

Speech Acts in Edgar Allan Poe's The Cask of Amontillado: Exploring the Themes of Revenge and Betrayal

Sumaira Mohib

BS English (Graduate) Department of English FATA University

Dr. Muhammad Imran (Corresponding Author)

Lecturer Department of English, FATA University

Email: imran@fu.edu.pk

Khadija Javed

BS English (Graduate) Department of English FATA University

ABSTRACT

Speech acts are a crucial component of interpersonal communication and enable people to accomplish pragmatic and social objectives beyond merely conveying factual information. Additionally, they offer a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying semantic production and aid in revealing a speaker's latent will. This study looks at the usage of speech acts in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, The Cask of Amontillado. This investigation's primary objective is to identify and analyze the many illocutionary act phenomena that are described in the short story and to comprehend how these concepts relate to the themes of betrayal and revenge that are covered. The goal of the study is to categorize illocutionary acts according to their representational, directive, commissure, expressive, and declarative categories using the qualitative descriptive approach. The results show that whereas Fortunato's comments are frequently representative and expressive, revealing his ignorance and pride, Montresor's statements are primarily commissure and directive, demonstrating his deceptive tactics and hidden objectives. The study comes to the conclusion that speech act analysis offers a deeper understanding of the psychological and social roles that language plays in Poe's story, demonstrating how literary communication transcends storytelling to provide a more comprehensive pragmatic effect.

Keywords: Speech Act, Commissure, Directives, Expressive, Allan Poe, Ignorance, Pride.

INTRODUCTION

Speech act theory is widely recognized as a core component of pragmatics. The notion of a speech act can be conceptualized as a fusion of two elements: speech, which refers to the utterance itself, and act, which denotes the action accomplished through that utterance. In essence, a speech act represents the performance of an action by means of language. British philosopher John Austin was the first to define the notion of speech acts, claiming that saying is not doing, but rather doing.

According to Griffiths (2006), the speech acts are the units of linguistic interaction; they include functions of telling, requesting, warning, greeting, acknowledging, and making appointments. Speech acts, or speech act theory, seeks to describe how a speaker uses language to produce intended actions and how the hearer can deduce or interpret the intended meaning of those actions. The conceptual understandability of speech act theory Before the development of the theory started by both Austin and Searle, it was logical positivism that prevailed. This paradigm argues that language is always used to describe facts or a situation and that the proposition that cannot be empirically tested to be true or false is in essence deprived of any meaning. More importantly, some of the best contributors to the discipline of pragmatics refuted this by arguing that, linguistic activity is similar to the activity of the bodily action; we use language not only to pass information but also to discharge a range of actions the giving of commands, the asking of questions, the giving of greetings, the giving of apologies, the giving of warnings and the making of promises; actions that go beyond the literal meaning of the utterance.

Austin divided speech acts into three classes namely, locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. The locutionary act refers to the actual literal meaning of something that is being said by the speaker e.g. in the expression, It is cold in here, the actual utterance refers to how cold the room is. The meaning said or meant by the speaker is the illocutionary act. The sound that is uttered by the speaker has a meaning. Example: It's cold outside. It refers to the speaker's intention to ask someone to turn on the heating. Perlocutionary action refers to an action of that sort that relates to the outcome or impact that such utterance has on the thought or the behaviour of the receiver or the opponent such as the hearer or the addressee (getting up and turning on the heater) (See, Habib et al., 2024; Gill et al., 2024; khan et al., 2025; Ilyas et al., 2025; Samar et al., 2025).

Edgar Allan Poe (1804-1809) an important 19th-century American poet, critic, and short story writer. Poe was widely credited with pioneering the science fiction genre. His short stories are full of mysteries, revenge, dark psychology, crime, insanity, death, murder etc. He is known as the father of detective stories. The story the researcher selected is a short story of Edgar Allan Poe the Cask of Amontillado. It is concerning the revengeful case of a man by name Montresor on the other man by the name Fortunato who has insulted him. Montresor nor is unfriendly and informs Fortunato that he also has a special wine known as Amontillado. Fortunato is fond of wine and so he with Montresor turns into the underground wine cellar (catacombs) to drink wine. He is unaware of a plot by Montresor as they descend deeper into the dark tunnels. Ultimately, Montresor surrounds Fortunato in his own wall and seals him in with a wall of bricks poured right around him. The story concludes as Montresor notes that nobody has heard anything about the murder within half a century. This work is an attempt to discuss the speech acts in this short story by Edgar Allan Poe.

Research Objectives

To determine the kind of speech acts that Austin put forward in the chosen short story by Edgar Allan Poe.

To Study and review the kind of illocutionary acts employed by John Searle in the short story of Edgar Allan Poe.

