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 (pragmatic-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 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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that characterize buffoons. In many cases the classic eccentricities of Wodehouse's upper class give rise to plot complications. Relatives, especially aunts and uncles, are commonly depicted with an exaggerated power to help or impede marriage or financial prospects, or simply to make life miserable. Although his plots are on the surface formulaic, Wodehouse's genius lies in the tangled layers of comedic complications that the characters must endure to reach the invariable happy ending. Typically, a relative or friend makes some demand that forces a character into a bizarre situation that seems impossible to recover from, only to resolve itself in a clever and satisfying finale.