

# The Power of Language in Orwell's *Animal Farm*: An Analysis of Speech Acts

Jiixin Lyu

Fuzhou University, Foreign Language Department, Fuzhou 350000, China

DOI:10.37648/ijrssh.v15i03.001

<sup>1</sup>Received: 09/05/2025; Accepted: 09/06/2025 Published: 03/07/2025

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## Abstract

This study aims to pragmatically analyze the power of language and its impact on people, with a focus on George Orwell's British novel *Animal Farm*. This research adopts Austin and Searle's speech act theory as its theoretical framework to examine how different types of speech acts function in the language manipulation. Four key extracts are selected in chronological order from the novel and subjected to contextual and pragmatic analysis. The findings indicate that the performative function of language can imperceptibly influence individuals' minds and reshape social dynamics. Based on Searle's classification of illocutionary acts, the research also finds that the pigs' manipulation of language relies mainly on representatives, which construct ideology, and directives, which control behavior, with less dependence on commissive and expressive.

**Keywords:** *speech acts; Animal Farm; illocutionary act; pragmatics; power*

## 1. Introduction

*Animal Farm*, published in England on 17 August 1945, is an allegorical novel written by George Orwell. The book reflects the events leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Although its simple storyline and animal characters once led some to mistake it for a children's book, it conveys far more than an innocent tale for young readers. At the beginning of the 1950s, especially during the early years of the Cold War, scholars began to pay attention to its political allegorical nature. Early studies focused mainly on its text and political themes, with limited attention given to the other interdisciplinary perspectives. It was not until after 1980s that interdisciplinary analysis emerged as a popular topic. Accordingly, studies on *Animal Farm* in fields such as education and linguistics has become increasingly prominent, evolving into a popular research area.

The study of *Animal Farm* from pragmatic perspective holds great significance. In the novel, language is closely connected with power, serving not only as a medium of communication but as a tool for manipulation and control (Elbarbary, 1992). Correspondingly, pragmatics studies language according to the contexts (Yule, 2022), emphasizing language is used to assert dominance and power in different situations (Harris, 1995). Therefore, It is valuable to analyze propaganda and control under totalitarian rule in *Animal Farm* through a pragmatic lens.

This study primarily focuses on speech act theory within pragmatics, drawing on the theories of Austin (1975) and Searle (1969). It selects four key excerpts from *Animal Farm* for analysis, dividing the approach into contextual analysis and pragmatic analysis. The research elaborates in detail on the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts in these excerpts, revealing how the pigs, as rulers, use language to mobilize and even manipulate the psychology and behavior

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<sup>1</sup> How to cite the article: Lyu J (July, 2025); The Power of Language in Orwell's *Animal Farm*: An Analysis of Speech Acts; *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*; Vol 15, Issue 3; 1-8, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v15i03.001>

of the other animals in the novel.

## 2. Literature Review

As one of Orwell's most-studied works, *Animal Farm* has attracted worldwide attention and has been comprehensively researched by scholars. Much attention have paid to the creation background (Crick, 1980; Rodden, 2007), political themes (Dwan, 2012; Senn, 2015), narrative strategies (Kirschner, 2004; Rodden, 2008) and the relationship between language and power of this novel.

Research on the power of language in *Animal Farm* enhances our understanding of how linguistic tools are employed in totalitarian contexts. Language manipulation and verbal commands contribute to the effectiveness of the farm's control system (Elaref, 2022). Based on Critical Discourse Analysis theory, Qiao (2013) conducts a critical discourse analysis of the character Squealer in *Animal Farm* and illustrates how language functions persuasively, deceptively, and manipulatively to consolidate the dictatorship of the ruling class. Similarly, Yang (2011) examines how different characters use language's functions, namely incitement, coercion, deception, and construction, to gain and consolidate power. From the perspective of pragmatics, the study of presupposition and implicature in the discourse of *Animal Farm* has become a key area of interest. Turkey and Al-Hilu (2020) focuses on Grice's theory of implicature and the cooperative principles (1975), and argues that when those in power imply their aims and ideologies in language, it can pave the way for a fully totalitarian regime. The study by Risdianto et al.(2019), which investigates pragmatic presupposition, reveals that the referential function is the most frequently employed in the use of presupposition. Speech act theory is also a significant area within pragmatics; however, there has been relatively little analysis of speech acts in *Animal Farm* to explore how different types of speech acts function in the language manipulation. Therefore, this research combines *Animal Farm* with Austin (1975) and Searle's speech act theory (1969) aiming to give a new aspect to explain this novel.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Speech Acts theory

