

STRUCTURAL-PRAGMATIC REALIZATION OF PROHIBITIVE SPEECH ACTS IN Roald DAHL'S SHORT STORIES "LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER," "THE LANDLADY," AND "POISON"

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Hojiyeva Marjona To'liqinovna
m.t.hojiyeva@buxdu.uz
Bukhara State University

Abstract: This study examines the structural and pragmatic manifestations of prohibitive speech acts in three short stories by Roald Dahl: *Lamb to the Slaughter* (1953), *The Landlady* (1959), and *Poison* (1950). Grounded in Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, the analysis identifies four principal categories of prohibitive devices: explicit negative imperatives, deontic modal prohibitions, indirect/conversational prohibitions, and self-directed prohibitions. The findings demonstrate that Dahl strategically deploys prohibitive language not merely as a grammatical directive form, but as a mechanism for encoding power asymmetry, psychological manipulation, and narrative irony.

Keywords: prohibitive speech acts, negative imperatives, deontic modality, indirect prohibition, speech act theory, politeness

INTRODUCTION

Prohibition, as a sub-category of directive speech acts, constitutes one of the most communicatively significant and pragmatically complex illocutionary acts in human language. Unlike simple commands, which urge the hearer to perform an action, prohibitive acts function to prevent, restrict, or terminate an action - making them inherently face-threatening in the sense described by Brown and Levinson (1987) [2, p. 65]. In Austin's (1962) seminal framework, such acts carry what he termed *illocutionary force* - the social intent behind the linguistic form - and in the case of prohibitions, this force is directed at constraining the hearer's behavioral autonomy, or "negative face" [1, p. 98]. English, as a communicative system shaped by strong cultural norms of politeness and respect for personal autonomy (*privacy*), does not always realize prohibition in its bare imperative form. Rather, prohibitive intent is frequently encoded through modal auxiliaries, rhetorical questions, indirect suggestions, or even non-verbal action - a fact that makes its analysis both linguistically rich and culturally revealing. Roald Dahl's short stories for adult readers represent a particularly productive site for the investigation of prohibitive language, given their

dense interpersonal dynamics, power imbalances, and psychologically charged dialogue.

METHODOLOGY

Corpus and Selection Criteria. "Lamb to the Slaughter" (1953): A domestic drama in which a wife kills her husband after he announces his intention to leave the marriage. "The Landlady" (1959): A psychological thriller in which a predatory landlady manipulates a young male guest. "Poison" (1950): A crisis narrative in which a man believes a venomous snake is lying on his stomach, and his companion and a doctor must prevent any movement.

RESULT

In "Lamb to the Slaughter" prohibitive speech acts are concentrated in the interactions between Patrick and Mary Maloney, and emerge again between the police detectives and Mary after the murder. The story demonstrates how direct, unmitigated prohibition signals a fundamental rupture in social and relational norms.

The most pivotal prohibitive act in the story occurs at its dramatic turning point:

"I've already told you," he said. "Don't make supper for me. I'm going out." [4, p. 14].

This ENI is entirely unmitigated - no softening device (*please, sorry, I'd prefer*) is employed. Pragmatically, this represents a deliberate violation of what Brown and Levinson describe as positive politeness norms [2, p. 101]. The prohibition is not merely directed at a domestic action (preparing supper), but at Mary's entire identity as a wife and caregiver. The illocutionary force of the act far exceeds its surface form: Patrick is effectively prohibiting the continuation of their marriage. This mismatch between form and depth is precisely what triggers Mary's homicidal response - a powerful illustration of how the *perlocutionary effect* of a speech act can far outstrip the speaker's apparent intention [6, p. 45].

Later, in the institutional context following the murder, a detective issues a standard ENI:

"Don't touch anything" [4, p. 22].

This downward-directed, high face-threat prohibition contrasts sharply with Mary's own subsequent internal monologue:

"Do everything normally. Keep things absolutely natural and there'll be no need for acting at all." [4, p. 25].

Mary prohibits her own natural emotional responses, transforming herself through self-directed imperatives into a convincing grieving widow. The word *absolutely* functions as an intensifier, underscoring the severity of the auto-prohibition.

The Landlady: Prohibition as Covert Manipulation

The Landlady contains the most sophisticated deployment of prohibition in the corpus. The landlady's strategy is to exercise absolute control over Billy Weaver while

presenting every constraint as hospitality. This results in a consistent pattern of face-threatening prohibition disguised as positive politeness - a combination Brown and Levinson describe as among the most manipulatively effective communicative strategies. [2, p. 129]

The first notable instance is a DMP deployed at the moment Billy considers leaving:

"You mustn't pay me anything tonight." [3, p. 81].

