

# THE INTENDED MEANING OF HUMOR ACTS IN “THE BORN LOSER”

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This study investigated the intended meaning of humour act produced by the characters in “The Born Loser”. It deals with the production of the utterances as well as the semantic process of how the humour considered funny based of the text and picture appeared in the comic strips. There are four problems discussed in this study, namely: (1) What are the kinds of humour acts produced by the characters in “the Born Loser” (2) How are the semantic mechanisms of humour acts produced by the characters in “the Born Loser” (3) What kinds of visual images appeared in “the Born Loser” and (4) Why are the humour acts used by the characters in “The Born Loser”.

After analysing the data, the researcher finds out that the comic strips use the linguistic forms. In the linguistic form, there is speech act analysis that focused on locution, illocution, and perlocution. In performing locution, the characters use three types of sentences. They are, declarative, interrogative, and imperative. They aim to make a certain effect of the utterances. In addition, he also finds out that the meanings of the utterance do not depend on the form of the sentences. It can be inferred that in uttering a declarative sentence is not always in the form of statement, an interrogative is not always a question, and an imperative is not always a command. While for *verdictive* and *declaration* did not appear in the comic strip because the story is about people’s pleasure in laughing at someone else’s mistake. For this reason, both *verdictive* and *declaration* are not performed since the characters have not got the authority to change the condition through their utterances.

**Keywords :** *Speech act, speech act classification, humour act in language teaching, language visual images*

## Introduction

Generally, humour act is the term that is developed from speech acts as a part of the act in communicating. The act of humour itself can be the ability of making one feel amused or amusement. It can evoke and make people laugh; hence it can also bring happiness to the audiences or readers. Raskin (1985:1) explains that there is nothing unusual or rare about the phenomenon. Somebody hears or sees something and laughs. In most cases, this means that the person finds the audio visual stimulus funny. Funny situation, funny stories, even funny thoughts occur everyday to virtually everybody. It can be concluded that sense of humour constitutes the ability to make fun or humour that all people or audiences share; though it depends on a host of absolute and relative variables—including geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education, as well as context.

The study of humour itself has once been conducted in the area of psychology. As quoted from ([http://www.ur.umich.edu/0405/Oct11\\_04/02.shtml](http://www.ur.umich.edu/0405/Oct11_04/02.shtml)) an article by Katie Gazella that's the kind of outcome that could result from the University's new three-year project titled Humour at Michigan. As the program begins, researchers from a variety of fields—including psychology, medicine, anthropology, history and more—plan to study humour with the help of a database of every New Yorker cartoon printed since the magazine's beginning. Though this study has been studied from various fields: such as medicine, anthropology, history and many more. It can be stated that language is closely related to thought, this also means that humour may be seen here as involving all of the emotion, thought and action—a fundamental principle—and later can lead to laughter. The findings have shown that the act of humour can be a way to ease stress as well as keeping one's health as quoted from various research of *International Journal of Humor Research* at the University of Maryland Medical Center. So that it can be stated that one can look at the effects of humor on people's health, the way race and gender have been portrayed in different generations, and how people react when they understand a joke in communication. Searle (1969: 21) proposes the speech act is the basic unit of communication; it is basically concerned with what people “do” with language and the function of it. This argument inspires as well as encourages the writer to make the study on the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts produced by the characters in “The Born Loser”, how they are used by them and why they are used.

Though the dialogues as well as the picture are short, the influences behind the comic strip can be influential or even powerful to criticise people's mistake. The story is all about people's struggle through everyday life as short cuts become long cuts and those characters try to keep his head above water as the perpetual low men on the totem pole. It means that all characters in the comic strip are “The Born Losers” where the high men who have the authority or the superiors can be ridiculed by their subordinates.

As the story is reflected to the real situation which the characters in “The Born Loser” began as a strip with no central characters that revolved around the loser theme. However, the story is arranged in such a way without any means of mocking to the authority. It is only to entertain and make the reader laughs. For this reason, the writer is interested in conducting this study by analysing the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts to capture the motive behind the intended meaning produced by the characters in “The Born Loser”.

