

# APPLICATION OF PRAGMATICS IN JONATHAN SWIFT'S GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

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## Introduction

### Satire as a *Performative Utterance*

Pragmatics is a theoretical framework that is concerned with studying the relationship between words and the interpreters of words in a given context, rather than words or symbols in and of themselves. In other words, rather than studying language in isolation, it does so in the context of the complex relationship between the speaker and the listener, and all the factors that may impact the process of their communication. Instead of examining what certain words or utterances “mean”, it assesses how the meaning is generated and affected with the presence and change in the *context* of those utterances. Hence,

Pragmatic scholars are concerned with the space between “what is said” and “what is meant”, depending upon a specific context or background. It thus posits that there are two kinds of meanings: Referential-semantic meanings and Indexic meanings. The first one describes things as they are, independent of circumstances; the second one is a strictly contextual meaning, inaccessible without the knowledge of the circumstances. It is necessary to acknowledge that in both these types of meaning, literary and contextual, the function of the words seems purely descriptive and symbolic. They are imagined to exist in an abstract, intellectual and semiotic plane removed from the objective world of action. In the historical period of intellectual uncertainty with the rise of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories, the theories of the philosopher J.L Austin, outlined in his seminal book, *How to Do Things with Words*, introduced the paradigm shifting concept of a “Speech Act”. A speech act is an utterance defined in terms of a speaker's intention and the effect it has on a listener. Essentially, it is the action that the speaker hopes to provoke in his or her audience. Speech acts may be requests, warnings, promises, apologies, greetings, or other kinds of declarations. Austin thus argues that utterances are not merely descriptive but also performative in their nature; not only describing but performing certain functions, based on the intention of the speaker with regard to the context. Satire has been a literary genre, interestingly, that has largely been defined in terms of its function, rather than its nature; in terms of “what it aims to do”, rather than “what it is”. This can be explained in light of the simple insight that satire creates a relationship between the satirist and their audience, that aims to expose and improve certain follies, foibles and vices, typically through the evocation of humour and use of instruments such as irony, exaggeration and parody. Satire aims not so much as to inform, as to instruct and improve. Regardless of whether the satirized readers act differently upon reading a satire, which they rarely do, the mere utterance of a satirical line performs a speech act and expects the readers to change in their behaviour and actions. Thus, contemporary literary criticism is inadequate in analysing works of satire as neutral “texts” like any other. A pragmatic analysis of satire is thus a more holistic and efficacious method of inquiry that understands the words spoken by characters and indirectly the author, to instead be speech acts or performative utterances.

### Applications of Speech Act Theory

Developing upon the theories of Austin, John Searle helped formulate three separate levels of speech acts: Locutionary act, Illocutionary act and Perlocutionary act. In context of the satirist as the utterer, the locutionary act would simply be the making of a cogent and meaningful statement. An example from *Gulliver's Travels* would be Gulliver translating the Articles of Liberty issued to him by the six-inched emperor of Lilliput. Therein, he is declared to be “the delight and terror of the universe” whose domains “extend to the extremities of the Earth”. Interestingly, this qualifies as a speech act precisely because it aims to declare, more than describe. The utterance “performs” the function of ordaining and demanding the admiration, awe, fear and respect of the listener.

At another level, that of the illocutionary, Swift, through the innocuous words of Gulliver, has the intention of satirizing, ridiculing and pillorying the pomp, vanity and arrogance of the “most mighty emperor” – through describing him earlier to be only six inch in height and ruling over a small, insignificant island. Through exposing the folly of the Lilliputians, and by extension and similarity, humanity; Swift aims at showing the limits of human ignorance, circumscribed by its narrow, self-enclosed, self-aggrandizing and narcissistically egotistical perspective. Through this exposition, Swift intends that the readers forgo their precious vanity and illusory sense of self-importance. This is evidenced particularly when Gulliver, the purported author of these travels, declares that his sole purpose and motive in publishing them was the benefit and enhancement of public and private good; through the philosophic reflection of its readers. In the letter to his cousin, an angry Gulliver also proclaims that he wrote these works not for fame or “approbation” of its readers, but for their “amendment” and reformation.

