# A Pragmatic Approach to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

**Dr. Raed Fadhil Mohammed**

**ABSTRACT :**

Pragmatics, in a broadest sense of the term, is the delineation of meaning in context. Of the significant conceptual areas of this interdisciplinary field of linguistics is speech act theory, by and through which literary texts can be scrutinized as par-excellent examples of human experience. The study purports to investigate Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in terms of the speech act theory. It endeavors to unravel how dramatic characters use their utterances to perform certain functions in certain social context. So the study proceeds with the hypothesis that stretches of language in the dramatic world are used not merely to perform dramatic functions, but also to perform pragmatic acts in in the tragic sequential events of the play. To be systematic, the study will be divided into two parts. While part One throws light on the sphere of the speech act theory, part Two will be devoted to the application of the pragmatic perspective tot eh body of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The study has proved that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, from a pragmatic stance, is not a play written to be performed on theatre, but as a multidramatic discourse whose charters' utterances carry performative acts. The study is rounded up with concluding remarks elicited from the analysis.

## Introduction:

Albeit its status as a formal structure, literature is viewed, from a functional stance, as a medium of human interaction in social context. The verbal work of art, in general, and the dramatic one, in specific, construes multimodal meanings, represented by certain potential multiple functions. The main concern is to show how Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides an approach to interpret the pragmatic aspects of the Multimodal Dramatic Discourse (MDD). MDD is a network of interrelated meanings. These socio-cultural, contextual, and linguistic meaning-patterns are correlated together to build up the imaginatively based worldview. Hallidy (cited in Cumming and Simmons, 1983, p. vii), speculates that language is a meaningful activity. It is *often taken to be the paradigm of the act of meaning – the*

*core of human semiotic, and model (a descriptive norm) for all other forms of meaningful behavior*. But, if language is a *social order* in the Hallidayan paradigm, it is plausible to extend the scope of the term to cover the socio-cultural aspects of the discourse. Being language in use, the meaningful particles of the dramatic discourse can be approached on a functionally based mode.

The aim is to investigate the validity of the functionally based approach in teaching MDD as a structure of speech acts, as ways of speaking. Having viewed language as a *societal phenomenon*, the functionally based approach treads the path of cultural pragmatics. By and through SL approach, EFL college students interact with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, being data, not as grammar, but as matrix of speech acts. The units of language, in structural approaches, are looked at as norms, they are referential. In functionally based approached; however, these constituents are viewed as functional. Accordingly, MDD is functionally studied, interpreted and evaluated from the pragmatic standpoint. This interpersonal learning may extend the scope of the discourse as a universe of metafunctions. Schiffrin (1994:32) speculates that *a definition of a discourse as language use is consistent with functionalism in general: discourse is viewed as a system (a socially and culturally organized way of speaking) through which particular functions are realized.* The meaning-patterns in the dramatic discourse which are constructed in the clause unit are essentially realized in the ideational (i.e. representing thought and experience in a coherent way), interpersonal (i.e. taking part in social interaction), and textual (i.e. creating well-formed and appropriate text) functions (Yule,1996:83).

The assumption behind the use of the SFL paradigm in theory is that the discourse is not merely a sum of linguistic options. Rather, it is the amalgam of socio-cultural, ideological and contextual relations. We argue that by and through the concept of the discourse as a process of social-cultural communication, the EFL college students can develop what is suggested to be called *Cultural-Pragmatic Competence*, the knowledge that brings the students' powers of thinking beyond the social interaction to the culture in which the dramatic discourse is situated. Though the setting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is that of Denmark, the Shakespearean dramatic discourse is still situated into the Anglo-Saxon culture.

In practice, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is taught for EFL students at the Iraqi universities is suggested to be approached, here, in terms of SFL model. While using language to perform some speech acts or functions, the students can develop skills to read, interpret, and evaluate the discourse, not as an ideal linguistic mode or *Form Focus*, but as a socio-cultural message. The aim is to make the EFL students cope with

instances of socio-cultural meanings derived from the communicative interaction between the dramatic personae in Act I of Shakespeare's tragedy.

