

## Analysis of Promise as a Speech Act in the Light of Satyajit Ray's Cinema

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**Abstract** - The current study is focusing on the analysis of promise as a speech act from a pragmatic and stylistic point of view, in correlation with Austin's speech act theory, specifically based on the instances of promises from the screenplays of Satyajit Ray's three greatest masterpieces - his debut film, "Pather Panchali", "Apu Sansar", which is the third and last instalment of "Apu Trilogy", and "Devi". All these three films have several promise speech acts present in the film, uttered by different characters in different situations, but the role of these promises is important also from linguistic point of view as the concept of promise as a speech act as explained by Austin (1962) and, Searle (1969) also brings some conditions to the scenario which are crucial, for those promises to be considered successful. In a successful promise, there has to be an obligation creating circumstance. A successful promise depends on the promisor's ability and the promisee's preference. We will be looking into Searle's (1969) theory, where he suggested that felicity conditions are important for a promise to be a successful speech act, i.e propositional condition, preparatory condition, sincerity, and essential condition. We will be looking out to observe the promises made and kept or left partially or completely unfulfilled by the characters, analyse them using the speech act theory, and briefly look into Ray's spectacular cinematic world to understand the role of the promises in the climax of the films.

**Keywords:** Speech act; Promise; Movie; Linguistics

### I. INTRODUCTION

"Pather Panchali", "Apu Sansar" and "Devi", the three exceptionally well-written movies, where Ray is at his peak of excellence in portraying both the rural the and urban Bengal, its socio-economic picture, the post-independence India, while shedding light on the beautiful yet perplexing nature of life, love, affection, belief and the human heart, are our topic of discussion here. These three movies are taken here, to look into the promises made by the characters of the films, in order to analyse them pragmatically, following the theories of Austin and Searle, to understand the nature and strategies of the promises. We will try to understand the capability of the promises to fulfil the suggested conditions that make a promise

different from a mere assertion or threat or commitment. In our literature review section, we have discussed briefly about the research conducted to analyse promise as a speech act in the fictions and films, written and made in English and other languages, but to analyse the promises made in Bengali fiction and films, especially the ones based on literary works, is rare. There are many instances of promises in the source literature of such films, which have been changed in form, essence, and meaning in the screenplay of the films. Without focusing on the source literature or making any comparisons between the two, here, the focus will be completely on the screenplay of the three splendidly brilliant films made by Ray to analyse the promises in the light of speech act theory.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the act of promising we need to dive deeper into moral philosophical ground. Promise as a speech act differs from any other speech on the ground of "obligation creating circumstance". promise creates an obligation to do or not do a future act between promisor and promisee. Here the promiser is a person or entity who is doing the act of promising and the promisee is the one to whom he promises. Promise is a commissive speech act whose point and purpose is an obligation by the speaker to do something. Austin asserted the concept of locutionary act as an utterance with a certain meaning and illocutionary act as an utterance with a certain force. According to Austin, a specific locutionary act can have different or multiple illocutionary forces or acts. Abstracting the meaning of the utterance will necessarily abstract an illocutionary force whenever the force is included in that meaning. In this paper we will see the illocutionary force of the promise speech act. In all the frameworks about promise speech act we have two things in common - one is promisor's ability and another one is the promisee's performance. Promisor's ability refers to the belief in the ability of the promisor to deliver the promised act and promisee's preference means the promisee must not be against the performance of promised speech act. We will initially follow the condition and framework of promises given by John Searle (2014). In his discussion, he explained a total of nine conditions that are necessary and sufficient for the act of promising to have been successfully and non defectively performed in the utterance of a given sentence. In his given framework, a speaker S utters a sentence T in the presence of a hearer H, then we can say that in utterance T, S sincerely and non-defectively promises that P to H if and only if the utterance satisfies the below nine conditions.

Here, We are considering S for speaker, H for hearer, T is the utterance, P is the proposed promise, A is the future act

proposed by the promise. Intention and knowledge stand for I and K.