The Perlocutionary act would be the utterance with which the intended action is duly performed by the audience. If upon listening to the grand and delusional claim regarding the universal stature of the Lilliputian emperor, a reader confronts their own vanity and insignificance, thereby bringing it under check and repudiating it: the act would be perlocutionary. To the immense chagrin of Gulliver, he writes that even after six months of the publication of his travels, no effect or impact whatsoever has been visible upon England, or the humane “Lilliputians” or “Yahoos” that populated it. Famously defining satire as a mirror in which viewers discover every other face except their own, this suggests that as a speech act and performative utterance, satire may well be more accurately categorized as a doomed illocutionary act devoid of any lasting and significant perlocutionary force, as intended. The perlocutionary effect most often observed is that of laughter at another, entertainment, and prompt forgetfulness

Direct and Indirect Speech Acts by Gulliver

Speech acts can further be categorized though their directness and indirectness as a criterion. Direct speech acts are those with no apparent difference or conflict between the literal and implied meaning. According to the framework of John Searle in *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, illocutionary speech acts can directly be either of these five types, illustrated with examples from the novel:

i. Verdictives, which present a finding: The King of Brobdingnag describing humanity as “the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the Earth.” (Book II, Chapter

6) ii. Exercitives, which exemplify power or influence: The Emperor of Lilliput being proclaimed as the “monarch of all monarchs, taller than the sons of men...at whose nod the princes of the Earth shake their knees...his most sublime majesty.” (Book I, Chapter 3) iii. Commissives, which consist of promising or committing to doing something: Gulliver agreeing to the single-handedly bring back the royal fleet of

Blefuscu with his bare hands, as well as the Empress of Lilliput swearing vengeance upon Gulliver when he extinguishes the fire in the royal palace by urinating on it in Book I.

iv. Behabitives, which have to do with social behaviours and attitudes like apologizing and congratulating: The long, circumlocutory and profuse apologies and praises which Gulliver offers to the Kings of Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, Luggnagg and Glubbudrib.

v. Expositives, which explain how our language interacts with itself: Gulliver seeking to satirically compare the semantic, lexical and syntactic differences between English language and the simple, uncorrupted language of the Brobdingnagians and Houyhnhnms.

In contrast, each of these illocutionary acts, when performed with the intention implying a hidden or another meaning distinct from the literary one, would become an indirect speech act. The most profitable examples from the novel are all the instances of veiled social, historical and political allegories, as well as biting and caustic attacks contained therein. To begin with, the conflict between the Big-endian and Small-endian egg breakers in Lilliput, is analogous to the trivial disagreement and violent schism between the Catholics and Protestants, as well as Whigs and Tories. Through this, Swift indirectly levels an attack on the pettiness of human opinions, what Freud later termed as the “narcissism of small difference”. The “six rebellions raised on that account, wherein one emperor lost his life, and another his crown” is another indirect speech act that obliquely satirizes the major historical events that determined the trajectory of England during and beyond the seventeenth century.

### **Implicature, Entailment and Presuppositions in the Novel**

It is a most intriguing phenomenon that most casual readers and the general public tends to associate *Gulliver's Travels* with the fantastical genre of imaginative, fabulous and adventurous travel literature, written chiefly for amusement. The difficulty in detecting the pragmatic power of satire in the novel lies in understanding the processes of presupposition, entailment and implicature. Apart from Gulliver's complete and overt rejection of humanity towards the end of his final journey in the land of the Houyhnhnms, as well as the explicit diatribes against human history in Book II, as well as the scientific Age of “Enlightenment” in Laputa (Book III); the implicit satires and polemics are concealed under the exactitude and verisimilitude in detailing the precise events and manners observed by Gulliver in Lilliput and other places. It is only when readers are keenly cognisant of various presuppositions, entailments and implicatures that the buried seeds of satire bloom to life.

