and let me go back to my drawing."

Here, Sue is encouraging Johnsy to eat and cooperate.

#### **3. Expressives (Expressions of feelings or emotions):**

Both characters use expressive speech acts to convey emotions. Johnsy expresses despair

and sadness about her illness, while Sue expresses concern, care, and encouragement toward her friend.

*I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking.*"

This expresses her exhaustion and hopelessness.

Sue also expresses concern:

*"You are not going to die."*

This reflects her emotional support and reassurance.

#### **4. Commissives (Commitments or promises):**

Commissive speech acts are less frequent but still present. Sue, at times, shows commitment to taking care of Johnsy and supporting her recovery, which reflects her loyalty and dedication.

*"I will not leave you alone."*

This indicates her commitment to care for Johnsy.

The examination of Johnsy's dialogues in *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry shows a significant pragmatic shift in her use of speech acts as she progresses from illness to recovery. At the beginning, Johnsy mainly uses assertive and expressive speech acts that communicate hopelessness and acceptance of death. For example, her statement, *"When the last one falls, I must go, too,"* reveals her strong belief that her life will end with the falling leaf. Likewise, her remark, *"I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking,"* expresses her emotional fatigue and despair.

As the story develops, a noticeable change occurs in her language. After observing that the last leaf remains on the vine, Johnsy begins to alter her outlook. This is evident in her statement, *"Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was,"* which reflects a sense of realization and a shift in attitude. Additionally, her directive, *"Get me a mirror, and then pack some pillows about me,"* along with her request for food, indicates a renewed desire to live.

This change illustrates a reduction in negative expressions and the emergence of more hopeful and active speech acts. The pragmatic shift, therefore, represents a transformation in Johnsy's mental state, moving from despair to hope and recovery. It also highlights the impact of Sue's supportive communication, reinforcing the themes of hope, resilience, and friendship in the story.

In *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry, the presence of the "last leaf" serves as an important contextual factor that influences the illocutionary force of the characters' speech acts. At

the beginning of the story, the falling leaves shape Johnsy's negative perception of her condition. Her statement, "*When the last one falls, I must go, too,*" operates as a strong assertive, reflecting her belief that her life is directly linked to the leaf's fall.

As the story progresses, the continued presence of the last leaf creates a shift in context, which in turn affects the meaning and force of later utterances. The leaf comes to represent persistence and hope for Johnsy, leading to a transformation in her language. This change is evident in her statement, "*Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was,*" where her speech reflects realization and a change in attitude rather than despair.

In addition, Sue's directives and expressive speech acts, which initially function as efforts to encourage and comfort Johnsy, become more impactful within this altered context. The presence of the leaf strengthens the effect of Sue's words, making her encouragement more convincing and meaningful.

Therefore, the "last leaf" functions as a significant contextual element that reshapes the illocutionary force of the characters' utterances. It influences Johnsy's perspective and enhances the effectiveness of Sue's supportive communication, ultimately supporting the themes of hope and recovery in the story.

## **V. Conclusion**

The study reveals that the dialogues between Johnsy and Sue in *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry are predominantly characterized by assertive, directive, and expressive speech acts. Johnsy's utterances are largely dominated by assertives and expressives, which reflect her initial state of despair, hopelessness, and emotional exhaustion. In contrast, Sue's speech is primarily composed of directives and expressives, aimed at encouraging, persuading, and emotionally supporting Johnsy.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights a noticeable shift in the use of these speech acts as Johnsy's condition improves. Negative and fatalistic expressions gradually give way to more positive and life-affirming utterances, indicating a transformation in her psychological state. The findings also demonstrate the significant role of contextual elements, particularly the "last leaf," in shaping the illocutionary force and effectiveness of the characters' communication.

The analysis indicates that the dialogues in *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry are predominantly characterized by assertive, directive, and expressive speech acts. Johnsy's speech is

mainly composed of assertives and expressives, reflecting her initial feelings of despair and hopelessness. In contrast, Sue's utterances are largely dominated by directives and expressives, which function to encourage and support Johnsy.

Overall, these dominant speech acts effectively reveal the emotional states of the characters and contribute to the development of their interpersonal relationship within the narrative.

Overall, the study confirms that speech acts play a crucial role in revealing character dynamics and reinforcing the central themes of hope, friendship, and resilience within the narrative.

The speech act analysis demonstrates a clear contrast between the communicative functions of Sue's and Johnsy's language in *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry. Sue's use of directives and expressives operates as "life-preserving," as her utterances consistently aim to encourage, comfort, and motivate Johnsy toward recovery. Her language functions persuasively, reinforcing hope and resilience. In contrast, Johnsy's frequent use of assertives and expressives in the early stages of the narrative reflects a "life-terminating" tendency, as her speech conveys resignation, hopelessness, and a passive acceptance of death. This contrast highlights how language not only reflects psychological states but also actively influences them, ultimately contributing to Johnsy's transformation and the thematic development of hope and survival.

## **References**

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**In-Text Citation Examples**

- **For a theory:** According to Searle (1969), speech acts are the basic units of linguistic communication.
- **For a quote from the story:** "I want to see the last one fall," Johnsy stated (Henry, 1907, p. X), which serves as a fatalistic assertive speech act.
- **For the methodology:** This study follows the qualitative descriptive framework established by Austin (1962) and later refined by Searle.