Research Questions

What are the different kinds of illocutionary acts used in the short story of Edgar Allan Poe?

In what ways do different kinds of illocutionary acts in Edgar Allan Poe's short story convey meaning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bruce Fraser (1996) defines pragmatics as the process by which a language user interprets the meaning of a sentence within a specific context. He argues that this interpretation goes beyond the grammatical structure and involves understanding the speaker's intended message and the effect it is meant to produce. Fraser's focus is particularly on how the literal meaning of a sentence before considering intonation, tone, or situational context—suggests certain direct messages. He introduces the idea of Direct Message Potential, which refers to the range of meanings a sentence can potentially convey based purely on its linguistic structure. However, he notes that these potential meanings are rarely fully realized during actual communication. Instead, features like voice modulation, emotional tone, and surrounding context often influence the final interpretation. For instance, a simple command like "Sit down" may express a request, a question, or even anger, depending on how it is spoken. Fraser also emphasizes that sentence meaning can be divided into two key components: the propositional content, which presents a situation or fact, and the pragmatic intent, which reflects what the speaker aims to achieve by saying it. His analysis sets the foundation for exploring how pragmatic markers contribute to this interpretive process. (Bruce Fraser's article (Pragmatic Markers, 1996; Gul et al., 2023(a)).

Some literal meaning of a statement or semantic is a locutionary. The theme of analyzing an assertion based on its essential constituents, regardless of the form of the [natural] language in which it serves to express it, a focus on the literal form and semantic composition of the utterance, is exactly the focus of a locutionary act, a focus on what is said, the form and meaning of a linguistic expression (Peirce, defined speculative grammar to analyse an assertion into their essential terms, regardless of form of the language of expression) and was also precisely what everyone occupied themselves with prior to voice writers introduced the topic of conversion. Nordquist (2025) defines in a locutionary act is the action of making, or creating, and having a meaning: a period of spoken language that is meant to be framed by another period of silence, or by the shift in the person who says it. J. L. Austin (1962) first proposed this notion (In How to Do Things with Words) as a locution or utterance act. John Searle (1969) subsequently substituted the term locutionary act with that of propositional act, the act of stating a proposition.

Austin's introduction of the concept of illocutionary force left its definition somewhat imprecise, prompting further refinement by subsequent theorists. According to Holdcroft (1978), illocutionary force is a quality of an utterance, which is generated with the hope of carrying out a given illocutionary action but has no bearing on

whether it is managed. For instance, the utterance “I bet you five pounds that it will rain” retains its illocutionary force even if the hearer does not perceive it. In contrast, Bach and Harnish (1979) argue that illocutionary force is present only when the illocutionary act is successfully performed, requiring the hearer to both hear and comprehend the speaker’s intention.

The third part of the speech act, the perlocution. The reality of the speech is this. The speaker may not wish it to be so, yet here it is the idiom. This is in relation to the impact of utterance on the hearer. In his book, Levinson also described the effect of uttering a sentence on the audience as perlocutionary act. It means that the listener/reader is in good/sad mood after uttering a sentence. Which is the effect caused by the utterance of the words and is its perlocutionary effect, or the effect brought about by the utterance of the words towards the hearer, toward the person who hears the words being uttered. This is to say that perlocutionary is an responding or responding effect on the auditor.

The Cask of Amontillado is a short story by the American author Edgar Allan Poe which appeared in the November 1846 issue of Godey Lady Book. Set in an unnamed Italian city during Carnival it is the story of a man going on deadly revenge on a friend who, he thinks, has insulted him. Montresor does not feel well treated by Fortunato and wants to punish him. Fortunato is deceived by Montresor during the Carnival feast, when Montresor tells him that he has a special wine he would like him to taste, which he has called Amontillado. Drunk and boasting of his knowledge of wine, Fortunato follows Montresor through his dark catacombs. There Montresor chains him up to a wall and constructs a wall of bricks to enclose him permanently. Many years later Montresor narrates the story without any remorse.

Scholarly engagement with The Cask of Amontillado has produced a range of critical perspectives relevant to both thematic and structural analysis. Disanza (2014) investigates the interplay between memory, forgetting, and reader complicity, noting that Montresor’s fifty-year delay in recounting the murder serves not only as a narrative device but also as a means of drawing the audience into a morally ambiguous position. According to Disanza, the act of remembering is deliberately selective, functioning as a strategy that heightens the horror of the confession while implicating the reader as a silent witness to the crime.

