
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Speech Acts and Direct Gratitude in Denzel Washington's "Fences": A Pragmatic Analysis

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| ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of direct gratitude as a speech act in *Fences*, directed by Denzel Washington, through the lens of pragmatic theory. Speech acts and expressions of gratitude play a vital role in revealing how characters construct and negotiate social and emotional meanings within interpersonal interactions. Drawing on Speech Acts Theory, this research seeks to identify the types of speech acts employed to express direct gratitude and to analyze their communicative functions in the film's social and familial contexts. The study addresses two key questions: (1) Which types of speech acts are present in the expressions of direct gratitude in *Fences*? and (2) Which type occurs most frequently? It is hypothesized that expressive, assertive, and commissive speech acts appear in instances of direct gratitude, with expressive acts being the most dominant. The findings contribute to understanding how gratitude functions pragmatically as a means of reinforcing relationships and emotional coherence in cinematic discourse.

| KEYWORDS

Speech Acts, Pragmatic, Direct gratitude, "Fences"

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1. Introduction

Language serves as a powerful medium through which individuals convey thoughts, emotions, and intentions in social interactions. Within the field of pragmatics, speech act theory provides a framework for analyzing how utterances perform actions beyond their literal meanings (Naar, 2019). Gratitude, as one of the most fundamental speech acts, reflects the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of communication, particularly in social contexts where politeness, respect, and acknowledgment are essential. Expressing gratitude involves both linguistic and cultural conventions that reveal how individuals negotiate relationships and construct social harmony.

The study of speech acts in literary works enables scholars to explore the pragmatic functions of language as used by characters to achieve specific communicative goals. Drama, as a literary genre, offers a particularly rich field for such analysis because it mirrors real-life conversational exchanges. *Fences* (2016), directed by Denzel Washington and adapted from August Wilson's 1985 play, provides a fertile ground for investigating the pragmatics of speech acts, particularly expressions of gratitude. The film portrays complex family and social relationships within an African American household in the 1950s, exploring themes of race, duty, disappointment, and resilience. Through its emotionally charged dialogues, the film illustrates how language operates as a tool for negotiating power, affection, and social belonging.

Despite extensive studies on *Fences* focusing on its thematic and sociocultural dimensions, limited attention has been given to its pragmatic aspects—especially the use of direct gratitude expressions as a speech act. Understanding how characters express gratitude directly offers insight into their interpersonal dynamics and communicative intentions. It also contributes to the broader understanding of how language reflects cultural norms, emotional intelligence, and social hierarchy.

This study, therefore, aims to analyze the speech acts of direct gratitude in Denzel Washington's *Fences* from a pragmatic perspective. It seeks to identify the types of speech acts used to express gratitude, examine their contextual meanings, and explore their communicative functions within the film's social and familial settings. By doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of pragmatic and discourse analysis in film studies, highlighting how linguistic choices shape and reflect human relationships in dramatic narratives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gratitude

Simmel (1950) states that gratitude is "the moral memory of mankind". Kumar (2001) defines gratitude as "Expressions of gratitude in the normal day-to-day interactions between the members of a society seem obviously to fall in the category of the 'social' use of language, Gratitude is also "a means of establishing social cohesion and creating a shared culture". (Komter, 2004, 208).

Naar, in 2019, divided gratitude into direct and indirect. This division is based on expression. Unintended gratitude is expressed indirectly or in a less overt manner. Direct gratitude is clearly stated and directed at the sponsor. Moreover, gratitude can be differentiated by manner.

Near (2019) states that direct gratitude contains clear terms of appreciation that are directly related to the sponsor. Conversely, statements that express in direct gratitude are more subtle. The main focus of this study is direct expressions of gratitude to better comprehend the complexity and breadth of this type.

2.2 Functions and Components of Gratitude

The complex emotion of gratitude has been studied in more than one field. This complexity is the main interest of Wierzbick (1999). Understanding the spirit of appreciation requires an understanding of the three basic elements she identifies: the sponsor's gratitude, the recognition of the advantage created, and the expressive response to the sponsor.

Emmon and Stern (2013) emphasize the value of thankfulness, noting its capacity to enhance emotional health and foster an optimistic outlook on life. Gratitude has social and moral benefits.

According to Dwyer (2015), gratitude enhances interpersonal relationships, fosters trust, and inspires people to support one another, strengthen their bonds with one another, and promote positive behavior when they show gratitude.

In a similar vein, Allen (2018) refers to thankfulness as "social glue" since it fosters the development of new friendships, fortifies existing ones, and upholds social order. Gratitude, in this context, is more than just saying "thank you"; it keeps communities united.