In every instance when Gulliver describes the denizens of the lands he discovers, there is an equivocation made between some cardinal qualities between them and humanity. In the case of Lilliput, the physical structure of their people, although miniscule in comparison to mankind, still retains the humanoid figure. So also, in the case of the towering Brobdingnagians, and loony and askew scientists of Laputa. Through these physical descriptions, a presupposition is made that they are not fundamentally different from mankind in their outer and inner psychological nature. This is successively borne out as the narrative progresses and the vices of these people, however monstrous or slight, are brought to light. This presupposition leads to an entailment that since the physiological and psychological natures of these creatures and humanity are different only in degree but not in kind, any criticism leveled at them is also applicable to humanity at large, ipso facto. Finally, every single satire directed upon these creatures, is by implicature, an indirect, hidden and implied satire on humanity. Through this tripartite process, the sword of satire is unsheathed, sharpened and used to cut through the follies and carefully knotted evils of mankind.

To take an example, Gulliver informs the reader that the Lilliputian kingdom and royalty refused to take his history and past account of life seriously, implying that he was somehow deluded and mistaken in his own apprehension of reality:

“For as to what we have heard you affirm, that there are other kingdoms and states in the world inhabited by human creatures as large as yourself, our philosophers are in much doubt, and would rather conjecture that you dropped from the moon, or one of the stars, because it is certain, that a hundred mortals of your bulk would in a short time destroy all the fruits and cattle of his majesty’s dominions: besides, our histories of six thousand moons make no mention of any other regions than the two great empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu”

(Book I, Chapter IV)

The triad of presupposition, entailment and implicature in this passage problematizes and challenges the smugness and self-satisfied certainty of human knowledge and philosophy, suggesting that any phenomenon beyond its limits is summarily dismissed and rejected, in an act of self-serving and protective defence mechanism. It also excoriates the complacency of treating histories as objective revelations carved in stone, rather than incomplete narratives subject to the limitations of historians.

The lofty, precious, chest-beating and elevated diction of the royal courts; where in a tiny figure is referred to as “Your Majesty” by a supplicating and prostrating Gulliver who is ten times larger than him – is similarly presupposed, entailed and implicated as a folly of the royalty in Europe and elsewhere. The insignificance and microscopic evanescence of humanity in front of the colossal infinitude of the universe – this is an insight that is implicated and tirelessly targeted at the readers of Gulliver and Swift, yet just like the petty Lilliputians, it often the false egotistical grandeur of self-centeredness and self-absorption that prevents them from confronting this destructive actuality.

### **Use of Irony and Ambiguity**

Carrying forth the previous theme, it is useful to question and investigate the very foundation of the novel: encounter with little humans and large humans. The reason why Swift chooses to insert these extraordinary occurrences in the travels are ultimately left ambiguous. The careful study of the manners and worldviews of Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians reveals that not only is this an experiment aimed at discovering the relativistic, humbling and sobering power of perspective; but at the core of it is also a biting satirical irony.

The most revelatory indicator of the pettiness of Lilliputians is not so much their size, but the pettiness of their hearts, narrowness of their interests as well as the corruption of their morals. This is contrasted ironically with the grandeur of their self-importance, self-congratulation and pompous self-inflation. Indeed, it is this very drive to seem bigger than they really are that constitutes their smallness. To take an apt example, Gulliver attempts to adroitly evade the animosity between the kingdoms of Lilliput and Blefuscu with the following oily statement that drives the irony of the situation home: “That since fortune, whether good or evil, had thrown a vessel my way, I was resolved to venture myself on the ocean, rather than be an occasion of difference between two such mighty monarchs.” (Book I, Chapter VIII)

Similarly, in case of the Brobdingnagians, the message is doubly reinforced as it is now Gulliver who is looked down upon as a reptilian and “cowardly” creature strutting in delusional affectation. The irony that had initially attacked Lilliputians directly and humanity indirectly, now accosted Humanity directly and Lilliputians indirectly. However, Swift prevents the novel from falling into the genre of simplistic moral allegory, by infusion of ambiguity with regard to the relationship between the physical tallness of the

Brobdingnagians and their ethical tallness. Because these two were interlinked in case of the Lilliputians, it does not simply entail that there is similar directly proportional relationship here. Gulliver’s master farmer is by no means a moral giant, ruthlessly exploiting Gulliver as a spectacle in the market. Nor is the larger Brobdingnagian society ethically in contrast with Lilliputians, being different only in degree; as the simpler, wiser and noble laws in their society are still often circumvented, elided and overcome by both the legislators and the legislated.

