
Fiction, speech acts and multimodality: How characters do things with gestures

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When we think of speech acts, we tend to think, as the name implies, of spoken words that perform a certain act. However, in the context of fiction, narrators often refer to the multimodal aspects of speech acts. Apologies, greetings, questions, and so on, are often described as gestures that accompany the verbal act or that perform it silently, as in the following examples (all taken from the fiction section of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*).

- (1) Mrs. Flannery smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.
- (2) “Thank you,” she said, smiling at him gratefully.
- (3) Lily glanced at Jenny, questioning, but the mercenary merely shrugged.
- (4) He waved goodbye and sailed across the lake.

In this contribution, we explore a range of pragmatic acts that, in fiction contexts, are regularly described as being performed by gestures. The analysis starts with a corpus search for the collocates of gesture expressions and focuses on those collocates that refer to pragmatic acts. In a second step, representative samples of such collocations are inspected to find out what kind of pragmatic acts are regularly accompanied, or silently performed, by what kind of gestures. The analysis has important implications for a theory of pragmatic acts in general. It suggests that speech acts should be seen from a prototype perspective. While some have a clear illocutionary force and can be clearly identified, others are (accidentally or intentionally) fuzzy and indeterminate, leaving it to the addressee or to discursive negotiations to assign specific illocutionary values to them. At the same time, the analysis has important implications for a pragmatic theory of fiction (see Locher & Jucker 2021; Jucker 2023) because our results suggest that such narrative ascriptions of illocutionary forces to gestures, such as smiling, shrugging, glancing or waving are largely restricted to fictional texts.

References: • Jucker, A. H. (2023). ‘He offered an apologetic smile.’ The politeness of apologetic gestures. In A. H. Jucker, I. Hübscher & L. Brown (eds.), *Multimodal Im/politeness*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 321–345. • Locher, M. A. & A. H. Jucker (2021). *The Pragmatics of Fiction. Literature, Stage and Screen Discourse*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.