Dykstal (2019) examines Poe’s use of the confessional mode as a deliberate “hoax” that manipulates the reader through the principle of unity of effect. He argues that the story positions the audience as voyeurs, initially seeking truth or justice, but gradually entangling them in the narrator’s moral corruption. The confessional structure, in this reading, becomes a formal trap—shaping not only the narrative’s tone but also its ethical impact. Together, these studies illuminate how Poe’s text can be understood through the lens of Speech Act Theory: Montresor’s confession operates as an illocutionary act that asserts control over the narrative, while its psychological impact on the reader constitutes a powerful perlocutionary effect.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative descriptive design. This approach is appropriate because the aim is not to measure or quantify phenomena but to explore and interpret the meanings embedded in language. As Nassaji (2015) and Gul et al., 2023(b) stated

that qualitative research facilitates the analysis of context and meaning, which is crucial for language studies. Similarly, Leavy (2017) emphasizes that descriptive research is particularly valuable when the goal is to describe and interpret patterns rather than focus on numerical data or statistical generalizations. Given that the primary data for this study is a short story, the qualitative descriptive method is well suited to the research aims. It allows for a detailed examination of character dialogues and the interpretation of their underlying meanings. This design is instrumental in uncovering how Montresor, the narrator, employs speech acts to conceal his true intentions and how Fortunato, the victim, responds. Thus, the chosen design aligns with the literary and linguistic focus of the study.

The research employs two broad categories of data including primary data and secondary data. Primary Data: The main theme would be on the short story of *The Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe. This work gives us the material to be analyzed, in particular, the conversations between Montresor and Fortunato. These dialogues are studied because they are full of meaning, irony, and hidden intentions. For example, Montresor appears to be polite, but his words actually show betrayal and revenge.

Secondary Data: In addition to the story itself, secondary sources are used to support the analysis. These include books, journal articles, and research papers that discuss Speech Act Theory and previous studies on Poe's works. Using secondary sources helps to connect the present study with existing research and to make the findings more reliable. Together, the primary and secondary data provide both the material for analysis and the scholarly background needed to interpret the findings.

DISCUSSION

When performing the analysis of *The Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe, the researcher used the note-taking technique to find, underline and extract the pertinent utterances in the story. Every statement of significance was cautiously put down in order to categorize the statement under either of the categories of speech acts suggested by J. L. Austin and subsequently amended by Searle. This tripartite classification of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts became the dominant model of analysis. In this way, it was possible to trace systematically the functioning of language in the revenge theme between Montresor and Fortunato, as a means not of honest communication, but as a weapon permitting deception, mental manipulation, and eventual murder.

In this three-faceted analysis, we can see that Poe has made his story a narrative of literal vengeance, but also, it is a narrative made on the control of language. The words spoken between the two characters do not stand still but develop into literal phrases and then goals set and finally, disastrous outcomes. The art of words to Montresor makes his revenge an easy version, and it can be proved that the words in this story can kill like guns. This way, through the text-taking technique, organization by coding and categorization, the researcher provided a formal demonstration of how *The Cask of Amontillado* embodies the dynamics of the speech acts. It vividly demonstrates the wisdom with which Austin presents the idea that to talk is to act-and, in the case of Montresor to annihilate.

The researcher has defined and categorized the utterances in *The Cask of Amontillado*

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into the three categories of speech acts which are provided in a two-table form in the following section.

Table 1: Summary of Speech Act Classification in The Cask of Amontillado

Speech Act Type	Number of Instances	Key Function in the Narrative
Locutionary	63	Provides narration, background information, and Montresor's inner reflections; frames the entire revenge plot
Illocutionary	29	Shows direct interaction between Montresor and Fortunato; used to manipulate, persuade, and maintain a façade of friendship
Perlocutionary	21	Implies the psychological impact on characters, e.g., Fortunato's reactions and gradual realization of danger

After data collection, the researcher wanted to classify the illocutionary utterances as Representatives, Directives, Commissive, Expressive and Declaratives in the form of a table to display it more systematically

Table No: 2

S#	Speech Act Type	Number of Instances	Key Function in the Narrative
No	Representative	11	Provides statements, explanations, and assertions that move the plot forward and reveal Montresor's reasoning.
1	Directive	11	Used to influence Fortunato's actions (e.g., invitations, commands, suggestions) and lure him into the catacombs.
2	Commissive	3	Shows Montresor's commitments and promises, adding to the sense of inevitability and foreboding.
3	Expressive	5	Displays emotions such as irony, false friendship, and mockery, heightening dramatic tension.
4	Declaratives	0	No declarative speech acts are used in the story.

The tables above are the breakdown of the short story, The Cask of Amontillado written by Edgar Allan Poe as viewed through the prism of the Speech Act Theory. The model of speech acts which was designed by John Searle and by J.L. Austin, is extremely helpful in the discussion of how the use of language in the story serves as a means of communication at the same time as it is used as a tool of manipulation,

deception, and, finally, revenge. When it comes to the organizing of the data according to not only the fivefold classification of illocutionary acts offered by Searle but also the tripartite division between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary sentences introduced by Austin, the study demonstrates that Poe genially introduces the conversation into a dramatic weapon pushing the storyline forward.

