

How Drama Directors Empower Lines to be Actionable

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Abstract

In order to provide a more scientific and effective method for the presenting of lines in drama directing, this paper, based on the Speech Act Theory proposed by Austin and combined with the Stage Action Theory in drama, puts forward a practical method for how the director empowers the lines of drama to be actionable.

Keywords

Speech Act Theory; Stage Action; Subtext.

1. Introduction

In present day, some research has already studied the relations between drama and linguistics. On the one hand, given a considerable need to dramas, studies about drama currently are rather underrepresented. On the other hand, most of these studies only focused on analysis to text, regarding plays merely as written materials such as poetry, fiction, or conversation. Drama was born with two characteristics, one is literariness, the other is theatricality which means a play has to be performed out in front of the audiences thus can achieve the original dramatic form. Although plays only pursuing literariness but unsuitable for performance were once popular in the 19th century, such plays have faded in contemporary life. Modern dramaturgy recognizes the importance of theatricality, while in the cross-disciplines of drama and linguistics, few studies have investigated the theatricality of drama.

2. First Step: Analyze the Three Acts of Dialogue with Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory was first put forward by the British philosopher Austin in 1962, starting from the study of the function of everyday language. Austin believes that the unit of linguistic communication is not sentences but the Speech Act implemented by these sentences.

His first assertion at the theory is the claim that there are two types of sentences: performatives and constatives. Performative sentences refer to that sentences do not describe things thus they can not be said to be true or false. The uttering of these sentences is, or is a part of, the doing of an action.

Here are some examples for the “performative sentences”.

- a. I promise to go back in time.
- b. I declare the game open.
- c. I name my son John.

Constatives means that the sentence is a description of what the speaker is doing at the time of speaking.

Here are some examples for the “constatives sentences”.

- a. (Physics teacher) I put a square on the ramp, and push it.

He/she must accompany the words with the actual putting and pushing, otherwise others can say that he/she is making a false statement.

However, when Austin tried to separate performatives from constatives on grammatical and lexical level, he discovered that the distinction between performatives and constatives is not

concrete. On the one hand, sentence like “Thank you from the bottom of my heart” seems a performative, but the speaker has already expressed the gratitude to the hearer. On the other hand, even the most typical constative verb like state, can be used to make a true difference instead of just to describe. Sentence like “I state that I’m alone responsible” makes a statement with the speaker’s undertaking of responsibility. Finally, Austin came to conclusion that all sentences can make truly difference to the real world.

In the latter part of his book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin rethought the question “In what sense to say something equal to do something?” In his opinion, there are three acts in which saying something may be understood as doing something. The three acts are Locutionary Act, Illocutionary Act, and Perlocutionary Act.

Locutionary Act means that using organs to make sound and organize the sound in a particular way, then express a specific meaning. After that, Austin suggested there is another act with the practicing of Locutionary Act, as asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or a criticism, making an identification or giving a description.

Illocutionary Act means when one speak a specific sentence, he/she have certain purpose and intention in producing them, as Austin puts forward, certain force. In this act, to say something is to do something. In Austin’s statement, “force” is a part of “meaning”, but which is used in a narrow sense, so “force” is more exact. Thus, illocutionary force is equivalent to contextual meaning or extra meaning.

Perlocutionary Act means the consequential effects that result from the utterance of speaker, such as changing the hearer’s opinions, misleading, surprising, or inspiring the hearer to do something.

Here are some examples.

a. It is cold here.

Locutionary act: giving a description that the weather is cold here;

Illocutionary act: (can be) a request to the hearer to shut the window;

Perlocutionary act: (can be) the hearer’s shutting of the window or his/her refusal to comply.

b.

(At home, the telephone rings)

Husband: That’s the phone!

Wife: I’m in the bathroom!

Husband: Okay.

The first sentence, “That’s the phone!” Locutionary Act is giving his wife information that the phone is ringing; Illocutionary Act is asking his wife to answer the phone; Perlocutionary Act is his wife’s refusal to comply.

The second sentence, “I’m in the bathroom!” Locutionary Act is giving a description that she is in the bathroom; Illocutionary Act is instructing her husband to answer the phone; Perlocutionary Act is her husband’s answering to the phone.

The final sentence: “Okay.” Locutionary Act is giving information that he knows the situation of his wife; Illocutionary Act is a promise to answer the phone; Perlocutionary Act (can be) his wife’s proceeding of her own things or her satisfaction to her husband.

Analysis of lines does not only emphasize dialogue but also monologue which usually is lengthy and carries character’s viewpoints. When analyzing monologues, different levels are analyzed according to the logic of the characters. At the same time, when a character’s monologue is used to express a point of view, it is often more logical than emotional. So different from the analysis of dialogue which needs to pay special attention to the illocutionary act, the analysis of

monologue should emphasize on the analysis from the angles of Locutionary Act and perlocutionary act. In other words, when a character makes a monologue to express an opinion, the most important point is what the character says and what the effect is, instead of the intention, because, in most cases, the intention is to persuade others.