Technically, the study falls into two main parts: Part I explores Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a socio-cultural context, whereas Part II deals with the socio-political context. Additionally, certain steps are suggested to achieve the goals of the functional approach. The theoretical framework will not be approached to as a separate part. Rather, it is inferred implicitly throughout the applied critique.

**The Socio-Cultural Context**

The protagonist of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is Prince Hamlet of Demark whose father, King Hamlet, is mysteriously deceased. Certain social clues assert that mystery, of which are the hasty marriage of Claudius, the dead King's brother, to Queen Gertrude, the late King's wife, and the sudden apparition of the King's ghost in Christmas Eve. Hamlet's ghost sows the seeds of suspence, perplexity, and anxiety in the whole land of Denmark. Not only that, nature itself supernaturally participates in building up the horrific image of the world at Elsinore.

Shakespeare's tragedy opens with the changing of the guards on a dreary chilling night the Danish royal castle The cold dead silence is hunted by the apparition of the late King's ghost. Socially, the audience of Shakespeare's age believed in ghosts and supernatural phenomena. They were more familiar with the stories that appealed to their imagination. The Elizabethans, in Turner's words,1974:xix), were *superstitious and believed in ghosts and magic, and that even the highest, including Queen Elizabeth and King James I, had strong Faith in the power of witches' and demons to affect the fortunes of men*. Turner (ibid.) concedes that it is not surprising that there was *a task for the marvelous, and supernatural at that time; and this task also helps to explain the introduction of the fairies in Midsummer Night's Dream, the ghost of Hamlet, and the witches in Macbeth*. Beliefs are a crucial part of nations' culture. Culture, in the general sense, is the systematic network of beliefs, arts, literature, and customs. These various social patterns which descend from generation to generation are manifest in language. Language, hence, is functional. It is a *functional semiotic activity* (Cook, 1994:48). The Elizabethan dramatic vision and the social collective awareness are fundamentally linked to *the context of culture which construes: tribal economics, social organization, kinship patterns, fertility rites, seasonal rhythms, concept of time and space* ( Kramsch, 2005:26-7).

Pragmatically, the scene starts with a highly conventionalized utterance that ought to be used. Francisco, the sentinel in the post, orders Bernardo, the relief at the change of the guards, to show the code-phrase for the watch:

**Bernardo : *Who's there?***

**Francisco : *Nay, answer me. Stand, and unfold yourself***

**Bernardo : *Long Live the King!*** **(I.I.1-3)**

This illocutionary act, i.e., issuing a command is followed by another speech act regarding the situation throughout the *bitter cold* that makes the sentinels *sick at heart*.

**Bernardo : Have you had quiet guard?**

**Francisco : Not a mouse stirring. ( I.I. 9-10)**

Semantically, Francisco's answer has nothing to do with Bernardo's yes-no question. In other words, the coded meaning of Francisco's clause is significant; yet, it is inadequate to determine the proposition implied in the utterance. Francisco provides the relevant answer via an implicature or non- coded proposition. It is not difficult to realize from Francisco's answer his assertive answer in this interaction. The conversational implicature or extra meaning makes elucidation to the setting without much recourse to the literal expression. This can only be reached by and through the use of language in context. In producing his meaningful utterance, Francisco is also performing a speech act. The act is that Francisco passes information to his relief. Depending on the context in which Francisco has used his utterance, it could b e said that he has proved the state of tranquility during his guard in the post. The interlocutors are actually guards; they are friends. So, the assertion, here, is one of the acts performed by the sentinels' utterances. Kramsch (Op. cit., p.28) observes that *coherence is not given in speaker's utterance, it is created in the minds of the speakers and hearers by the inferences they make based on the words they hear. Thus, pragmatic coherence relates speaker to speaker within the larger cultural context of communication*. She concedes (pp.28-9) to say that *the semantic cohesion of words the speakers utter, combined with a shared cultural background, establishes*

