

Jonathan Culler's Literary View of World-making and World-transforming Speech Acts

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Abstract: Jonathan Culler has been profoundly influenced by Austin's and Searle's speech act theory and Jacques Derrida's deconstructive speech act views. Since the 1970s, he has introduced the speech act view of "speeches are performances of acts" into American literature, regarded literature as a "world-making" and "world-transforming" "act or event", and especially expounded poetry as a special speech act. His concept of "literary competence" has absorbed elements from the speech act theory, and refers to some institutions or conventions in literary forms, instead of traditional institutions in literary contents such as themes and subjects, adding unique significance to literature.

1. Introduction

Jonathan Dwight Culler (born 1944) is a reputable American literary theorist and critic; he has played an essential role in introducing European structuralism and deconstruction into the academia in the USA. Two of his monographs, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, and *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, provide detailed sorting and explanations of the Continental structuralism and deconstruction. Of them, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* has been universally recognized as an authoritative work in introducing the Continental structuralism. He advocates an interpretation strategy that goes beyond the New Criticism, and constructs a structuralist poetics for literary studies, which has received widespread praise and welcome from American academia. His *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* is another masterpiece in which he tracks and studies the development and evolution of structuralism; by way of "participation", he has clearly sketched out the ins and outs of deconstruction, and his expositions of origin background, basic theoretical propositions and specific criticism practices of deconstruction are also classic. On top of that, some of his other works, such as *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, have also exerted huge impact on the Chinese academia. In this paper, Culler's learning from and absorption of Austin's and Searle's speech act theory and Derrida's and Yale's Gang of Four's deconstructive speech act views to develop his own speech act theory is analyzed to call contemporary academia's attention to the origins of and connection between the speech act theory and the deconstructive literary theory.

2. Culler's literary view of speech acts

In Culler's monograph of *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, there is a whole chapter dedicated to "Performative Language", introducing and interpreting Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. He holds that a shortcut to understand the destructive connotations of mode of significance is to refer to Derrida's reading of Austin in *Margins of Philosophy* and his later debate with the US speech act theorist John Searle. For him, "the performative brings to centre stage a use of language previously considered marginal – an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language – and helps us to conceive of literature as act or event. The notion of literature as performative contributes to a defense of literature: literature is not frivolous pseudostatements but takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world, bringing into being the things that

they name". It can be discovered that Culler has absorbed Austin's and Searle's speech act view of "speeches are performances of acts", and elevated and regarded them as literature being "world-making" and "world-transforming" "act or event", showing a macroscopic view of cultural criticism. According to him, "the text ... is something an author has constructed, and its meaning is not a proposition but what it does, its potential to affect readers". That is to say, the focus of Culler's discussion about the performative function of literature is from the perspective of reader. At this point, he further discusses the performative function of literature in world-making, and he believes, "the literary utterance too creates the state of affairs to which it refers, in several respects. First and most simply, it brings into being characters and their actions, for instance. ...does not refer to some prior state of affairs but creates this character and this situation. Second, literary works bring into being ideas, concepts, which they deploy." Moreover, based on Iser's and Fish's concept of "event of reading", he further notes that, "narrative poems recount an event; lyrics, we might say, strive to be an event". Therefore, for Culler, the function of making and "event" of literary discourse are both essential embodiments of literature's performative function, which is a functional expansion and specific development of Searle's "perlocutionary act".

Culler has expounded the distinction between Austin's early "performative utterance" and "constative utterance", and directly introduced the speech act view into literary studies. He holds that, "the difficulty Austin encounters of separating performative and constative can be seen as a crucial feature of the functioning of language". Culler points out that, the separation made by Austin may help people realize that language may lead to actions and help overcome the linguistic view of "imitation" or "representation". However, such separation also creates conflicts, and "the tension between the performative and constative emerges clearly also in literature". His objection to this separation is also tactfully expressed. For him, "if every utterance is both performative and constative, including at least an implicit assertion of a state of affairs and a linguistic act, the relation between what an utterance says and what it does is not necessarily harmonious or cooperative". He redefines the performative and the constative. According to him, the performative is the acts of language and the rhetorical operations, while the constative is language claiming to represent things as they are. Concerning Austin's exclusion of literary utterance in theory and Austin's distinguishing between "serious and non-serious discourses" and between "fictional and non-fictional discourses", Culler also points out flaws and shortcomings in such separations. He holds that such separations are not accurate, as the literary discourse, just like everyday discourse, does not refer to a prior state of affairs and is not true or false. In other words, the literary discourse is not traditionally-believed "non-serious and non-felicitous" one, or derivatives from everyday discourse or a result or outcome of imitation of the latter; in a certain sense, the literary discourse has even become a prior condition to construct everyday discourse.

