Persuasive farce. Dialogical pragmatics in the novels of P.G. Wodehouse

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Abstract

Abstract – This paper explores persuasion, as a speech act, in the novels of the English comic writer P.G. Wodehouse. Persuasion, as a topic for enquiry within linguistics, has been extensively studied, in a variety of social contexts (e.g. Sandell 1977; Jowett and O’Donnell 1992; Messaris 1997; Nash 1989; Hyland 1998; Halmari and Virtanen 2005; Charteris-Black 2006; Tardy 2011). All these studies are either general accounts of persuasion, or else describe its presence as a pragmatic focus in a specific social context, invoking diverse (pragma)-linguistic features to explain its operation. What seems, as yet, relatively under-explored, is its operation in everyday conversational interaction, and this paper represents a move in this direction, though the distinction between authentic and literary data is recognised. It uses an analytical methodology based on Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) and Dialogical Pragmatics (Kecskes 2016) to explore instances in the novels in which Bertie Wooster, Wodehouse’s principal character, is persuaded to do various things. What emerges, although not a picture of authentic verbal persuasion as it would occur in actual interaction, but a facsimile that may shed light on some of the discursive processes involved. It is suggested, in fact, that, at the level of pragmatic, the processes involved in authentic and literary speech acts are not as different as they are sometimes taken to be.

DOI Code: 10.1285/i22390359v23p195

Keywords: persuasion; dialogical pragmatics; speech act theory, P.G. Wodehouse; salience

References

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Thompson, Kristin. Storytelling in film and television. Harvard University Press, 2003. Wodehouse was an acknowledged master of English prose admired both by contemporaries like Hilaire... The Times has hailed him as a 'comic genius recognized in his lifetime as a classic and an old master of farce'. Best-known today for the Jeeves and Blandings Castle novels and short stories, Wodehouse was also a
talented playwright and lyricist who was part author and writer of fifteen plays and of 250 lyrics for some thirty musical comedies. He worked with Cole Porter on the musical Anything Goes and frequently collaborated with Jerome Kern. Although Wodehouse and his novels are considered quintessentially English, from 1924 on he lived largely in France and the United States. He was also profoundly uninterested in politics and world affairs.