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 (pragmalinguistic) 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 pragmatics, the processes involved in authentic and literary speech acts are not as different as they are sometimes taken to be.

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References


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Although Wodehouse’s scripts had no trace of Nazi propaganda, the very act of broadcasting from Germany branded him a traitor in the eyes of British journalists and politicians. Two years later the Germans exiled him to Paris, where he was obliged to remain in the Hotel Bristol until the liberation of France.

Wodehouse confessed that the broadcasts were a hideous mistake. “I made an ass of myself,” he wrote in May 1945, “and must pay the penalty.” Oswald Mosley appears in the novel as Roderick Spode, the leader of the black-shorts. “The trouble with you, Spode,” Bertie Wooster tells the would-be dictator, “is that because you have succeeded in inducing a handful of halfwits to...
disfigure the London scene by going about in black shorts, you think you're someone. Since pragmatic expression and interpretation by definition are realized in the context of language use, a natural choice to practice pragmatics is found in dialogues in the classroom that the learners themselves have to create. Observe the following activity; then think about how this example can help learners understand pragmatics and practice their language.

Actividad: ¿Cómo nos organizamos nosotros? Ahora es el turno de que tus compañeros y tú se organicen las actividades domésticas en su casa compartida. Decidan quién es responsable de los quehaceres domésticos que aparecen en la actividad.