The first table is based on the categorization presented by Searle, assertive, directives, commissibles, expressive and declaratives. In the narration, Montresor often uses assertive to build credibility as well as entrap Fortunato. The actual example is that in the scene when Montresor tells Fortunato that the Amontillado he is talking about is real, he relies on the speech acts of assertion so that he appears honest and trustworthy, despite having two faces. Orders are also relevant in that we can see Montresor constantly tempting Fortunato to continue the journey toward the depths even after the latter starts coughing. Putting his instructions in the form of courtesy or suggestions, Montresor disguises coercion as care. Commissibles work when Montresor seemingly means his *guanxi* in the good health of Fortunato, which is a lie and the fabric that covers his goodwill in order to revenge Fortunato. The use of expressive is done rarely, but with strategic intent, like Montresor in his pretended sympathy, or Fortunato when he is laughing; these are indications of moods, but in both cases quite ironic. Less evident, declaratives are found at nevertheless at critical points--intentionally so when Montresor is and has stationed himself above the wall closing it up, a declaration of whereby Fortunato is entombed, and Montresor is finally able to outshine him.

The latter table uses the threefold distinction by Austin of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The literal meanings of utterances are locutionary acts in the story--such as the mention made by Montresor of the health of Fortunato or the quality of the Amontillado. But the illocutionary force behind these utterances actually describes the intentions of the person who is uttering them, e.g. persuading, mocking, manipulating. The perlocutionary effects matter just as much: by making Fortunato abide by his words (and he does), by triggering his feeling of pride and by increasing the anticipation and horror felt by the reader, he shows how speech also has a specific and using real effects on psychology and even behavior. This precis emphasizes the manner in which Poe sets up meaning in dialogue in such a way that a superficial expression of dialogue hides an underlying pattern of action and purpose. Collectively these readings indicate that *The Cask of Amontillado* is highly informed by the crafting choice of speech act staging. Montresor avoids using brute force in his revenge; his key weapon is the use of language. Words create trappings of capture, disguising evil within innocence until the final act of deceit is executed. It is also shown by this analysis that this story is not Poe merely relating to a physical revenge story, but one of immense insight into how speech can be used as the weapon of psychological domination.

FINDINGS, SUGGESTION AND CONCLUSION

This study identifies a number of utterances found in *The Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe. The most common of them are directive speech acts, which emphasize Montresor's capacity to influence and dominate Fortunato. On the surface, Montresor's words appear friendly, yet they betray his vindictive intentions.

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Contrarily, Fortunato's responses are mostly expressive and representative, reflecting his conceit and ignorance. All things considered, the research shows how speaking acts significantly influence the story's main themes of betrayal and retaliation.

For scholars who want to apply Speech Act Theory to literary texts, this study might be a useful resource. The ability of this theoretical framework to reveal the pragmatic and rhetorical layers of a narrative is demonstrated by showing how locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts function in *The Cask of Amontillado*. This study should be expanded in future studies to examine speech act kinds, cultural contexts, and betrayal in a larger spectrum of texts and writers and historical periods contribute to meaning-making, character development, and plot construction. Comparative studies either across different authors or literary traditions—might reveal that certain speech acts, such as directives, commissive, or expressive, dominate in particular genres or thematic situations. Overall, Speech Act Theory provides not only a useful lens for interpreting Poe's revenge narrative but also a broader methodological approach for exploring the interactive relationship between language and literature.

This study used the Speech Act Theory framework to evaluate Edgar Allan Poe's short narrative *The Cask of Amontillado*. Of the 97 utterances found in the text, nine were representatives, ten directives, five commissive, six expressive, and zero declaratives, according to the study. According to the research, the Directive speech act, which is crucial to creating tension and suspense, is the story's dominating speech act. The narrator, Montresor, regularly employed orders to control Fortunato's behavior, forcing him to go farther into the catacombs in spite of constant cautions concerning his health. Under the pretense of compassion and civility, these instructions served as psychological manipulation and deception tactics. The study concludes that Poe's use of speech acts is a deliberate stylistic choice. By relying heavily on directives, he creates urgency and suspense, while irony and false expressions of sympathy reinforce Montresor's manipulative power. Language in the story functions not only as dialogue but as an instrument of control, deception, and revenge.

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Yule, G. (2010). The Study of Language (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press. Pub
jan 2010 This is a widely used introductory textbook in linguistics. The quote appears
on page 1, where Yule Begins by defining what linguistics is and what it aims to
study