Moreover, the aspect that can be given is about the insight as well as the development of understanding humour in English by using comic strips. Last but not least, the writer hopes that this study might be worth for all the readers in general; especially for the students who are interested in studying speech acts—or humour acts rather—as a part of the philosophical study of language.

### **Speech Act**

Since words have a meaning, it can be meant that when one says something, one intends to convey it by doing something. Therefore, in the theory of speech act is concerned with what people “do” with words or language as proposed by Searle. It is a reason that speech act theory becomes very helpful at this point as it reveals how the utterance causes a certain effect. The distinction which J.L.Austin makes between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts illustrates this point in (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/FARBER/Johnson.html>.) Austin writes: We first distinguish a group of things we do in saying something, which together we sum up by saying we perform a *locutionary act*, such which is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in traditional sense. Second, we say that we also perform *illocutionary acts* such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, &c., i.e. utterances which have a certain (conventional) force. Thirdly, we also may perform *perlocutionary acts*: what we bring out or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even say, surprising or misleading. Here we have three, if not more, different sense or dimensions of the use of sentence or the use of language ( and, of course, there are others also)

Based on this statement, Austin restricts ‘meaning’ to the sense and reference of locution. Then, he goes on to locate the force of an illocutionary act in the conventional usage of an expression, which thereby determines the kind of act that the speaker is performing.

Related to speech act—or humour act rather—this study is conducted on the utterances of humour act of dialogues where the communicative approach is also applied. It is clear that the discussion of communicative language teaching needs to be involved to identify the humour act utterances as they are still regarded as communicative act. It means that what an addresser and addressee do in their dialogues represent speech act as both acts in language use.

## Speech Acts Classification

The types of speech acts described by Austin in which he divides speech act into three different kinds which classified as the basic kinds of speech acts adopted in Levinson (1983:236) three basic senses in which saying something one is doing something, hence three kinds of acts are simultaneously performed *locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act.*

In agreement with Levinson, according to Traugott and Pratt (1980:229) the aspect of speech act which specifies what the language is being used for on a given occasion. Various attempts have been made to classify the illocutionary acts in English. Here is one useful working classification as follows:

- 1) Representatives.
- 2) Expressives.
- 3) Verdictives.
- 4) Directives.
- 5) Commissive.
- 6) Declarations.

From the classifications above, can be meant that representatives, expressives, and verdictives are all intended to affect the addressees' mental sets-what they know (representatives), their social attitudes (expressives), and their judgment (verdictives) and are only indirectly intended to modify behaviour. Directives, however, are primarily contractual, establishing states of affairs in the world, some with few consequences (arresting).

A speaker's communicative competence includes not just knowledge of what illocutionary acts can be performed in the language, but also how, when, where, and by whom they can be performed.

## Discussion



Wilberforce: Why do we recycle our old newspaper instead of just throwing them out?

Brutus : To do our part to help save the environment! New paper is made of trees you know!

Wilberforce : You're puttin' me on! No one can slice a tree that thin!

### **Classification of the Utterances**

By uttering “Why do we recycle our old newspaper instead of just throwing them out?”, Wilberforce actually has performed two kinds of speech acts, they are an act of referring and an act of uttering. The act of referring which comes from the utterance “Why do we recycle our old newspaper instead of just throwing them out?” consist of three referring expressions namely *we*, *our old newspaper*, and, *them*. As a result, the addresser performs three acts of referring. In uttering *we* it refers to *Wilberforce himself* and *Brutus as his father*, *our old newspaper* refers to *their old newspaper*, and *them* refers to *their old newspaper*.