*a deep pragmatic coherence through what the speakers do*. What creates meaning in use is not the linear constituents of a syntactic structures only, but the context which adds a further interpretation to the speaker's utterance. The speaker's utterance does not function unless it occurs in a proper situation. The dialogue is of importance as an interpersonal discourse, but what directs the dialogue is the speaker's meaning. Cook ( Op. cit., p.36) thinks that *in brief spoken exchanges it is quite common to encounter sequences of utterances that are almost entirely bare of cohesion. In the view of pragmatics, such sequences are coherent through pragmatic inference, connected through the functions they perform*.

Being relieved of his watch by Bernardo, Francisco remains until the arrival of Horatio with a third guard, Marcellus. The sentinels informed Horatio of the stately apparition of the late King. The sense of suspense and anxiety is aroused when the dramatic characters on guard start giving clues to *this thing* that *appeared again tonight*. The illocutionary acts come in a sequence of interrogative forms so as to elicit the perlocutionary effect:

**Marcellus : *Who hath relieved you?***

**Francisco : *Bernardo hath my place.***

***Give you good night.***

**Marcellus : *Holla! Bernardo!***

**Bernardo : *What, is Horatio there?***

**Horatio : *A piece of him.***

**Bernardo : *Welcome, Horatio. Welcome, good Marcellus.***

**Marcellus : *What, has this thing appeared again tonight?***

**Bernardo : *I have seen nothing.*** **( I.I. 18-22)**

The sequence of the interrogative interlocutions and the negative perlocutionary act are performed in form of staccato questions and answers which are laden with mystery and suspense. According to Adams (1985:46) *the conventional speech acts are greatly influenced by the circumstances in which speech acts occur.* The

interlocutors are in a state of doubt whether *this thing* is truth or fantasy. *This* is a type of deixis, it is anaphora since it refers to the antecedent of the ghost apparition. It is also a social deixis since that sentential aspect is determined by a certain reality in that social situation. Marcellus's indirect speech, *Horatio says,' its but our fantasy'*, (p.23) is of importance in this context. As a scholar, Horatio at first denies the story of the apparition stated by the guards. However, Horatio, on entering the ghost, tries to cross it when Marcellus gives his request; *Question it Horatio* (45). The ghost is still viewed as an inanimate thing and referred to by the use of *it*. So, Horatio:

**Horatio : *What art thou, that usurp'st this time of night,***

***Together with that fair and warlike form***

***In which the majesty of buried Denmark***

***Did sometimes march? By heaven I charge thee, speak!***

**(I.I.46-9)**

The interlocutor who starts with a series of descriptive speech acts ends with an intentional order to *speak*. The language in use, here, serves to perform *communicative acts*. We are mainly concerned, from a pragmatic standpoint, with the functions of language. The functions concerned with are *those akin to communicative intentions (the illocutionary force of an utterance* (Schiffrin, op. cit., p.90). By speaking to the majestic image of the late King in that way humiliated way makes the image *stalk away*, so Marcellus directly comments, *He is offended* ( 50) Still, Horatio insists on going on with that tone of order, *Stay! Speak! I charge thee, speak!* ( 51).

From a pragmatic perspective, Horatio's performative acts do not suit the appropriateness of conditions under which these acts are uttered. To issue a command to the royal figure in that style means to violate the pragmatic aspect of the rules which are inherited into the social conventional system. Having seen the ghost at that mysterious night, Horatio stresses the likeness of the ghost to the dead King:

**Marcellus: *Is it not like the king?***

**Horatio : *As thou art to thyself.* (I.I.59-60)**

Socially, the apparition of the King in that *fair and warlike form* is the prelocutionary power that exhorts a great effect upon the present human psyches at that chilling night. The ghost not only usurps the tranquility of the night, but also the social beliefs, too. Ghosts ritually never appear at Christmas Eve. The atmosphere of fear and perplexity is not without relevance to the language in use. The utterances of the sentinels are but communicative pieces encoded into the linguistic and socio-cultural context. And Shakespeare reflects to the spirit of the time so far superstitions are concerned. Though secular in the general trend, the Elizabethan age construed the superstitious medieval spirit interwoven with the new spirit of science.

