

The Request of Xiangling: A Controversial Case on Silencing

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Abstract:

Dream of the Red Chamber has been one of the well-known novels in China, which has contributed to an area named “redology.” In the realm of redology, there are a lot of controversies about the silencing of Xiangling’s request for Baochai (one main character of the Red Chamber) to teach her poetry. However, few researchers have tried to analyze this conversation through a linguistic angle. This paper will introduce the Austinian approach to silencing to this controversial case in Dream of the Red Chamber, which could make essential distinctions between important concepts, and provide a coherent explanation for the reason why Xiangling insisted on her specific request to learn poetry and why Baochai had such systematic recognition failures. Through the case study, this paper proves that Xiangling suffers illocutionary silencing in her conversation with Baochai by refuting possible counterarguments. It is significant not only to the explanation of this novel, but also to expansion of application of Austin’s speech act theory.

Keywords: Dream of the Red Chamber; Austin’s speech act theory; illocutionary silencing; Xiangling learning poetry.

1. Introduction

“Xiangling learning poetry” is a classic episode in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Born into a scholarly family, Xiangling should have had the opportunity to become a talented female. However, she was abducted and sold at such a young age that she could neither remember her early years, nor could she learn any poetry. Snatched away as a concubine later by Xue Pan, the rude and unlearned young master of the Xue clan, she should have long been reduced to someone who *lacks refinement*. With such a reduced fate, why did Xiangling still insist on requesting the young ladies to teach her poetry? Many scholars believe that Xiangling was fortunate and did not suffer in the Xue family at least before Xue Pan married his legitimate wife [1, 2]. This may seem especially true considering the care she received from Baochai, the talented and understanding sister of Xue Pan. Baochai sought the opportunity to persuade her brother to leave for a distant place so that she could take Xiangling with her to the Garden, a place Xiangling had long dreamed of. It was in the Garden that the main characters, including Daiyu and Baoyu, lived, and Daiyu later agreed to teach Xiangling poetry. However, if this were all the case, how should the readers understand the silencing of Xiangling’s request for Baochai to teach her poetry? Why did Baochai remark her as *dull* [3]?

In this essay, Austin’s speech act theory will be adopted to analyze silencing and discuss whether Xiangling suffers

silencing in this case or not. This paper argues that when Xiangling requested Baochai to teach her poetry, Baochai neither literally refused nor agreed, reflecting the fact that she failed to recognize the seriousness and sincerity of Xiangling’s request. In fact, Baochai’s recognition failure here is systematic, which will be demonstrated in the later section. In general, this paper supports that Xiangling’s request to learn poetry is a case of illocutionary silencing in her conversation with Baochai.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Illocutionary Silencing

Austin points out in his speech act theory that speech is a matter of doing things, and he insightfully distinguishes locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, which separately mean the utterance of words, the performance in uttering words, and the effects of the utterance of words [4]. Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton introduced the Austinian approach to silencing in the 1990s to deal with the problem of sexual refusal, and defined silencing as “uptake failure” [5]. In addition, Mary Kate McGowan insightfully introduced “recognition failure” to indicate that uptake (the hearer’s recognition of the speaker’s intention) is necessary but not sufficient to the success of a refusal [6, 7]. Laura Caponetto further elaborated this argument by claiming that silencing can be caused by the hearer’s systematic failure to recognize any of the four basic con-

stituents of the speaker's illocutionary act, which are the speaker's illocutionary intention, sincerity, seriousness, and authority [8].

2.2 Xiangling's being Spooky and Dull

Dream of the Red Chamber describes Xiangling as a dull character. Noticeably, this novel has a unique view on being spooky and dull. Ding Wei [3] incisively analysed the concepts of spooky and dull in Dream of the Red Chamber, pointing out that the spooky person is the one who retains their true nature but is not understood by the common customs, thus revealing as a dull person externally. Therefore, in this novel, a spooky person is also a dull person, and also a dull person can largely be a spooky person. Cao Yue cited an insightful definition of spooky from Zhou Ruchang that by spooky the author means the deepest degree and highest state of love [9].

Zhang Lihong and He Di analysed Xiangling's poem made from her dreams from a psychoanalytic perspective, and they profoundly pointed out that Xiangling's poem was more than simply describing the moon's external appearance, but showed her subconscious understanding of the tragic fate that is not limited to herself only but all women [10]. This effectively proves that though Xiangling looks naive and even dull, deep in her heart she is quite sensitive to life experience and has a wish for happiness. She looks dull, because she can do nothing, but silently swallow the bitter fruits of her tragic life.