3. Next Step: Analyze the Subtext of the Lines based on the Above Analysis

The origin of the concept "Stage Action" is unknown, but with the development of Stanislavsky's system, the importance of Stage Action begins to be noticed. Stanislavsky was the first researcher who defined and classified "Stage Action". In his theory, Stage Action is a relatively complete process of behaviors, which is created by actors as characters with the help of directors, and displayed received information on stage. Most important of all, such performance is restricted by the given circumstances and aims to achieve a certain purpose.

Stanislavsky proposed two criteria on the classification of Stage Action, one is classified by sizes of units for a whole play-one action is done from the beginning to the end, or it just be done in one single Act, or even be done in a scene. The other is classified by different properties-that's how the action is done, or by which ability of human. Under the latter category, Stage Action can be classified as Mental Action, Physical action, and Verbal action.

How directors deal with Stage Action is an important problem that the director must solve in the phases of rehearsal and performance. All generations of directors have their own answers to this. Nowadays, there are several aspects which are generally recognized as basics to handling and organizing Stage Action.

- 1) Analyze, search and summarize the accurate and effective actions of all characters on stage;
- 2) Create and organize specific links and levels of conflict and action;
- 3) Sharpen given circumstances where external conflict is not as sharp as it should be;
- 4) Handle the characters' verbal and physical action creatively;
- 5) Help actors create specific characters by finding and organizing Stage Action;
- 6) Use a variety of stage techniques to achieve Stage Action.

The forth aspect is focalized since language and motion are two main means of actors to execute and complete characters' Stage Action. When directors are helping actors fulfill verbal and physical action, they should pay attention to make language actionable and motion speakable.

Making language actionable implies that through the co-creation of directors and actors, Verbal Action on stage should be able to convey profound thoughts of characters; Actors should be able to perform out of characteristics of roles rather than directly speak out about them; Relationships between roles should be displayed rather than simply tell audience the relation. Through this process, the characters' purpose and intention will be conveyed more actively, accurately and effectively so to influence or even change the other characters' Stage Action.

In order to achieve this goal, directors can start from subtexts of the lines. which are hidden meaning and unspeakable words of the lines, determining the logical accent, pause and intonation of the lines. Accent, pause and intonation are the main techniques to facilitate actors to convey the true meaning of the lines. In other words, use above techniques by way of finding out the subtexts of lines can make drama lines actionable.

In one example of *Luotuo Xiangzi*, Tigress comes to Xiangzi, pretending to be pregnant, hoping to marry him. But when she arrives, Mrs. Gao asks her to wait in the hallway rather than let her in. Tigress says "怨不得你躲着我呢，敢情这儿有个妖精似的小老妈儿!".

In the version of Director Mei Qian and Actress Shu Xiuwen, Tigress gave "敢情这儿" and "小老妈儿" the highest intonation, and put accent on "敢情这儿". By this sentence, Tigress is teasing

Mrs. Gao with her fiery personality, and Xiangzi is not back yet, so the first half of the sentence is not the point. The highest intonation of “敢情这儿” and “小老妈儿” and accent on “敢情这儿” achieve the purpose to get Mrs. Gao’s attention and irritate her. Furthermore, the accent can not be put on “妖精”, because Tigress loves Xiangzi, she would not say that Xiangzi likes “妖精”; also, the accent can not be put on “小老妈儿” either, because Tigress in this scene is not jealous of Mrs. Gao, but blamed her for not letting her in, if she put accent on “小老妈儿”, it would appear that Tigress’s emotion is too strong to weaken her character.

From the example above, it can be concluded that nowadays directors and actors have already payed attention to the analysis and expression of subtext in their creation, but their analysis of subtext is still at a relatively perceptual level and lacks systematic methodologies. The three explicit stages of Speech Act Theory make it possible to understand drama lines at different levels, thus providing a more scientific and effective method for drama directors to make drama lines actionable. This is exactly the new method proposed by this paper.

4. Final Step: Use Basic Techniques of Stage Language to Express the Subtext

Language is the materialization of thought. Language exists for the expression of thought. Therefore, the use of stage language techniques, first of all, must be on the basis of a correct understanding of the drama and the ideological meaning of the lines.

But on the stage, the actor speaks the language that the author has written, the words of the character. If an actor on the stage simply recites the lines, performing without personal attitude and genuine feelings, then even if his/her tongue is clear, the voice is very loud, speaking is rhythmic, these lines stay as some empty words that do not convert to lively artistic language.

Accent, pause and intonation are the three basic means of lines expression. Only by mastering these basic techniques can an actor express the meaning of lines in a script, and lay a foundation for creating a distinctive representation of characters on the stage.

In everyday life, the means of expressing a person’s language is natural, plain, and unconscious. But on the stage, creator must refine the means of expressing lines and consciously use them to achieve better performance outcome.

4.1. Accent

Accent refers to the important words in a sentence that should be emphasized. The methods of putting accents are varied and should not be understood simply as stress. As Stanislavsky said, “Accent like your index finger pointing to the most important words in a sentence or a stanza! The accent contains the soul, the inner substance, and the main element of the subtext!”