One possible answer to this ambiguity is that it serves only as a foil to emphasize the ethical poverty of humanity through Gulliver, who had similarly exploited Lilliputian cattle as a profitable spectacle in England. Another is that the ambiguity solidifies the aura of reality, verisimilitude and veracity of the travel narrative, rescuing it from a formulaic arbitrariness of fables, with the endless conveniences of coincidences and requisite suspension of disbelief.

Another powerful use of irony in the novel is the inversion of the “rational” status of humanity and what it means to be a “rational creature”, as first propounded by Aristotle, with that of the “irrationality” of a horse. The Houyhnhnms are revealed to be the rational and sapient counterparts of Yahoos, who embody the irrational, chaotic, dark and libidinal instinct of human nature. By comparatively raising the rational stature of horses as genteel creatures that do not invent gunpowder and kill thousands of their own species, along with other amply abominable atrocities; it is humanity that is reduced to the stature of an unthinking and unreasonable beast.

### **The Central Role of the Context**

Arguably the most prominent area of focus for pragmatists is the role of the context of an utterance or speech act performed. The previous irony mentioned, secures most of its vitality, vitriol and potency in the context of the “Enlightenment” or the dawn of the scientific “Age of Reason”, witnessed in Europe during the eighteenth century, with its roots spreading back to

Renaissance Humanism in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Context refers to the dynamic background or the totality of factors that may affect the meaning-making process of utterances and speech acts. There are various types of contexts studied in Pragmatics.

- i. **Physical context:** This refers to location or background of a speech act, as well as the possible ways in which the spatial component might shape the utterance under question. The communication style of Gulliver shifts according to the places he visits and the worldviews he begins to gradually imbibe. He has to whisper in Lilliput and exclaim loudly in Brobdingnag, just as the manner of his expression changes depending upon the prevailing physical circumstances to which he is a slave at a given point in time.
- ii. **Epistemic context:** This refers to the totality of previously shared knowledge between the speaker and his audience. Between Swift and his readers, there is a huge epistemic continent amassing centuries of intellectual development and progression of ideas; not only in history and science, but also in philosophy. The knowledge of the Enlightenment fundamentally impacts the pragmatic meaning in Book III and IV of the narrative, making the satire more topical and therefore more universal at the same time. The necromancy of Aristotle, Descartes, Caesar and Brutus in Glubbdubdrib questions the veracity of human historical and philosophical knowledge, whereas the machine in Laputa for the random jumbling of words, becomes an attack on modern literary criticism and its snobbish obscurantism.
- iii. **Social context:** This refers to the society or the social company of individuals in which a speech act is uttered, along with its subsequent impact on the form and content of the speech. Gulliver traverses the company of characters from all walks of society, from the royalty to the common rabble; from the comforts of his domestic home, to the snares of rebellious Japanese pirates, from amicably learning the tongue of Glumdalclitch while sitting in her lap, to indignantly writing a letter of protest to his publisher: the manner of Gulliver's utterances undergo a continuous transition throughout the novel. While he is supplicating and self-abasing in the royal courts and the company of kings, queens and princes: he is frequently belligerent and emphatically candid when encountering his equals such as the dwarf and the mischievous boy in Brobdingnag. Finally, Gulliver presumes to be addressing himself to the English speaking citizens of Europe, thereby taking unceasing pains to present himself as a patriotic lover of Queen and Country, as well as uncontroversial in his own estimations and evaluation of English society, history, law and culture, especially in the beginning of the narrative.
- iv. **Historical context:** This refers to the temporal period in which a specific speech act is made. In context of Gulliver's eighteenth century England, the historical context exercises a profound influence upon the construction and craft of the satire. Endeavouring throughout the works to be as plain, honest, neutral, gullible, innocuous and harmless as possible, Gulliver takes on the mask of a guileless traveller documenting his own experiences and learning for the dispassionate and disinterested benefit of the reading public. Being one of the first English novels ever to be written, it also features many devices for creating an illusion of factuality and veracity, such as letters and anonymous publishing. The historical popularity and exaggerations of travel narratives during the time was also utilised by Swift as the adequate vehicle for the transport of his satire. All these factors ensured that no offence was openly given to any authority or institution in England, while from behind the curtain, the very mat underneath them was pulled off briskly and with masterly finesse. Thereby managing the rare feat of both fascinating and lambasting its targeted victims.
- v. **Linguistic context:** This refers to the shared language and linguistic understanding between interlocutors that impact the construction of speech acts. This is most visible in the ornate and elaborate language of Gulliver, and the ironic difficulty he faces in translating the *eidōs* and *ethos* of the Houyhnhnms in his native tongue, and vice versa. Similarly, an awareness of the circumlocutory nature of the eighteenth century English language is helpful in understanding the satire leveled against the cant and impenetrable jargon of English laws, in contrast to the simplicity and candour of Brobdingnagian constitution. The high-falutin and grandiloquent diction of Lilliputian royal court is better understood as a satirical jab, when the prolixity of English royal and liturgical cant is perceived as part of the linguistic context of the novel.