3. Poetry as a special speech act

Based on Austin's and Searle's speech act theory, Culler has expounded in details poetry as a special speech act. Different types of speech acts in everyday speech acts, such as declarations, commands and assertions, as Searle discusses, also numerous exist in poetry. Culler gives some examples of poems. For example, in terms of apostrophe, lines from Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind": "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being!"; "O, wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind?"; these lines contain strong emotional feelings. Culler believes that, "the emotional intensity attaches especially to the act of address or invocation itself". For him, the go-as-you-please way of speaking and recitation in the poem seems to be quite different from the everyday rule-bound speaking in the real world. He holds that the exaggerated inquiry in Shelley's poem is indeed to communicate and converse with Nature. Poetry is a communication and act; the object of communication act is not limited to others, but including oneself, even including the universe, Nature, and all non-living beings. Thus, for him, "for the poem as act, a key question has been the relation between the act of the author who writes the poem and that of the speaker or 'voice' that speaks there". In other words, the intention, mode, attitude, rule and force etc of performing with

words between the poet and the reader have been the focus of Culler's poetics. Culler regards structuralist poetics as an indirect critique act, and its main task is to construct a theory of literary discourse, which is used to explain and illustrate the Abstract and void meaning of some so-called real meanings and yet not to give the works a specific meaning.

4. View of literary speech act meaning

Based on Austin's and Searle's speech act theory, Culler has more deeply interpreted "literary meaning". For Austin and Searle, a complete speech act consists of several levels of act: "utterance act, propositional act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act". Searle has also proposed concepts such as "literal meaning", "force", and "meaning intention". Inspired by that, Culler has also summarized three levels of literary meaning, i.e. "literal meaning" of literary text, "performative meaning" or "communicative meaning" of literary works, and "reception meaning" or "effect meaning" of readers, corresponding to his understanding of functions of literary speech acts. For him, literary meaning does not resemble a free play, but a grafting of meaning, and meaning is produced through continuous grafting processes. He notes that, speech acts are indeed such a graft. The introduction of speech act theory undoubtedly refreshes the interpretation of literary meaning. He has further listed six ways of grafting, such as "approach grafting", "bridge grafting", and "inarching". By further exploring and extending Derrida's concepts such as "iterability" and "citationality", he has reached another principle or conclusion: meaning is produced under repetition of signifying sequences of texts, and it is repeatedly cited or parodied under serious and non-serious contexts; deconstruction also exists for the existence of iterability. It can be seen that, "grafting" and "iteration", for Culler, are actually two vital modes for the production of literary meaning. In his view, one discourse must be grafted to a new context so that the illocutionary force of literature can be intensified and promoted with new context features; similarly, "one must be able to isolate them as elements that could be repeated, and thus the iterability manifested in the inauthentic, the derivative, the imitative, the parodic, is what makes possible the original and the authentic". Iterability has intensified Culler's understanding of literary speech act view.

5. Literary competence and use of context and rule

Culler's attention to literary context and background study is closely related to his attention to Searle's speech act theory. As mentioned above, Searle thinks highly of the study of context and rule. For Culler, on the one hand, the concept of context is rather broad, almost without any limit: "...includes rules of language, the situation of the author and the reader, and anything else that might conceivably be relevant", which is to say, "any given context is always open to further description"; nonetheless, on the other hand, "any attempt to codify context can always be grafted onto the context it sought to describe, yielding a new context which escapes the previous formulation", which means that a specific reading act is restricted by the context and, under different situations, the context implies varied contents. In these aspects, Derrida's speech act view can be easily observed. For him, what the reader "characteristically do is imagine or reconstruct a speaker and a context: identifying a tone of voice, we infer the posture, situations, concerns, and attitudes of a speaker (sometimes coinciding with what we know of the author, but often not)". The illocutionary force normally depends on the context rather than the intention. Culler refers to such a contradiction and unity as: the decisiveness of context to text and the infinite extensibility of context, i.e., "meaning is context-bound, ... context is boundless". It can be seen that Culler has absorbed Searle's determination view of meaning being context-bound, and also included Derrida's thoughts of repetition and *différance* and uncertainty of meaning. As in an example given by Culler: all speeches related to bombs and weapons will be seriously treated; a notice at the airport security check obviously belongs to a context of enforcement, but if the language is codified and grafted to a new context, the different would be rather different. This proves that the purpose of deconstruction is not to destroy or abandon, but a reconstruction based on both of them.