One more thing, Horatio's assertion takes the form of a conversation implicature. What Horatio means is more than what is literally expressed by the conversational sense of his utterance. The previous quoted lines (46-9) show that Horatio, a dramatic character, impinges on the *Cooperative Principle (CP)* and *Politeness Principle (PP)* as well. He should be cooperative when he interacts with the majestic vision. It is an impolite human behavior to give an order to the kingly ghost since politeness is a social *deixis* that expresses low degree of solidarity between the addresser and the addressee. Horatio's language-in-action, in other words, does not fit the situation in which he is communicating. The communal practices are not only rooted in real-life situations but also in discourses as pieces of communication.

Being so, *cultures, social groups, and institutions shape social activities* (Gee,1999;1). Comparing dramatic personae of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* reveals different levels of discourse in the MDD. Being a scholar, Horatio's speech acts are mostly straightforward, skeptical, and lack of rhetoric, while the King's sequential utterances are charged with tropes and metaphorical expressions. They are rhetorical, witty, and persuasive. The utterances are intended to be persuasive, so they are laden with figures of style that add more sublimity to the King's characterization:

**King : *Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death***

***The memory be green, and that it us befitted***

***To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom***

***To be contracted in one brow of woe,***

***Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature***

***That we with wisest sorrow think of him***

***Together with remembrance ourselves*. ( I.ii.1-7 )**

The change of the situation leads to the change of the discourse- linguistics. Dealing with the state business, Claudius's institutional choices are different from that of Horatio, which are necessarily different from that of Prince Hamlet. Mad in behavior to the men of the court, Hamlet is often *perceived as a philosophical character, expounding ideas that are now described as relativist, existentialist, and skeptical*(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki//Hotm). Scholars agree that Hamlet reflect *the contemporary skepticism that prevailed in Renaissance humanism* ( Ibid.).That philosophical texture is painted with the hues of metaphoricity. The elaborately skeptical world-view is construed in a chain of metaphorical utterance:

**Hamlet : *How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable***

***Seem to me all the uses of this world!***

***Fie on 't! O, fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden***

***That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature***

***Possess it merely.* ( I.ii.134-6)**

The dramatic style is reflective. The language here serves to express the protagonist's skeptical world-view. The illocutionary power builds up that vision which penetrates the intellectual and psychological traits of the speaker.

## 2. Applied Linguistics and Context of Culture

It is pertinent at this point in the argument to explore the socio-cultural and political ground of MDD in relation to the field of Applied Linguistics. Haratio, after the ghost's apparition, is given the chance to comment on the socio-political situation in Denmark. The authorial intention, however, is that Shakespeare has thus *made it possible for his audience to learn something of the recent history of Denmark, of events which took place before the action of the play begins* ( Lott, 1968:4). The dramatic interest of the guard change in the opening lines is turned into the observable socio-political circumstances:

**Horatio : *our last king***

***Whose image even but now appeared to us,***

***Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,***

***Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,***

***Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet-***

***For so this side of our known world esteemed him-***

***Did slay this Fortinbras; who, by a sealed compact,***

***Well ratified by law and heraldry,***

***Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands***

***Which he stood seized of to the conqueror;***

***Against the which, a moiety competent***

***Was gaged by our king, which had returned***

***To the inheritance of Fortinbras,***

***Had he been vanquisher, as, by the same covenant***

***And carriage of the article designed,***

***His fell to Hamlet.*** **9 I.ii.80-95)**

The quoted utterance construes *one* clause running over sixteen lines on the page. Though descriptive in nature, the illocutionary speech acts state the socio-political nature of the state in struggle. Note that the scientific knowledge of the Renaissance era is not away from the scope of the MMD as a piece of human communication. Horatio's hint to *stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood* (117), may infer the Elizabethan awareness that *comets were believed to be the cause of ' red dew', drops of red liquid seen on the ground in the early morning* ( Lott, op. cit.,p.6). The Elizabethan scholar, in reality, manipulates the language resources effectively so as to recall to the minds of the hearers the political situation of the country at that critical time. He, in other words, manipulates all his pragmatic competence to state certain facts which are must do truly from the illocutioner's perspective. Horatio, in reality, performs certain speech acts beside making statements Language, here and elsewhere, can mean in two fundamental ways, *both of which are intimately linked to culture: through what it says or what it refers to as*

*an encoded sign ( semantics), and through what it does as an action in context( pragmatics)*( Kramsch, op., cit, p.15). The functional side of pragmatics is to show how the linguistic forms are used by the dramatic character in communication, and how to maintain social roles with the other participants (guards). Cook (Op.cit, p.37) speculates that Pragmatics attends to concern itself very much *with function in terms of the intention of the sender rather than with the effect on the receiver*. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* the visible is intertwined with the invisible. Horatio's performatives give clues to the possible reasons of the apparition. The discourse of the Elizabethan scholar intends primarily to communicate information about the world they live by. Additionally, his language in context creates social channels with the other illocutioners. What Horatio does with his words construes the scholar's pragmatic meaning. He links the world knowledge to the language knowledge throughout his literal and referential meaning-patterns. The imaginatively perceived world is represented by the sequences of performatives.

The second entrance of the ghost gives rise to another set of illocutionary acts. On seeing the ghost once more, Horatio tries to cross it. He again asks the deceased King's image, but this time to foretell the unknown future of Denmark:

**Horatio** ***:*** ***Stay,***

***illusion!***

***If thou hast any sound or use of voice,***

***Speak to me.***

***If there be any good thing to be done,***

***That may to thee do ease and grace to me,***

***Speak to me.***

***If thou art privy to thy country's fate,***

***Which happily foreknowing may avoid,***

***O, speak!*** **( I.i.129-36)**

It is of interest to realize that the scholar's tone this time is of request rather than an order. The intention is to unlock the ambiguous future of the land. Horatio's speech acts do not follow highly intuitional conventions as that of Claudius, nor are they charged with the metaphorical power, as manifested by Hamlet when he beholds his father's ghost for the first time:

**Hamlet :** ***Angels and ministers of grace defend us!***
***Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,***
***Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,***
***Be thy intents wicked or charitable,***
***Thou comest in such a questionable shape***
***That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,***
***King, Father, Royal Dane. O, answer me!***
***Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell***
***Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,***
***Have burst their cerements; why the sepulcher***
***Wherein we saw thee quietly inurned,***
***Hath oped his ponderosr and marble jaws***
***To cast thee up again!*** ***( I. iv. 39-51)***

*Hamlet's utterance with its interrogative constituents are laden with anxiety, suspence and skepticism.* The protagonist unusually uses the deixes, *thee* and *thou* in addressing the majestic ghost. This may explain the degree of intimacy between Hamlet and the deceased King. Additionally, by the use of *canonized bones,* Hamlet may suspect that his father was buried according to the Christian rites of the time.

Lott (Op.cit., p.36) comments that in the religious belief of his time, the ghost of a man might walk about if these rites had not been properly performed over him.

Between Horatio's *I charge thee, speak,* and Hamlet's *O, answer me*, the dramatic personae do things with words. They express statements, make requests, ask questions, give orders, and so on. All these acts are functional since they are communicative. The characters express various attitudes in that context of culture. The is asymmetrical form between the acts used and the metafunctions being expressed.

The speech acts used by the dramatic personae are but acts of communication, but still they perform different functions in context. Nida (1997; 1) speculates that "communication takes place through a medium and a place that are limited in time and place. Each specific situation determines what and how people communicate, and it is changed by people communicating. "Nida(ibid) goes on to say that" situations are not universal but are embedded in a cultural habit, which in turn conditions the situation. Language is thus to be regarded as part of culture, and communication is conditioned by the constraints of the situation-in-culture."