1. Normal input and output conditions obtained. Here "output" covers the conditions for intelligible speaking and "input" covers the conditions of understanding
2. S expresses the proposition that P utterance of T.
3. In expressing that P, S predicts a future act A of S.
4. H would prefer S's doing A to his not doing A, and S believes H would prefer his doing A to his not doing A.
5. It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.
6. S Intends to do A.
7. S Intends that the occurrence T of will place him under an obligation to do A.
8. S intends (i) to produce in H the knowledge (K) that the utterance of T is to count as placing S under an obligation to do A. S intends to produce K by means of the recognition of i, and he intends i to be recognized in virtue of (by means of) H's knowledge of the meaning of T.
9. The semantic rules of the dialect spoken by S and H are such that T is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions 1-8 are obtained.

Conditions number 2 and 3 make the **Proposition Condition**. Condition 4 and 5 represents **Preparatory Condition** according to searle. Searle specially emphasized on condition 6 that is **Sincerity Condition**. And condition 7 searle called it **Essential Condition**.

When we are discussing the conditions for the promise speech act. We must look into the factors which make an unsuccessful promise. In his paper Searle analyzed the explicit promises and ignored elliptical terms of phase, hints and metaphors. As We are following searlian speech act conditions we are not considering about hypothetical

promise. We are also excluding head nodding when asking to do something or writing down I O U when you owe something to someone.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research studies have been conducted focussing on various aspects of speech act theory in the fields of pragmatics, logic and philosophy for many years. In Linguistics, one of the most preliminary works on this topic is J.L. Austin's "How to Do Things with Words", a series of his lectures, published in 1962 for the first time. The works that followed Austin and significantly influenced the research in this field came from Searle. Austin in his lectures, defines the speech act of promise and explains the conditions that make any speech act capable of being considered as a promise. To quote Austin, "For one who says promising is not merely a matter of uttering a word! It is an inward and spiritual act!" is apt to appear as a solid." Searle, after Austin, has significant contributions in the field; from reviewing, and criticizing Austin's works to discussing the conditions of performatives or speech acts including those of promise speech acts, in "An Essay in the Philosophy of Language" (1969) and in his other works on speech act theory (1979), the conditions of promise as a speech act (2014), locutionary and illocutionary acts (1968). Adil Hanif Kurji explained the concept of promise and what we can consider a promise and what not.

Wen Yuan an Siqui Lyn (2022) have discussed the implications of speech act, the idea of commissive and assertion, along with the differences these speech acts share with promises, while Raymond Hickey (1986) focussed on the concept of promise and commitment in English. The differences between promises and threats have been an important topic of discussion in this discipline, pointed out and discussed by many logicians and linguist from time to time, like Antonio Blanco Salguero (2010) and Samar Sami (2015). The concept of promise as a speech act has not only been discussed from the theoretical or philosophical point of view but

the act of promise among students in different languages and culture, along with the instances of promise as speech act in non-fiction works have been analysed by linguists and philosophers, for example, by Miller (2002), Rahman (2020) and Malk (2020). Instances and various types of promises as well as that of other speech acts present in the premise of different genres of literary works, fiction and audio-visual medium like movies and TV series have been analysed from different point of view by Arovick (2019) discussing the speech act of promise in "Franklin's Tale", Safira (2017), Devi (2020), Anggraini and Hardjanto (2022), discussing the speech act of promising in the TV series "Gilmore Girls". As far as Bengali films and literature is concerned, there haven't been a lot of significant attempts to look into speech acts, their strategies, types, and structures, especially those of promises and commissives. Here, three remarkable creation of Satyajit Ray, Devi (1960) and two films from his epic trilogy "Pather Panchali" (1955), and "Apar Sansar" (1959) are the source of data for the paper, where the analysis is focussed on the types of made in these films, as brilliantly written by Ray in his adapted screenplays.

### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

For our everyday use, we consider a promise to be a kind of utterance that we make to assure someone of some kind of act that we will complete. From the point of view of Linguistics, promises are speech acts through which the speaker communicates with the hearer to commit something that he/she will do in favor of the hearer. But, in the real world, the maximum number of times someone gets their hearts or dreams shattered, we see that, it originates from unfulfilled promises – the one that is made by the loved ones, or the one made by the person to his/her own self. But in the view of pragmatics, are we allowed to use the term "promise" every now and then, without taking in consideration all the conditions that a speech act is supposed to fulfill to be considered as a "promise" and how

do we explain the impact of broken promises found in the storyline of fiction, both in literature and audio-visual media, and how the concept of broken promises in fiction is different from that of unfulfillment of the conditions referred by logicians and philosophers?

To answer the question, we have chosen from the bests of audio-visual media, three unparalleled examples of film adaptation from literature, “*Pather Panchali*”, “*Apur Sansar*”, and “*Devi*”, directed by the legend himself, Satyajit Ray. These three movies have a number of promises in their premise, made by the prominent characters in different situations. All the three movies are based on some literary masterpiece, the two movies from “*Apu Trilogy*” are loosely based on two novels by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, “*Pather Pachali*” and “*Aparajito*”, while “*Devi*” is based on a short story with the same title by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay. Before the discussion starts, it is important to state that, we are working on Satyajit Ray's screenplays of the films, not on the source literature. We are not referring to the original text or any other literary reference related to the films

“*Pather Panchali*” the groundbreaking film for Bengali cinema, was the directorial debut of the legend, released on 1955. It is considered to be one of the greatest films ever made, and won the best Human Document Award at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. The movie revolves around Apu, the protagonist of the trilogy in his childhood, living with his parents, and his elder sister, Durga, in a village in rural Bengal, leading a pretty ordinary, yet joyful life, playing and roaming around in the village with his sister, who dies from fever later, without any proper treatment owing to the miserable financial condition of the family. We find a number of promises in the film, but two of the most significant promises are found to be uttered by Harihar, Apu's father, to his elderly cousin Indir Thakrun and Apu, making the other one to Durga, before her death.

In the first context, Harihar, Apu's father, promises Indir, that he will buy her a new shawl in the coming puja, as Indir tells him that her shawl is of no use anymore. She doesn't ask for the shawl herself, but Harihar is the one who affectionately says that he will get a new one for her, (“বেশ ত, পূজোয় একটা নতুন চাদর কিনে দেব!” or “well, I will buy you a new shawl in the Pujo”). This promise fulfils the conditions that a speech act needs to do, so that it can be considered a proper promise. Here the speaker has the intention to fulfil the promise in favour of the hearer, the promise means there will be this act of buying a new shawl in future for the promise and it also means Harihar is obligated to fulfil the promise in future and according to the first condition, both of them understands the meaning of this promise. In the next example, we see that Apu promises Durga that he will take Durga to see a train, something which was a greatly desired thing for Durga for a long time. She asks him “এবার জ্বর সারলে আবার রেলগাড়ি দেখতে যাব”, means, if he will go with her after she recovers from her illness. In reply to her question, Apu answers in positive that he will do so. It fulfils all the Searlian conditions of promise. Apu proposes a promise to Durga, which creates a future act. Durga believes that Apu will fulfill the promised act and Apu also intends wholeheartedly to complete the act. Lastly it puts Apu into an obligation to do the act, to take her to the place where they can see a train together.

If we look into the cinematic world of “*Pather Panchali*”, and go to the ending of the film, we can see that none of these two promises are fulfilled, because in both the cases, in spite of having the desire and intention to fulfil their promises, the promisers can't do so, owing to the adverse situation. Indir Thakrun and Durga, both die before their wishes are fulfilled.

In “*Apur Sansar*”, known as “*The World of Apu*”, the third and last film from the “*Apu Trilogy*”, an adult Apu is happily



married to Aparna, living a very humble life in Kolkata, when their little heaven gets all messed up by Aparna's death during childbirth, making Apu reluctant to see and accept the responsibility of their son, Kajol, and starting to lead a vagabond life. Throughout the movie, there are several instances of promises made by Apu to his wife and Kajol to Apu. The film is an example of Ray's unparalleled talent of creating a beautiful atmosphere where the human soul, its desires, dismays, and journey of self-realization and ambitions.