2.3 The Relationship between Gratitude and Speech Acts

Gratitude, or thanking, is a form of illocutionary act in which the speaker reacts to something the hearer has done in the past, according to Eisenstein and Bodman (1986). The speaker benefits from the hearer's act; As a result, the speaker feels grateful and expresses this gratitude verbally. However, there are cultural differences in how people express gratitude. A speech act is an action that is carried out through the use of language.

In daily life, Speakers convey gratitude by expressing their thanking, admiration, and acknowledgment (Fishgadam & Zarei, 2011). Studies on speech acts have revealed that cultural differences can result in wildly divergent

interpretations of the same communicative act. Han (1992). A speech act can be found beneath the impact of the listener, the speaker, and the context.

The speech act of gratitude content is revealed based on how it is expressed during the interaction. Another way to analyze acts of gratitude is through Politeness Strategies, which take into consideration the relation between the interlocutors and the extent to which the addressee is being forced to save face (Brown and Levinson 1987). Gratitude runs contrary to the face wants of the addressee and the speaker.

A theoretical Framework, Cheng's (2005) taxonomy for eight strategies of expressing gratitude:

1-Thanking: Speakers use thanking in three ways.

A-Simple talking by only using the word "thank you".

B-Thanking by stating the favor "thank you for your help".

C-Thanking and mentioning the imposition caused by the favor "thank you for helping me cleaning the room".

2-Appreciation

A-Using the word appreciate "I appreciate it".

B-using the word appreciate and mentioning the imposition caused by the favor

."I appreciate the time you spent for me "

3- Positive Feeling

A-By expressing a positive reaction to the favor giver (You are a life saver).

B- By expressing a positive reaction to the object of the favor. (This book was really helpful)

4-Repayment

A-Offering service, food, or money(next time it is my turn).

B-Feeling indebted. (I owe you).

C-Promising Future self-improvement, e.g, (It won't happen again).

5-Apology

A-Using only apologizing words (e.g., I am sorry).

B-Using apologizing words and stating the favor or the fact. (I am sorry for the problem I made).

C- Criticizing or blaming oneself. (I am such a fool)!

D- Expressing embarrassment (e.g., It's so embarrassing).

6-Recognition of Imposition

A-Acknowledging the imposition (e.g., I know that you were not allowed to give Extra time).

B-Stating the need for a favour (e.g., I try not to ask for extra time, but this time I need it).

C- Diminishing the need for a favor. (e.g., you didn't have to do that).

7-Alerters

In the thanking situation, alerters and address terms are likely to occur in the same utterance.

A-Attention getter (Hi, Well, Hey).

B- Title (e.g., Dr, Sir Professor).

C- Name(John, Mary).

8-Other expressions that don't belong to the above strategies.

A-Here statement (e.g., Here you are)!

B-Small talk (e.g., My name is John. What is your name?)

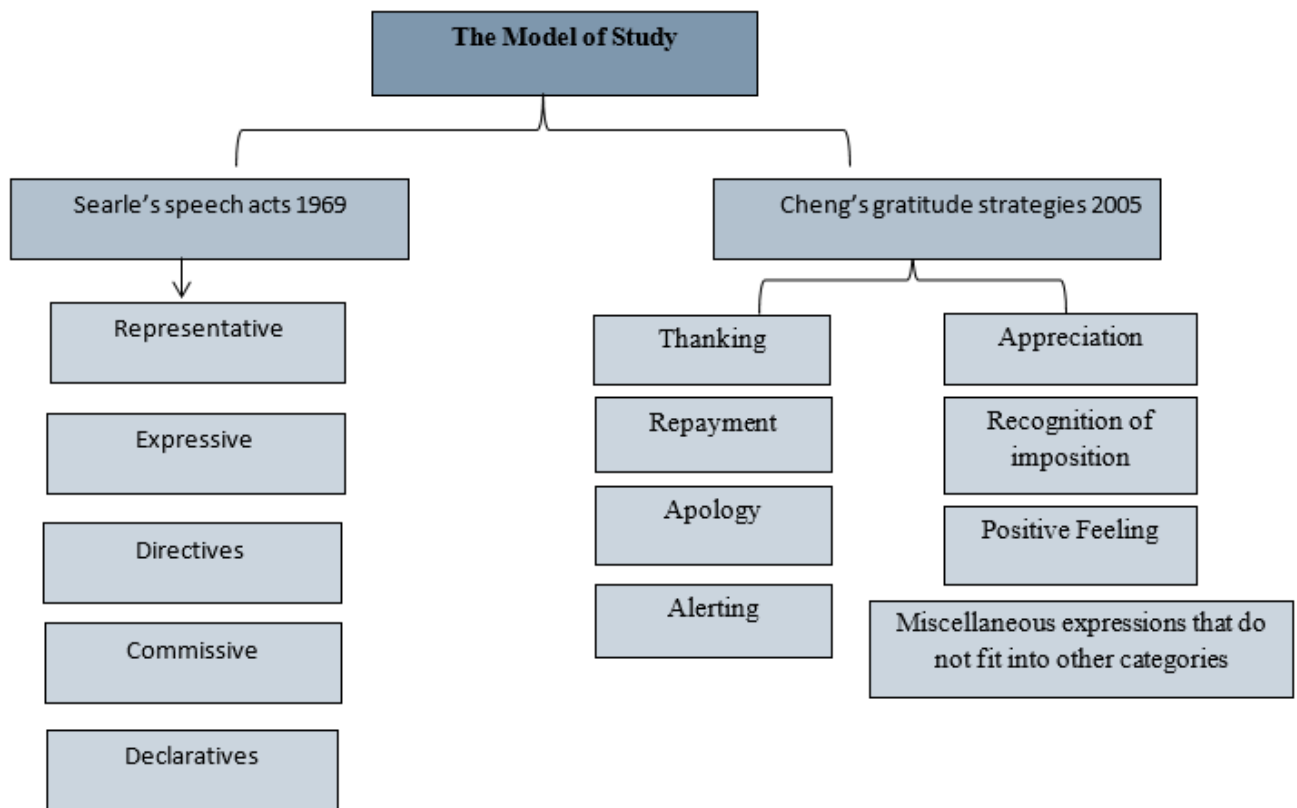
C-Leave and Taking (e.g., Have a nice day).