In Hamlet's soliloquy, Hamlet, by and through the *ideational* function expresses his emotional and intellectual responses toward that *un weeded garden*, whereas in his discourse with the ghost, he intends to elicit more information about the unusual roaming of the ghost. The textual function does exist by the amalgam of structures in the MDD. The dramatic character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in fact, performs three classes of speech acts: he makes statement by commenting on the socio – cultural or the socio-political situation in context as in Claudius's utterance, he asks questions so as to elicit information from The *illusion*, and sometimes he either earnestly asks or orders the *illusion* to identify it. These classes of performances are not culture specific. Rather, they are universal. Lyons (1981:187) argues that these three classes of illocutionary acts are basic in two senses: *first, no human society could exist in which acts of this kind have no role in play, and , secondly, many, if not all, culture-specific illocutionary acts can be seen belonging to a more specialized subclass of one of the three basic classes*. The speech acts, in this perspective, are linguistic universals. These pragmatic- cultural perforamatives are organically rooted into the cultures of communities.

Having realized Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a socio-cultural discourse, we are in position to the applicable steps of SFL approach to MDD. Halliday ( cited in Brown, 2007:224-5) enlightens the imaginative function of language by stating than *through*

*the imaginative dimensions of language we are free to go beyond the real world to soar to the height of the beauty of language itself, and through that language to create impossible dreams if we desire to*. The functional linguist, in other respect, determines the linguistic dimension of modern analytical approaches. Halliday ( cited in Fowler, 1971; 38) thinks that *in talking of " the linguistic study" of literary texts we mean, of course, not " the study of the language" but " the study ( of language) by the theories and methods of linguistics".*

Shakespeare's dramatic discourse, in our paper, is fundamentally concerned with the field of Applied Linguistics. The relationship between the literary studies and language teaching is evident. Both disciplines deal with the same phenomenon, i.e. language. Therefore, it is the task of the applied linguist to bridge the gap between them. Modern teaching methods and approaches are seminally oriented into general linguistics, while literature itself is made of language.

The analyses of the utterances of the dramatic characters would begin by focusing upon the socio- cultural, historical and ideological background of the Shakespearean tragedy. The first step of our tripartite procedure is to arouse the EFL students' awareness about the discourse by enlightening the multi- discourse dimensions. Questions are preferable to brainstorm the EFL students' minds.

Having read extracts of *Hamlet*, the students can discuss either with a partner in the group or with the group as a team. Such a discussion in the second may enrich the students' world-views, not about the discourse as an imaginatively worldwide product, but also about the real world they live in.

Thirdly, the teacher makes comments on the students' commentary notes pointing out the metafunctions of the speech acts as meaningful acts of communication. Throughout the teaching process, the instructor or the teacher functions as a mediator, organizer, creator and a guide, while the students take the responsibility of the analytical process. They are the real productive participants. The systematic step framework is flexible, in the sense, it can be modified whatever required.

**Concluding Remarks**

The powerful omnipresence of the speech acts in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as the study has shown, gives the literary discourse a sense of universality. The connected illocutionary acts in MDD has proven that the discourse is not merely a sequence of syntactic-semantic options. Rather, it is a world of communal practices inherited into the human culture(s). The study has demonstrated that the dramatic characters'

speech acts are acts of communication acknowledging their intentions in certain socio-cultural contexts. The proposed configuration may help the students realize the metafunctions of the language of literature by foregrounding the pragmatic aspects of the discourse. Finally, in linking the universe knowledge to the language universe, the text becomes discourse in the ESL students' intellects. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* , being MDD, in no more text-linguistics, it becomes the imaginatively literary world where the complex system of the social, cultural, historical and ideological sub-systems are combined as one whole to build up the mental image of the world.

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