A speech act in linguistics and the philosophy of language is an utterance that has performative function in language and communication. It is found that we can perform actions through language—for example, making a promise, offering something, giving an order, or even making a threat. Speech act theory was originated with the British philosopher J. L. Austin, and was further developed by other scholars, particularly J. Searle.

#### 3.1.1 Austin's Theory

The modern study of speech acts begins with Austin's work *How to do Things with Words* (Austin, 1975). This work analyzes certain sorts of sentences, e.g., I promise to do so-and-so, to demonstrate that we use language to do things, here to make a promise, rather than merely to assert things (Austin, 1975). Austin dubbed such sentences performatives—speech act utterances that contain the information needed to perform actions—in contrast to constatives, which are descriptive statements used mainly to say something (Sadock, 2006). However, Austin argued that the distinction between performatives and constatives was not ultimately defensible, due to the fact that every normal utterance has both a descriptive and a performative aspect. He proposed a new and more general framework of speech act analysis—locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. For this research, the researcher focuses on illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

Austin observed that in saying something, the speaker is performing three kinds of speech acts simultaneously. In other words, he analyzed the action performed when an utterance is produced on three different levels, namely the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels, all of which are characteristic of both performatives and constatives.

Locutionary act is saying something with a specific linguistic form, which refers to the literal or factual meaning of the sentence (something that is verifiable). For example, if someone says "It's cold in here", the locutionary act is the production of the sentence, with its literal meaning: the temperature is low.

Illocutionary act stands for what is done in uttering the words, especially the apparent purpose for using a performative sentence: christening, requesting, and so on. Archer and Grundy (2011) explain that illocutionary act is the speaker's or writer's intention when saying or writing something. For instance, the utterance "Can you pass the salt?" performs the illocutionary act of making a request to have the salt passed.

The third level is perlocutionary act, the act performed by or resulting from saying something. Archer and Grundy (2011) stated that perlocutionary act is the intended effect produced by the listener. In other words, it refers to the effect or change that the utterance brings about in the hearer's thoughts or actions. According to Austin, perlocutionary acts consist in the production of effects upon the thoughts, feelings, or actions of the addressee, speaker, or other parties, such as convincing an addressee of the truth of a statement, causing an addressee to feel a requirement to do something, and so on.

Among these three dimensions, the most discussed is illocutionary force, which is Austin's central innovation. The term 'speech act' is generally interpreted quite narrowly to mean only the illocutionary force of an utterance. In other words, speech act theory is in fact a theory of the illocutionary act.

### 3.1.2 Searle's Theory

Searle (1969) categorized speech acts into certain types in terms of their illocutionary force, as listed below: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives acts. This research adopts Searle's taxonomy, as it offers a comprehensive framework.

Representatives are speech acts that commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. The direction of fit is to match words with the world. The psychological state is what the speaker believes to be the case. This act includes describing, claiming, affirming, denying, reporting, predicting and so forth.

Directives are acts in which the speaker tries to get the hearer to do something. The direction is to fit the world to words; the propositional content is always that the hearer does some future action. The types of directive can be categorized in five terms: suggestion, command, request and warning.

Commissives refer to acts that the speaker commits himself or herself to a certain course of action. The direction is to fit the world to words; the propositional content is always that the speaker does some future action. The intentions of commissives are promising, offering, threatening, pledging and vowing.

Expressive acts are used to express the speaker's attitude toward a certain state of affairs. The truth of the expressed propositional content is presupposed, such as apologizing, praising, congratulating, regretting.