While in the act of uttering, it is divided into three kinds of acts, namely (a) locutionary act. Locution is a term that roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in traditional sense, that is *Why do we recycle our old newspaper instead of just throwing them out?*. It means that *Wilberforce is questioning to his father about what is the recycling of old newspaper for*. The way how to carry out the utterance is via an interrogative sentence. Accordingly the locution meaning is an INTERROGATIVE sentence; (b) the illocutionary act (illocution). It is a term deals with what the speaker intends to communicate to the addressee that is *why do we recycle our old newspaper instead of just throwing them out?*. It means that *he has no idea about recycling the old newspaper. Therefore, he tries to ask it to his father (Brutus) to whom he is expected to know more than he does*. From this utterance, it can be seen that it functions as a question, however, if it is looked at more closely, there is an indirect relationship between a function and a structure. Consequently, it can be interpreted as a form of *request* where the addresser i.e. *Wilberforce is asking about why they recycle their old newspaper instead of just throwing them out*. From this utterance, Wilberforce is performing the kind of illocution i.e. DIRECTIVE, which is QUESTIONING; and EXPRESSIVE i.e. SHOWING CURIOSITY (c) for the perlocutionary act (perlocution). Perlocution is a term that deals with the act of producing the effect of uttering, that is *why do we recycle our old newspaper instead of just throwing them out?*. Based on this utterance, the addresser produces the effect to Brutus to whom he is expected to explain it to

Wilberforce as the addresser. As a result, *Brutus explains about what is the use of recycling the old newspaper to Wilberforce.*

By uttering “To do our part to help save the environment!”, Brutus has carried out two kinds of speech acts, namely an act of referring and an act of uttering. In the act of referring, the utterance “To do our part to help save the environment!” consists of two referring expressions, i.e. *our* and *the environment*. Accordingly, the addresser is carrying out two acts of referring expression. In uttering *our*, he refers to *all people in general as a part of the living things*, especially to *Brutus as himself* and *Wilberforce as the addresser*. While in uttering *the environment*, the addresser refers to *the environment in general as a part of the surroundings and conditions in which people live in*.

In the act of uttering “To do our part to help save the environment!” can be described differently namely (a) locutionary act (locution). The utterance “To do our part to help save the environment!” it means that *recycling the old newspaper is a part of saving the environment*. Accordingly, the way the addresser performs the utterance is through a declarative sentence. Thus, the locutionary act (locution) form is a DECLARATIVE sentence; (b) illocutionary act (illocution) is a term that the addresser, i.e. Brutus intends to explain to the addressee, i.e. Wilberforce, by saying “To do our part to help save the environment!”. This utterance can be interpreted as the form of statement, and it looks closely to assertion. This is called as a direct speech act. The meaning of this utterance is *Brutus tells that recycling the old newspaper is a part of saving the environment*. It can be interpreted as *a logical answer as an old man who tries to explain to his son the concept of saving the environment by recycling the old newspaper. He thinks that the new paper is made of trees. For this reason, Brutus wants to recycle them*. This kind of illocution is REPRESENTATIVE, it means TELLING.

By uttering “New paper is made of trees you know!”, Brutus has performed two kinds of speech acts that are a referring act and an act of uttering. In the act of referring, the utterance “New paper is made of trees you know!” consists of three referring expressions, namely *new paper*, *tree*, and *you*. Accordingly, Brutus is performing three acts of referring. In uttering *new paper* the addresser refers to the *new paper is the substance in thin sheets used of writing, printing, and drawing*, and the utterance *trees* which refers to *plants with a wooden trunk and branches*. While in uttering *you*, it refers to *Wilberforce as the addressee to Brutus*.

While the act of uttering “New paper is made of trees you know!” can be described into three different ways. They are (a) locutionary act (locution), the utterance “New paper is made of trees you know!” it means that *Brutus says that new paper is made of trees*. The way how to carry out this utterance is through a declarative sentence. Accordingly, the form of the locutionary act (locution) is DECLARATIVE sentence; (b) illocutionary act (illocution) by saying “New paper is made of trees you know!” it can mean that *Brutus states that new paper is made of trees*. From this utterance it can be seen that it functions as a statement, however if it is looked closely, it is an assertion. The form of this utterance is a direct speech act. It means that *Brutus asserts that new paper is made of trees*. Consequently, the illocution is REPRESENTATIVE, i.e. ASSERTING; (c) the perlocutionary act (perlocution) of the utterance “New paper is made of trees you know!” can be described that the act is produced in order to get an effect toward Wilberforce, so that he can understand about what does Brutus mean. “You’re putting’ me on! No one can slice a tree that thin!”

