

Promotion of performative utterances in in our time



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Words are important. But, as is commonly said, ‘actions speak louder than words.’ In speech-act theory, there are two types of utterances, constative and performative. Constative utterances can be identified as true or false. Performative utterances perform some action through the act of being spoken, or as John J. Austin writes, “to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (Austin, 6). If actions do hold more influence than speech, speech-action would be the most influential type of speech. This is why, in Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, Nick is shaped by the performative utterances of authority figures more than he is shaped by constative utterances. In order to show the utility of performative utterances and how they are promoted in the English language over constative utterances, a close reading is required. The performative utterances of Nick’s father in “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” influence Nick for the book’s entirety. At the end of the story, Dick, Nick’s father, leaves the house and his wife for a walk. His wife asks him to send Nick inside to speak with her. He does not. The dialogue, “All right. Come on, then” (Hemingway, 76) is a performative utterance, one that grants permission with its usage. And, with its usage, Nick learns that it is acceptable to retreat from human interaction and connection, especially in favor of nature and the outdoors. Readers can gather from Dick’s character and behavior that this utterance is not an anomaly, that performative utterances highlighting the acceptability of isolating oneself in nature are frequent in Nick’s childhood. This type of utterance becomes a part of Nick’s identity, as is evident in the next story, “The End of Something.” It is fitting that this story follows immediately. The stories’ order underlines the connection between Dick’s performative utterance and his son’s isolation

from people in favor of nature. In this narrative, Nick goes on a camping trip with his girlfriend and a close friend. Following his father's lesson, Nick isolates himself from both. "Isn't love any fun?" asks Marjorie. And Nick replies "no" (Hemingway 81). With this, their relationship ends and Nick seems to be left alone with nature. This is where readers first see Nick isolate himself according to his father's teaching through the influence of performative utterance. But Nick is not alone. Again, the part of his identity that prefers nature to man is evident: "Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while." And with that, Nick is finally alone with nature. This preference for nature over people is shown in "Big Two-Hearted River" as well. The phrase "The coffee according to Hopkins" suggests that Nick does have a longing for human interaction. But due to his father's performative language, and to how that language has rooted itself in Nick's identity, he chose to go on the trip alone.

Going backward to "Indian Camp" can show that constative utterances, even seemingly important ones, hold less influence on the forming of identity than performative utterances. In example, the dialogue exchange at the end of "Indian Camp," which only contains constative utterances and seems to be a formative experience for Nick, holds no influence over him. Though his father tries to reassure him about the nature of death (with utterances that could be identified as true or false), Nick denies the notion of his own death. A lesson opposite the intended one is learned because of the usage of constative utterances and the demotion of constative utterances in the English language. Not only do they appear to hold less influence than performative utterances on the formation of an identity, but they may also

have the reverse effect. Whereas performative utterances influence along the lines of the utterance (Nick is given permission through speech and he applies that permission to his identity), a constative utterance from authority figure may cause an identity to absorb an antithetical lesson (Dick states that death is easy and Nick feels he won't die) (Hemingway 70).

Jonathan Culler puts the promotive quality of performative language a different way: “ performative language is... bringing things into being, organizing the world rather than simply representing what it is” (Culler 101-102). Culler is saying that performative utterances shape the world around us, including identities within that world. One reason that performative utterances might be more influential than constative utterances is that they cannot be false. Perhaps the possibility or suspicion of falsehood could drive one away from a lesson taught through constative utterances. Performative utterances cannot be false since they themselves constitute the sole authority on that utterance. So, when Dick utters “ alright,” he grants permission and at the same time makes the utterance the only evidence as to whether Dick grants permission or not, since it created the permission. In cases like this, a performative utterance commits the specified action of the utterance and confirms the utterance itself. This factor increases the utterance's ethos by making it more reliable, thus causing the subject, in this case Nick, to absorb the lesson.

Works Cited

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