Declaratives are acts through which the speaker alters the status of conditions of an object or situation solely by the utterance, and brings about the change in the world corresponding to the propositional content. The direction of fit is both to fit the world to words and words to the world. For example, declaratives could be statements like "You're fired".

## 4. Data Analysis

Four key extracts are selected in chronological order from the British novel *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 2013), with the aim to illustrate how the pigs manipulate language to consolidate power—first to unite the animals in rebellion against Man, then, after the pigs coming to power, to defend their prestigious domination, and ultimately to sugarcoat their acts of tyranny. The extracts are analyzed through Austin's Speech Act Theory and Searle's classification of illocutionary acts.

### 4.1 Analysis of Extract 1

*Only get rid of Man, and the produce of our labour would be our own. Almost overnight we could become rich and free. What then must we do? Why, work night and day, body and soul, for the overthrow of the human race! That is my message to you, comrades: Rebellion! I do not know when that Rebellion will come, it might be in a week or in a hundred years, but I know, as surely as I see this straw beneath my feet, that sooner or later justice will be done.*

(Orwell, 2013, p. 5)

#### 4.1.1 Contextual Analysis

This extract is delivered by Old Major, a respected elder pig, who is the founding leader of the animals' revolution against human. At the initial stage of the animals' enlightenment, this speech envisions utopia of Animal Farm in a post-human world, which serves as the ideological foundation for the animal's uprising against Man.

#### 4.1.2 Pragmatic Analysis

From a pragmatic perspectives, Old Major's speech showcases the power of language. It is not a mere description, but an action in itself. The major intention is to evoke the animals' desire for an ideal life and to fuel their enthusiasm for revolution. The use of conditional ("Only get rid of Man...") and declaratives ("we could become rich and free") are all pragmatically designed to convince and rally the audience. The purposes and influences of these sentences are made clear through the speech act theory.

##### 4.1.2.1 Illocutionary Act

The illocutionary acts are primarily commissives and directives. Indirect commissives such as "the produce of our labour would be our own" and "almost overnight we could become rich and free" function to implicitly promise a better future, thereby persuading the animals to commit to the revolution. More importantly, the directives act ("that is my message to you, comrades: rebellion") urges the animals to initiate resistance against humans, which produces action.

##### 4.1.2.2 Perlocutionary Act

The perlocutionary effects are to inspire hope, provoke urgency of taking action. By depicting rebellion as the only path to justice and freedom, it instills a revolutionary mindset among the animals. The speech fuels discontent with current oppression and establish a vision for the revolution, thus laying the psychological groundwork for collective action.

#### 4.2 Analysis of Extract 2

*I have little more to say. I merely repeat, remember always your duty of enmity towards Man and all his ways. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend. And remember also that in fighting against Man, we must not come to resemble him. Even when you have conquered him, do not adopt his vices. No animal must ever live in a house, or sleep in a bed, or wear clothes, or drink alcohol, or smoke tobacco, or touch money, or engage in trade. All the habits of Man are evil. And, above all, no animal must ever tyrannise over his own kind. Weak or strong, clever or simple, we are all brothers. No animal must ever kill any other animal. All animals are equal.*

(Orwell, 2013, p. 5)

##### 4.2.1 Contextual Analysis

This extract is taken from Old Major's ideological speech before the rebellion. He identifies man as the root of all evil, which sets solid foundation of the animals' future revolution. Furthermore, the speech outlines a series of moral principles, marking the beginning of the Animalist doctrine.

##### 4.2.2 Pragmatic Analysis

From a pragmatic perspectives, the main intention of his language is to control the animals' thoughts and behaviors to achieve unity and collectively resist humans. By setting binary distinction that animals are friends while men are enemies, he not only strengthens the bond between animals, but provoked the animals' resentment against humans. In

this regard, Old Major manipulates the animal's emotions through his words. Moreover, the repetition of "must never" suggests moral taboos, making it easier for other animals to follow these digestible rules.