By uttering “You’re putting’ me on!” Wilberforce has carried out two kinds of speech acts namely; an act of referring and an act of uttering. In the act of referring, the utterance “You’re putting’ me on! No one can slice a tree that thin!” consists two kinds of referring expressions, which are *you* and *me*. Accordingly Wilberforce is performing two acts of referring expressions. In uttering *you* the addresser refers to *his father*, i.e. *Brutus*, and by uttering *me* it refers to *Wilberforce himself*.

While the act of uttering “You’re putting’ me on!” can be described into two different acts namely (a) locutionary act (locution). The utterance “You’re putting me on!” it means that *Brutus’ utterance is not properly understood by Wilberforce, so he gets confused when Brutus asserts that new paper is made of trees*. This utterance is performed through a declarative sentence. So, the form of locution is a DECLARATIVE sentence; (b) illocutionary act (illocution) is a term deals with what the addresser intends to communicate to the addressee, which is *you’re putting me on!*. From this utterance it can be interpreted as the form of statement, although if it is seen more closely, it functions as assertion. It can be regarded as a direct speech act. Accordingly, the meaning of this utterance is *Wilberforce is showing that he gets confused when Brutus told him that new paper is made of trees*. Hence, the kind of illocution is REPRESENTATIVES, it means ASSERTING.

By uttering “No one can slice a tree that thin!”, Wilberforce has performed two kind of speech acts, namely an act of referring and an act of uttering. In the act of referring, the utterance “No one can slice a tree that thin!” consists of two kinds of referring expressions that are, *one* and *a tree*. Accordingly the addresser is carrying out two acts of referring. In uttering *one* it refers to *a person or one in general*; while in uttering *a tree* it refers to *a plant with a wooden trunk and branches*.

While in the act of uttering “No one can slice a tree that thin!” can be described into three different ways. They are as follows (a) locutionary act (locution), the utterance “No one can slice a tree that thin!” means that *Wilberforce says that no one can slice a tree as thin as a paper*. The way he performs is through a declarative sentence. Therefore the form of locution is a DECLARATIVE sentence; (b) illocutionary act (illocution) the utterance that deals with what the speaker intends to communicate to the addressee. The utterance “No one can slice a tree that thin!” can be seen it functions as a statement, i.e. *Wilberforce states that no one can slice a tree as thin as a paper*. However, if it is seen closely, it means as an assertion. This form is called a direct speech act where Wilberforce asserts and also challenges it directly toward Brutus. Hence, Wilberforce has actually performed two kinds of illocutionary force. Therefore, the meaning of this utterance is *Wilberforce is asserting as well as daring to Brutus that no one can slice a tree as thin as a paper*. It can also be meant that *it takes a lot of time or even impossible for everyone to slice a tree as thin as a paper*. Accordingly, the kind of the illocution is REPRESENTATIVES, i.e. ASSERTING and DIRECTIVE, i.e. DARING; and (c) the perlocutionary act (perlocution) which deals with the act of producing the effect of uttering, that is “No one can slice a tree that thin!” from this form of the utterance, the addresser, i.e. Wilberforce produces an effect toward Brutus. Hence, the effect of this utterance to Brutus that he gets confused and ridiculed by Wilberforce.

### **Conclusion**

The intended meaning of the utterances sometimes do not depend on the forms of the sentences produced by the characters. It can be captured that the basic act of utterance has got various functions that are independent from the real utterance. For example, a declarative is not always asserting, however it can be for *telling, suggesting, informing, asserting, stating, criticising, showing curiosity, showing annoyance, showing surprise and deploring*. An interrogative is not always asking, but it can be used for *ordering, questioning, showing*



*surprise, making fun* and *showing curiosity*. An imperative is not always used for ordering, yet it can be used for *ridiculing, daring, and requesting*.

The Speech acts which are used by the characters in the comic strip ‘The Born Loser’ are carried out through three related acts as pointed out by Austin namely, locution, illocution, and perlocution. In carrying out locution, they use interrogative, declarative, and imperative. In performing illocutionary acts, they use four kinds of illocution namely; *representative, directive, commissive, and expressive*. While in performing the perlocutionary acts, the characters understand about what the other characters’ intention. In addition, they also perform their utterances through a direct and an indirect speech acts. A direct speech acts are performed if there is a direct relationship between function and structure, and an indirect speech acts are performed if there is an indirect relationship between function and structure.

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