D-Joking (e.g., don't forget to pay again next time).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Analysis

The primary source of data for the study is a selection of dialogues from Denzel Washington's 2016 film "Fences." The expressive aspects of gratitude and assertiveness are the main focus of this study, which follows Searle's (1969) Speech Act Model. This model is used exclusively throughout the analysis. It's not an eclectic approach.



4. Findings and Discussion

Extract 1:

Troy: " I'd appreciate it if you'd help me take care of her."

This is a direct expression of the attitude of gratitude. Troy appreciates his wife for raising his daughter. This line is linked to his needs, and it suits Cheng's (2005) appreciation strategy. Troy's line serves as a directive in the first place because he is requesting that Rose do something in the future. It also conveys assertiveness and expresses gratitude in a sincere and honest manner. Lastly, it contains an expressive solution. The child expresses his appreciation to Rose for her role in cherishing their daughter.

Extract 2

Lyons "Thanks, Rose. Look, I got to run. I'll see you later on".

Troy expresses his gratitude to his mother directly and acknowledges her mediating role. She shows her support to her son, which strengthens the bond between father and son. Since Lyon is thanking someone for money, his Statement "thanks, Rose" Serves as an expressive speech act. It also has a commissive component. Since he has committed himself to a future meeting, this line suits Cheng (2005), thanking strategy.

Extract 3

Rose: "Thanks, Gabe"

Rose's thank-you to Gabby in this scene is an example of a direct act of gratitude. Cheng 2005 taxonomy states that this is consistent with the thanking strategy, which calls for the direct use of the phrase "Thank you". This phrase has social value / since she wants to be courteous. Rose attempts to convey her inner state of thankfulness. According to Searle's classification of speech acts, this phrase falls under an expressive act.

Extract. 4

Rose: Thanks, Jim

Rose expresses gratitude directly in her statement "Thanks y Jim" because she specifically uses a thanking Strategy. Maintaining friendly relationships and politely acknowledging Bone's Bino. Contributions are its main social functions. Rose's statement, which falls under the category of expressive speech acts, conveys her psychological state of appreciation for Bone's help or support.

Frequencies and percentages of SAs.

No.	Speech Acts	Fr.	Pr.
1	Expressive	3	42.9%
2	Assertive	1	14.3%
3	Directive	1	14.3%
4	Commissive	2	28.6%
5	Declarative	0	0%
6		7	100%

5. Conclusions

The analysis of speech acts in Denzel Washington's *Fences* reveals that expressive acts constitute the highest proportion (42.9%) of the utterances. This dominance highlights the characters' tendency to convey emotions, attitudes, and psychological states, reflecting the play's deep focus on interpersonal relationships and emotional expression within family and social contexts. Commissive acts account for 28.6% of the total, emphasizing the importance of responsibility and commitment as characters make promises or express intentions about future actions. Meanwhile, assertive and directive acts appear less frequently (14.3%), suggesting that the characters prioritize emotional and relational engagement over factual statements or commands. Overall, the findings indicate

that *Fences* foregrounds the emotional and social dimensions of communication, using expressive and commissive speech acts to construct meaning and reveal character relationships.

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