#### 4.2.2.1 Illocutionary Act

The illocutionary acts are primarily directives and representatives. The commands such as "remember always your duty of enmity towards Man and all his ways" and the repetition of "no animal must ever..." are directives acts that incline to influence future behavior. By controlling animals' behavior, the pig leaders are able to mobilize them to follow their leadership and carry out the revolution. Besides, Old Major also performs representatives acts when he states "all the habits of Man are evil" and "all animals are equal." The acts serve as tools to present the words of Old Major as factual truths to be accepted without doubt. Thereby, animals were easily drawn to his side, readily accepting his guidance.

#### 4.2.2.2 Perlocutionary Act

The perlocutionary effects are both psychological and social. Emotionally, it stirs up hatred against humans and a sense of urgency of rebellion by portraying humans as the enemy of animals. Socially, it establishes a common goal and shared identity among animals by highlighting the Animalist doctrine. The audience adopt these views as their own and then act upon them by joining the fight against men. Even after Old Major's death, his words remained sacred, upheld as guiding principles by the new pig leaders, which undoubtedly showcases the enduring perlocutionary force of the speech. Overall, the speech of Old Major lays the groundwork for revolution and future manipulation as it fosters blind loyalty.

### 4.3 Analysis of Extract 3

*"Comrades! 'he cried. ' You do not imagine, I hope, that we pigs are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege? Many of us actually dislike milk and apples. I dislike them myself. Our sole object in taking these things is to preserve our health. Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig. We pigs are brainworkers. The whole management and organization of this farm depend on us. Day and night we are watching over your welfare. It is for your sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples. Do you know what would happen if we pigs failed in our duty? Jones would come back! Yes, Jones would come back! Surely, comrades, 'cried Squealer almost pleadingly, skipping from side to side and whisking his tail, ' surely there is no one among you who wants to see Jones come back? "*

*(Orwell, 2013, pp. 35-36)*

#### 4.3.1 Contextual Analysis

This extract occurs after the pigs emerge as the new ruling class and appropriate the milk and apples for themselves, which reveals the emerging hierarchy in Animal Farm. The passage is delivered by Squealer, a pig known for his persuasive rhetoric that is used for justifying the pigs' privilege. Not only is his speech a defense but also a potent weapon to justify inequality under the illusion of collective interest. Throughout the narrative, his manipulation of language is a key approach for the pigs to maintain control and prevent dissent.

#### 4.3.2 Pragmatic Analysis

From a pragmatic perspectives, Squealer's speech is performative. By addressing the other animals as "comrades," he reinforce a sense of solidarity and intimacy, which serves as the foundation of his preaching. He uses scientific appeals ("proved by Science") to portray selfish actions as rational. Rhetorical questions are used to intensify the tone and emphasize threats (Jones's return), evoking fear among the other animals in order to ensure that they submit to the rules. The words of Squealer evidently reflect how discourse is shaped by tone, emotions and authority references.

#### 4.3.2.1 Illocutionary Act

The illocutionary acts are representatives, expressives and directives. Representatively, the claims of "milk and apples... contain substances absolutely necessary..." and "we pigs are brainworkers," position these as unquestionable truths, disguising the pigs' privilege as a kind of necessity. Moreover, by appealing to emotion ("I dislike them myself"), Squealer performs the expressives act to win the animals' trust and sympathy. Additionally, indirect directives emerge through rhetorical question, such as "surely... no one wants to see Jones come back," focusing the other animals to comply without explicit commands. This indirectness is the key strategy of persuasive manipulation and it fosters a climate of fear and anxiety.

#### 4.3.2.2 Perlocutionary Act

The perlocutionary effects are both submission and acceptance. The fear of Jones's return evoked by Squealer's words leads to the other animals' submission to the inequality distribution. They are too frightened and discouraged to continue questioning the emerging hierarchy. Furthermore, due to the lack of knowledge, the other animals blindly accept Squealer's words. They find themselves guilty and indebted when Squealer portrays the pigs' privilege as sacrifice, which ultimately eliminates their intention of rebellion and secures their long-term obedience. Each time an issue emerges, Squealer immediately delivers a speech to silence doubts, which indeed forms a pattern that reinforces totalitarian control.