To begin with, there are many promises uttered by the characters, or at least there are sentence structures that look like it's a promise. But if we analyze them linguistically or in the context of moral philosophy, we can make a clear distinction between what we can call a promise speech act and what not. In our first example, which comes in the very last scene of the film, Apu makes a proposition that has a promise in his utterance. He promises his son Kajol that, if he takes him to Kolkata, Kajol's grandfather, Apu's father-in-law won't know about it because Apu won't tell him (“দাদু জানতে পারবে না। দাদুকে আমি বলবো না”, which means, “Dadu won't come to know about this. I won't tell him”). Apu assures his son with this promise. In this promise, Apu predicts a future act. Here Kajol prefers that Apu will do the future act, and he prefers Apu doing that rather than not doing that. For the fifth condition, we can say that Apu will generally not take the course of action. Apu proposes that a promise P creates a future obligation. Here, it is believed that Apu will keep his promise as he clearly intends to do the act. In another example of a promise that Apu makes to his son, Apu promises Kajol that he will take him to his father as till then, Kajol doesn't want to believe that Apu is his father, rather considers him as his friend. It also satisfies every condition given by Searle. Kajol asks him “আমায় বাবার কাছে নিয়ে যাবে?” (“Will you

take me to my father?”) and Apu replies “নিশ্চয়ই”, (“certainly”).

In another example, before Apu and Aparna's marriage, Aparna's mother threatens her father that if he gets her daughter married to someone who is mentally imbalanced, she will commit suicide. This utterance, “তুমি যাও নইলে আমি গলায় দড়ি দিয়ে মরব!” (If you don't leave, I will hang myself to death” is a potential threat because here she is giving a warning. There are philosophical and linguistic differences between promise as a speech act and warning as a speech act. This sentence doesn't work to the advantage of the hearer or the promise, and it is not sure if the promiser actually intends to commit the uttered task.

Immediately after their wedding, Apu asks Aparna if she will be able to live with him, and in reply, Aparna assures him that she can do that. She can live the rest of her life with Apu, irrespective of his financial condition. Though not uttered in a complete sentence, this can be considered as a promise because the promiser has the intention to fulfil it, she is obligated to fulfil it, and she is sincere enough to fulfil it. In the last example, we can find another promise, which is made as an answer to a question but can be considered a conditional promise. Apu asks Aparna if she will write letters to her, and Aparna replies that she won't write if Apu doesn't do the same (“তুমি না লিখলে লিখব না”). This doesn't fulfil all the conditions of a promise, as suggested by Searle.

Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (The Goddess), considered to be his first directly political film, explored not only the theme of dehumanization of women from Indian context but also reminded us of the worldwide tradition of vilifying and worshiping women at the same time along with presenting the dark picture of blind religious faith. The story revolves around Kalikinkar, an influential aristocrat in rural Bengal of 19<sup>th</sup> century who is very affectionate towards his daughter-in-law, Doyamoyee, and on a fateful night, he dreams her to be the reincarnation of Goddess



Kali and eventually starts to worship her, a human being of flesh and blood. Kalikinkar's son, Doyamoyee's husband Umaprasad, is a liberal-minded Bengali man but he ultimately fails to stop the devastating tragedy of the family and the death of the most loving member of the family, letting Doyamoyee lose her sanity and the family lose their peace and happiness forever. In Ray's "Devi", promises are made and broken, and in their own strange ways, broken promises greatly affect the tragic ending of the film. But as a film, "Devi" not only showed the sheer audacity to question the religious faith in 1960's India, immediately after its independence but also threw light on several other underlying themes, including interpretation of dreams and subconscious mind, complexities of relationship, and most importantly the identity of women, their urge to neither be worshiped as goddess or be looked down as witches. All these themes, if we look into them, have been presented by Ray, not in a preachy way but with the use of subtle images and strong use of impactful dialogues, of which the promises, commitments, and complaints are important parts of. The way Doyamoyee promises her husband and her sister-in-law with wholehearted intention to fulfill those are the most significant promises in the film, along with some other promises uttered by the other characters. If we want to look at those from a linguistic point of view, we need to discuss the conditions of promise, as proposed by Searle, that make any speech act a successful promise.