All these contexts are dynamically interdependent and mutually interconnected with each other, making context, as a whole, the very central concern and core of Pragmatics as a discipline.

### **Cooperative Principle and its Applications**

This principle by Paul Grice is well exemplified by Gulliver in most cases, aiding him in the quick acquisition of the language of another culture and his ability to impressively make himself understood. Naturally, the process of cooperation is double-edged, as it is this very cooperative and agreeable quality in Gulliver that makes him the most powerful conduit used by Swift for inflicting satirical blows upon his subjects, for the benefit of his readers, very often without causing any perceptible offence.

Principle: "Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."

#### **A. The Maxim of Quality - Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically:**

- (i) Do not say what you believe to be false: An endeavour constantly attempted by Gulliver throughout his descriptions.
- (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence: Gulliver also exhibits due hesitation in making unwarranted claims regarding most of his subjects.

**B. The Maxim of Quantity -**

- (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange: The copious descriptions of the latitudes, marine conditions, customs, manners, language and physical details of his travels by Gulliver are a testimony of this quality displayed.
- (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required: The refusal of Gulliver in admitting the presence of his secret pocket with his spectacles, to the treacherous emperor of Lilliput, exhibits the presence of this maxim.

**C. The Maxim of Relation (or Relevance) -** Make your contributions relevant: The omissions of trivial irrelevancies throughout the novel so as to not tire the patience of the reader, is a sign of this.

**D. The Maxim of Manner - Be perspicuous, and specifically:**

Avoid obscurity: Although Gulliver endeavours to be as precise and direct in his speech as possible, the very structure of his language makes it difficult for him to eschew long, symmetrical and complex sentence structures.

- (i) **Avoid ambiguity:** Gulliver often fills out the facts and motives unknown to him with reasonable and just speculations for the satisfaction of the readers and the characters to whom he recounts his tales.
- (ii) **Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity):** A quality which Gulliver, is often shown to exhibit, particularly in encompassing whole tracts and treatises of government, politics, history, morality, religion and philosophy within a span of days, when explaining them to the Emperor of Brobdingnag and Master Houyhnhnm.
- (iii) **Be orderly:** The systematic, coherent, consistent and chronological flow of the narrative is an evidence of this trait in the writings of Gulliver and Swift.