#### 4.4 Analysis of Extract 4

*"You have heard then, comrades," he said, "that we pigs now sleep in the beds of the farmhouse? And why not? You did not suppose, surely, that there was ever a ruling against beds? A bed merely means a place to sleep in. A pile of straw in a stall is a bed, properly regarded. The rule was against sheets, which are a human invention. We have removed the sheets from the farmhouse beds, and sleep between blankets. And very comfortable beds they are too! But not more comfortable than we need, I can tell you, comrades, with all the brainwork we have to do nowadays. You would not rob us of our repose, would you, comrades? You would not have us too tired to carry out our duties? Surely none of you wishes to see Jones back?"*

*(Orwell, 2013, p. 50)*

#### 4.4.1 Contextual Analysis

This extract occurs when the pigs begin to live in the farmhouse and sleep in beds, which are exactly what was forbidden in the original commandments—animals must not behave like humans. Squealer is once again sent to pacify the other animals and reinterpret the rules. The speech, which intends to distort the original revolutionary ideals, acts as a tool to rewrite history in the minds of the animals and justify the pigs' unjust actions.

#### 4.4.2 Pragmatic Analysis

From a pragmatic perspectives, Squealer's reinterpretation of the rule, shifting the ban from beds to bed sheets, indicates that the pigs have amassed such authority that they can manipulate the other animals' memories at will. This sends a clear signal of the full consolidation of the pigs' authoritarian regime; they have become virtually identical to the human oppressors they replaced, and the idealistic vision of a utopia has entirely collapsed.

#### 4.4.2.1 Illocutionary Act

The illocutionary acts are representatives, expressives and directives. Squealer asserts that "the rule was against sheets," and "a bed merely means a place to sleep," presenting these claims as truths. He redefines the meaning of "bed," shifting attention from behavior to semantics, which blurs the line between truth and falsehood for the animals. What's more, Squealer performs expressives act ("with all the brainwork we have to do nowadays...") by emphasizing



self-pity or fatigue. This less-than-sincere expressives is employed to arouse sympathy and understanding. Lastly, the indirect directives emerge in questions like “You would not rob us of our repose, would you?” While framed as inquiries, they leave the other animals no room for opposition, suggesting that questioning the pigs' comfort would be selfish or even dangerous.

#### 4.4.2.2 Perlocutionary Act

The perlocutionary effect is that the animals give up questioning, allowing the pigs to achieve absolute rule. The animals are deeply confused about their history due to the pigs' arbitrary alterations. They lack the ability to resist the pigs' propaganda machine; just trying to understand the Squealer's words exhausts them, let alone find flaws to refute. Besides, the animals are made to feel unreasonable if they challenge the pigs' comfort, as any challenge would be met with warnings about the humans' return. In this case, the repeated threat of Jones's return serves as a perlocutionary force, producing fear and silencing opposition. Generally speaking, the ultimate goal of the speech is that the pigs retain their authority while the animals rationalize their own exploitation.

### 5. Conclusions

On the bases of analysis, it is found that language can act as a potent weapon to shape humans' thoughts and convictions. Orwell illustrates the manipulative power of language in *Animal Farm*, where the pigs fulfill all their ambitions by exploiting the animals' limited intelligence and inability to question authority.

The contextual and pragmatic analysis of *Animal Farm* shows that the implicit intentions embedded in language can imperceptibly influence individuals' minds and reshape social dynamics. Specifically, bases on the speech act theory, the pigs' manipulation of language relies mainly on representatives and directives, with commissives and expressives playing moderate roles. Representatives are used by the pigs to shape reality and rewrite the truth in ways that justifies their actions; directives, often disguised as rhetorical questions, pressure the animals into compliance; commissives promise illusory visions to deceive the animals; and expressives appeal to sympathy and understanding, manipulating the animals through fabricated emotions. The reason why representatives and directives acts take the dominant part is that representatives help construct ideology, directives control behavior, while both avoid exposing true intentions or bearing responsibility, such as expressing genuine feelings or making commitments.

### 6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### 7. Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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