Immediately after the opening of the film, we can see Umaprasad asking his wife, Doyamoyee to promise that she would write him a letter every day, without missing out even one single day. The same night, in the next scene, Umaprasad asks Doya if she will go abroad to live with him after he secures a good job, and to answer this question again, Doya promises that she will go wherever her husband goes. But later we see that, when it is the time to make a decision regarding her going to Kolkata with her husband when he comes to take her with him, she doubts if she

could actually be the incarnation of the goddess and if she should actually live in the village only, which makes her refuse to go to Kolkata and stay there in the chaos that Kalikinkar started, being blind in his belief and affection. If we look into it from a linguistic point of view, we can see that this promise fulfills every condition in our framework. Here, Dayamoyee expresses a promise that she will go with Umashankar by her utterance. It creates an obligation for Dayamoyee as well as states a future act. Umashankar prefers that his wife will fulfill the future act, and Dayamoyee is also intended to do the act.

The most difficult and crucial promise that Doyamoyee makes is that she will treat an ailing Khoka, the little baby boy of Harosunadri, who is loved and adored dearly and unconditionally by Doyamoyee, and give him back to his mother but can't keep the promise. She asks to be with Khoka with the belief that, staying with her, he will be fine, by the grace of her divine power, but that doesn't happen, and Khoka dies the next morning. This is the ultimate tragedy in her life as well as in the fate of the family. We can see that she makes that promise without even uttering a word, in complete silence, but she knows the meaning of the promise when Harosundari asks her, "Do you promise that you will give him back to me tomorrow?" and she nods. For Doyamoyee, it was one chance to hold that little boy close to her, for at least one night, who stopped coming to play with her after her transformation and after she started to be worshiped as a goddess. This promise cannot be considered as a promise, if we look from a linguistic perspective, as Doyamoyee doesn't utter any sentence by herself while making this assertion, nor is there any obligation on her to fulfill the promise. As Kurji (2002) mentions in his paper the list of three types of situations, when it is not a promise, and the first one is when a friend asks you, "Will you do this huge favour for me?" and in reply you just nod, we understand that what Doyamoyee promises here cannot be called a promise from a Searlean point of view.

### V. CONCLUSION

This paper tries to focus on the linguistic side of the promises in Satyajit Ray's works without spoiling the artistic value of these three highly celebrated films. The promises in Ray's movies, as skillfully presented by the legend to create an impact on the minds of the viewers, are mostly indirect or conditional or uttered in silence. Visually, a treat to the eyes of the viewers, these scenarios where the characters are promising something to their loved one, may it be the one to go to see a train together or the promise of writing a letter every day, are extremely important to the plot of the film and contribute greatly in the climaxes. But as we have tried to analyse them linguistically, following the rules of speech act theory, as proposed by both Austin and Searle, we can see that the essence and strategies of the promises are different from one another in the films. They are different in structure, condition, and attitude of the promisers who are uttering those. We find a number of promises that can be considered promises in the reality of the world that Ray creates but cannot be certified as promises from the lens of Pragmatics or logic. We have considered all of the conditions specifically cleared by Searle in his explanation and tried to see how they work out for the dialogues in the films. Making promises in the world of audio-visual, their impact, and how some of them are pure promises, some others being conditional promises, and some others being merely assertions or even threats, have made us wander around the world of Ray's cinematic magic. We have realized v and tried to portray how Ray looked at promises as a part of his films and how, despite failing in the test of speech act theory and felicity conditions, the promises are important in creating the overall atmosphere.

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