From the point of view of logic, there is only one main logical accent in a sentence. The logical accent determines the main meaning of the sentence and is the word that should be emphasized most.

Accent is subordinate to verbal action, and it is one of the important means of communication. Identify the accent wrongly or use it incorrectly on stage immediately reveals that the actor has an inaccurate or inappropriate understanding of the lines.

Ouyang once mentioned at a lecture that several troupes have made one Chen Bailu’s line wrong when they performed Cao Yu’s *Sunrise*.

Here are some examples.

黑三：（气汹汹的，对着后边的党羽）进来，你们请进来，搜搜吧。

白露：（忽然声色俱厉地）站住，都进来？你们吃什么长大的？你们要是横不讲理，这个码头不讲理的祖宗在这儿！！

Several actors put the accent on “这儿”, while Ouyang Yuqian thought it should be on “祖宗”, because Chen Bailu aimed to overpower Heisan’s arrogance, emphasize “祖宗” is really more forceful than emphasize “这儿” and make the meaning more profound.

Efficient ways to identify accent first lie in treating lines in a holistic rather isolated manner. Lines in drama situate in a context where preceding and following information work together to exert an influence. Therefore, it is impossible to analyze every line in isolation but only to study the meaning and function of each sentence from the content, the theme, the development of the plot and the changes in the actions of the characters in the context. In short, if directors and actors can draw on the illocutionary act, the analysis of the lines can be more accurate.

Then, the Perlocutionary Act will perform the function of helping character determine the accent based on the other character’s response.

Here are some examples:

To die-- to sleep--

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd.

(From *Hamlet*)

In this sentence, “heart-ache”, “shocks”, “consummation” and “wish” can all be determined as accents, but it can be seen that “consummation” is the most important word, and if it is erased, this sentence will lose its meaning, because these are the words of Hamlet, in his own silent meditation, full of unutterable pain. At this time he was entangled in contradiction and did not decide yet a way to revenge. And an imaginary, ideal “consummation” is exactly what he craves. When creators employ illocutionary and perlocutionary acts to analyze a line, they can then determine which word is the most important one and should emphasize.

4.2. Pause

A pause is a break in one’s voice while speaking. In daily life, the pauses in speech are natural and unconsciously formed. The pause of stage language must be formed by the actors on the basis of deep understanding and experience of the content of the work and determine according to the needs of the work and the role.

The pause is divided into logical pause and psychological pause. The logical pause helps the speaker to organize the stanza and the whole sentence, clarify its meaning, and make what the character is saying clear and easy to understand. The psychological pause comes from the mental state of the speaker, which is dominated by desire, psychology and emotion. It must not destroy the logical pause, but reinforce it. However, in some special cases, the psychological pause can not be regulated by the logical pause, and can stop at the place that seems can not stop according to logic and grammar.

Pause is also an important means of conveying subtext when an actor is performing on stage. There should be different practices such as the development, transition, turning point and replacement of thoughts among the pauses in lines.

4.3. Intonation

Intonation is the sound color of language. Intonation is produced by feelings and images inspired by clear thoughts, distinct attitudes, and strong desires. An actor should try to find the right tone to convey these thoughts, attitudes, desires and feelings in a clear and vivid way to affect the audience.

The determination of intonation of a sentence should be based on the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of the sentence, as well as on the characters’ relationship between each

other, so that the subtexts can be accurately conveyed, because the same sentence can have completely different meanings when spoken in different intonation. There is a classic exercise in the training of actors, which is to ask actors to say “hello” in totally different intonation. A qualified actor should be able to change more than ten intonation in a short time to complete this exercise. In order to complete this exercise and stimulate actors’ sensibilities and creativity, teachers and directors will ask practitioners standing in front of one person who do not speak, then imagine the relationship between them or what happened before, for example, a pair of previous friends meeting in the street-that is a kind of “hello”; a pair of enemies meeting in the street - is a different “hello”; meeting a friend when one has just learned parents’ death-is another “hello”; meeting a stranger when one just won a prize-it is also another “hello”. This is the power of intonation.

Intonation changes are the result of different combinations of three dimensions-high and low, fast and slow, strong and weak. At the same time, intonation does not exist in isolation, either, but is restricted by the theme and character image, and is generated on the basis of unified conception of director.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly proposes a method to make drama lines actionable which contains three steps. Firstly, Speech Act Theory is used to analyze the locutionary act, illocutionary act, and Perlocutionary Act of each lines; secondly, obtain the subtext based on the analysis of Speech Act Theory; thirdly, determine the accent, pause and intonation of the lines by incorporating Speech Act Theory and the analysis of subtext. With rehearsal and practice, that characters in a play can get the unity of internal and external aspects, then actors have the chance to get real experience on stage.

This approach has enabled linguistic theories not only to be used for analysis, but also for creation. Language, as a tool, is the carrier of thought and emotion, and most linguistic analysis makes such thought and emotion transitioning from unconscious to conscious. By contrast, the language of drama on stage needs to reverse this process, making thought and emotion from conscious to unconscious so that performance can be natural and become “life-like”.

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