Culler's study of literary rules and institutions is also influenced by Searle's speech act theory. Culler holds that, "the analysis of particular cultural phenomena must always take place in a given context, and at any one time the production of meaning in a culture is governed by conventions". Moreover, he also admits that his study of literary rules and conventions etc has been affected by Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar. However, Chomsky values the study of rules and conventions of language speculation and formal logic etc, while the speech act theory has both a broad theoretical spectrum and also emphasis on rule and formal analysis; obviously, the latter has also exerted certain influence on Culler's poetics theory. As Culler points out, he insists that the purpose of literary study is to acquire knowledge about its operating mechanism. For instance, to read *King Lear* is not to produce yet another interpretation, but to advance one's understanding of the conventions and operations of an institution or a mode of discourse. He defines structuralist poetics as a condition to determine the production of meaning. He holds that, poetics does not focus on whether it is true and false, but on the connection between verses and on literary institutions, that is, some general or common rules or conventions, which is consistent with Searle's methods in the research of speech act theory. According to him, the interpretation procedures and semantic transformation applied by literary critics are some general and common forms and means, not determined by their own personalities or preferences. He believes that, the identity, status, social role, and institutionalized authority mentioned by Searle can all be demonstrated in the fictional effect of the literary subject. Reading the same literary text with different reading conventions may also produce different reading effects. Culler once transformed a piece of news into the format of poetry, and the reader found the sense of poetry from the text. In his view, a poem is a kind of expression; its meaning is constructed on the customary system accepted by the reader group. Only when this customary system works, a poem will have meaning. This fully illustrates such a truth: the difference in the meaning of the text depends on the reader's reading conventions; different reading conventions bring changes to the meaning of the text.

It is worth mentioning that Culler has developed the concept of "literary competence" on the basis of literary institutions and rules. Although the concept of "literary competence" originated from Stanley Fish, Culler has systematically interpreted it. For him, "literary competence" mainly refers to some institutions or conventions in literary forms, instead of traditional institutions in literary contents such as themes and subjects. Culler believes that "literary competence" is both the reader's internalized knowledge conventions and the author's introspective knowledge or conventions. When readers master such conventionalized and institutionalized knowledge, they can say that they have a "literary competence". It can be said that Culler's concept of "literary competence" indirectly originates from Searle's concept of "background capacities". Searle sees the background as a set of rules that permeate into intentionality and have a non-characteristic mental ability. The two obviously share some similarities. Culler holds that, literary competence is the premise, mechanism or condition for literary reading and literary meaning. The tenet of poetics is to extract the institutions, procedures or conventions in these literary readings. Styles are the cohesion of various literary institutions, conventions, and traditions, while styles and institutions are essentially expressions of various literary meanings. When a text is regarded as a work, it is inseparable from the norms and recognition of literary institutions. Culler's poetics elevates "literary competence" to "ideal readers" of social culture undertaker, and regards it as a universal rule and competence, which shows the influence of Searle's constitutive rules and institutional facts as well as the shadow of Chomsky's "linguistic competence" and "universal grammar". In his view, reading poetry is a rule-governed process of producing meanings; the poem offers a structure which must be filled up; the reader therefore attempts to invent something, guided by a series of formal rules derived from one's experience of reading poetry, which both make possible invention and impose limits on it. Once any change happens to literary institutions, there will be countless queer reading conventions and also influence on reading interpretation. Difficulties in interpreting certain works just prove the restrictions of cultural background on reading conventions. With "literary competence", "types of conventions" and "naturalization", Culler applies "literary competence" and "conventions" into throughout structuralist poetics, which is reflected in his analyses of the series of concepts such as "real world",

“shared cultural knowledge”, “models or conventions of literary genres”, and “conventionally natural”.

6. Conclusion

In all, Jonathan Culler has been profoundly influenced by Austin’s and Searle’s speech act theory. Since the 1970s, he has introduced the speech act view of “speeches are performances of acts” into American literature, and regarded literature as a “world-making” and “world-transforming” “act or event”. He has especially defined the position of poetry and regarded it as a special speech act and an indirect critique act; its main task is to construct a theory of literary discourse, which is used to explain and illustrate the Abstract and void meaning of some so-called real meanings and yet not to give the works a specific meaning. His expounding of “literary competence” and “literary meaning” has absorbed elements from the speech act theory as well as from Derrida’s deconstructive speech act views. His concept of “literary competence”, in particular, mainly refers to some institutions or conventions in literary forms, instead of traditional conventions in literary contents such as themes and subjects, adding unique and specific competence of “performance of acts” to literature.

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