Structurally, this is a modal prohibition directed at the hearer. Functionally, it operates as a *favor* - the landlady appears to be protecting Billy from financial inconvenience. Yet pragmatically, it initiates a chain of obligations that will prevent him from leaving freely. By accepting a favor, Billy implicitly accepts a social bond that constrains his autonomy.

The most complex prohibitive act in the story occurs when Billy is on the verge of realizing the dangerous truth about the house's previous guests. At the critical moment of near-revelation, the landlady interrupts:

"Milk?" she said. "And sugar?" [3, p. 84].

This is a paradigmatic example of ICP through conversational hijacking. No grammatical negation is present; no explicit directive is issued. Yet the landlady effectively silences Billy's inquiry by redirecting the conversation to mundane domestic ritual. When Billy attempts to return to the subject, the landlady deploys a second strategy:

"Come over here now and sit next to me and warm yourself in front of this lovely fire. Come on. Your tea's all ready for you." [3, p. 85].

The surface form here is a chain of positive imperatives, encoding warmth and hospitality. Yet the pragmatic function is unmistakably prohibitive: these imperatives silence Billy's emerging suspicion by mobilizing culturally loaded English rituals (fire, tea, domestic comfort) to neutralize critical thinking. The prohibition is invisible - its power lies precisely in not appearing as a prohibition at all

The landlady also employs an institutionally framed DMP to obtain Billy's signature in the guest book:

"Everyone has to do that because it's the law of the land, and we don't want to go breaking any laws at this stage in the proceedings, do we?" [3, p. 87].

The first-person plural *we* and the tag question *do we?* are classic politeness strategies designed to involve the hearer in the prohibition's logic, making refusal appear socially deviant. The hearer is maneuvered into compliance not through command, but through an apparent shared rational interest.

Poison provides the starkest contrast in the corpus: a story in which the pragmatic necessity of prohibition completely overrides all politeness considerations. When Harry lies motionless in his bed, believing a venomous *krait* is resting on his stomach,

his companion Tim and the Indian doctor Ganderbai issue a rapid sequence of urgent prohibitions:

"Don't move! When did it bite you? Keep still, Harry. Don't spasm your stomach."

"Don't even breathe," I whispered

"Keep perfectly still! Don't twitch a muscle!" [4, p. 210].

The hyperbolic *Don't even breathe* and the anatomically precise *Don't twitch a muscle* demonstrate that in life-or-death contexts, English abandons all softening strategies; the communicative need for absolute obedience overrides every norm of face-protection.

The hedges *really think* and *pretty* soften what is functionally a prohibitive act into a personal evaluation. Arthur avoids threatening Pamela's negative face by encoding his prohibition as a subjective moral judgment rather than a command - a classic ICP strategy. Pamela, however, demonstrates her dominant position in the relationship by dismissing this with a bare ENI of her own:

"Don't be such a pompous hypocrite!" [6, p. 62].

This contrast - Arthur's hedged indirect prohibition versus Pamela's unmitigated ENI - encapsulates a key finding of the study: the structural form of prohibition in English is not determined by grammatical convention alone, but by the relative power of the interlocutors.

DISCUSSION

The results confirm that prohibitive speech acts in Dahl's fiction function as the primary linguistic mechanism through which power relations are established, challenged, and subverted. In all three stories, characters who issue high-frequency, unmitigated prohibitions occupy dominant narrative positions - Patrick over Mary in *Lamb to the Slaughter*, the landlady over Billy in *The Landlady*, and the medical authority of Dr. Ganderbai over Harry in *Poison*. In *The Landlady*, the most powerful prohibitor is also the most linguistically polite, using ICP and DMP to exercise coercive control while maintaining the surface form of hospitality. The perlocutionary power of her prohibitions - their actual effect on Billy - is greater than any unmitigated command could achieve precisely because they do not appear threatening. This inverse relationship between linguistic directness and pragmatic power is one of Dahl's most recurrent narrative devices.

CONCLUSION

Indirect/Conversational Prohibitions represent the most culturally specific and narratively sophisticated form of restriction in Dahl's fiction, functioning through implicature, topic hijacking, and ritual mobilization; (4) Self-Directed Prohibitions reveal character psychology and serve as indices of social pressure, trauma, and moral compromise. Together, these findings demonstrate that prohibition in English literary

discourse is not a single grammatical category but a multidimensional pragmatic act whose power derives as much from what it conceals as from what it reveals.

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