**Politeness Maxims and their Uses by Gulliver**

Geoffrey Leech's similar formulation of the politeness principle with conversational maxims, is similarly fulfilled by Gulliver in every possible way. It is his politeness that makes him avoid giving offence to all those he mildly satirizes and rebukes in the narrative, although forgoing this quality upon his return from the land of Houyhnhnms. He follows all six maxims:-

- A. Tact:** Through agreeing to crawl and lick the floor before the feet of the emperor of Luggnag, he is able to immediately get his patronage, free passage and support in his kingdom.
- B. Generosity:** Through refusing to harm or eat the punished Lilliputians while still imprisoned, he is eventually able to win their approval and trust, and thereby his liberty.
- C. Approbation:** Through constant praise of the King and Queen of Brobdingnag, he is able to secure the best possible and least dangerous standard of life for himself, as well as escape the slavery of his master farmer.
- D. Modesty:** Through refusal to be corrupted by his near omnipotence in Lilliput, he is able to prevent the bloodshed and killing of thousands of lives that would arise out of a war between himself and the empire.
- E. Agreement:** In gradually beginning to agree with the insights offered by both the King of Brobdingnag and Master Houyhnhnm into his own credulity and ignorance, Gulliver is able to share their trust and communicate an understanding.
- F. Sympathy:** Through exercising charity and sympathy towards his enemies such as the dwarf, as well the defeated kingdom of Blefuscu, along with the enslaved and tyrannized horses in England: Gulliver is able to broaden the scope of his travels, favours received and understanding gathered.

The first and second form a pair, as do the third and the fourth. These maxims vary from culture to culture: what may be considered polite in one culture may be strange or downright rude in another; as is amply exhibited in the difference of cultures between all the lands that Gulliver visits.

**Relevance Theory and Reader Response to the Satire**

Relevance theory is a framework for understanding the interpretation of utterances. It was first formulated by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, and is widely used within cognitive linguistics and pragmatics. The theory was originally influenced by the work of Paul Grice and germinated out of his ideas, but has since become a pragmatic approach of its own.

It is a considerable mystery that despite its vehement, wide, unrelenting and unequivocal diatribe against whole of humanity: human nature, human condition, social structure, government, law, history, philosophy, science, religion, vanity and egotism; the novel was an instant and overnight success - famously in the words of John Gay, "read universally, from the nursery to the cabinet council". The malleability of the novel, with its multiple and manifold contexts, to be relevant to all stages and professions of humanity, highlights the totality and holistic perfection of the novel in creating a mirror of life, in all its kaleidoscopic variousness.

The utterances of Gulliver are interpreted by children in terms that are immediately relevant to them. Blissfully blind to its satirical possibilities, they perceive the work chiefly as a magical fairy tale of adventure and fantastical intrigue: something out of the *Travels of Sindbad the Sailor* and the *Arabian Nights*. On another level, the utterances by Englishmen and scholars are similarly interpreted in the framework of topical and contemporary history, politics and public allusions, which is most directly relevant to them. Finally, even without the knowledge of English history and politics, citizens of the world can detect with the work a timeless observation and lament over the human condition, that transcends all climes,

languages and cultures. Through concerning itself with what is most relevant to every thinking and feeling human being living on earth or ever having lived, the novel reclaims and everlastingly renews its vibrancy and stature as an immortal Classic of English and World Literature.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The pragmatic study of *Gulliver's Travels*, as well the systematic application of its principles upon the text, enriches and expands our comprehension of the nature, function and construction of satire as a dynamic movement between the author, reader and the contexts of their relationship. It convincingly demonstrates how satire is much more than an aggregation of symbols and descriptors on a page, but rather a performative utterance with an illocutionary force capable of generating powerful insights and real change in the world of action.

Most importantly, it aids in grasping not only how universally read and admired classics such as *Gulliver's Travels* are studied to understand their meaning, but also how the ever-ongoing process of meaning making is shaped, moulded and influenced by the context in which the author writes, the characters speak and the readers read: thereby explaining the ever invigorating quality of such classics with regard to its readers and itself.

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