2.3 Review of Relevant Studies

Previous literature discussed the image and subconsciousness of Xiangling effectively, as well as the positive and negative meanings of *spooky*. They also developed the speech act theory successfully. However, there are also many gaps and unexplored areas regarding the following points: firstly, the established literature fails to analyse from a linguistic perspective the reason why a person as spooky as Xiangling is perceived as *dull* by the common customs. Secondly, an effective and coherent explanation of why Xiangling insisted on learning poetry is lacking. Finally, few researchers have noticed that the distinction between the spooky (e.g., Xiangling), and the conservative (e.g., Baochai), which is of great importance to uncover the mystery of Baochai's systematic failure to recognize the sincerity and seriousness of Xiangling's request.

This paper will apply Austin's theory of speech act as a theoretical framework and its related development to explain how the case of Xiangling requesting Baochai to teach her poetry meets the conditions of illocutionary silencing. This can thus illustrate that from a linguistic point of view, why the spooky characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are assumed by common customs to be dull.

3. Case Study

3.1 Case Description

In the following extract, Baochai kindly offered Xiangling an opportunity to move into the Garden with her, which was the dream of Xiangling. Xiangling was very grateful and asked Baochai if she could teach her poetry as soon as knowing she could live in the Garden with her.

"Dear Miss!" said Xiangling, "Now that there is the time and the opportunity, will you teach me how to write poetry, please?"

However, Baochai laughed and gave her a puzzling response.

Baochai laughed. "You're like the famous general: 'One conquest breeds appetite for another'. I advise you to take things more gently. Today is your first day in the Garden. If I were you, I should go out of that corner gate and, beginning with Lady Jia's, call in at all the different apartments and pay your respects to everybody. You needn't go out of your way to tell them that you have moved into the Garden; but if the subject should happen to arise, tell them that I have brought you in as my companion. After that, when you get back into the Garden, you ought to go round and call on all the young ladies."

3.2 Analysis

Though Xiangling's request was not silenced locutionarily and perlocutionarily, this paper still considers this as a case of illocutionary silencing. This section will discuss possible counterarguments and present the rebuttal. Opponents may think that Baochai did not interrupt Xiangling's words, and she made her response to Xiangling's request as well. Therefore, Xiangling's request was not silenced. They may argue that her response was that this was not the right time for her to learn poetry and that Xiangling should pay her respects to the masters of the Jia clan first, which is a gentle refusal.

In order to refute the argument above, it is necessary to distinguish between *uptake* and *recognition* clearly. This distinction is mentioned in the literature review. The fact that Baochai did give a response to Xiangling's request which can only show that Baochai did uptake Xiangling's request and that she was aware that Xiangling had a request, but it does not mean that she recognized the seriousness and sincerity of Xiangling's request, which are the basic constituents of an illocutionary act. She might think that Xiangling was only acting on a whim. Therefore, the sincerity and seriousness of Xiangling was silenced. If Baochai had been able to recognize the seriousness and sincerity of Xiangling's request, given her understanding character, she might have agreed to teach Xiangling, instead of joking about her request.

In fact, it can be proved that Baochai *appeared* as if she failed to recognize the seriousness and sincerity of Xiangling's request. Apologetic refusal or sincere promise is necessary to respond to sincere requests if the speakers do not want to perform Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), the notion proposed by Brown and Levinson in their politeness theory [11]. However, there is not any apology or promise involved in Baochai's answer, indicating her recognition failure. Similarly, a polite response to serious requests is to take it seriously at least. After Xiangling followed Baochai's advice to pay respects to the masters of the Jia family, Baochai did not mention teaching her poetry again, which is a manifestation of not taking it seriously. Therefore, Baochai's recognition failure is obvious. After Xiangling moved into the Garden, she found an opportunity to request Daiyu to teach her poetry, who is the most beloved lady of the author and also a spoony character. Comparing Baochai's response with Daiyu's response, the recognition failure of Baochai is distinct. Daiyu agreed to Xiangling as soon as she requested, and *gladly* said, "You can make your kowtow and become my pupil if you like". Daiyu solemnly established the teacher-student relationship and officially began to teach Xiangling poetry. Xiangling was very happy to hear this because she knew that Daiyu recognized the seriousness and sincerity of this request.

There is another related plot in the novel that specifically implies Baochai's recognition failure. When Baoyu, the spoony young master of Jia clan, saw Xiangling's obsession with poetry, he was deeply relieved and could not help admiring her.

"The genius of the place brings out the excellence of the person", said Baoyu, misquoting slightly. "The lord above doesn't give us our talents for nothing. We always used to say what a pity it was that a person of her qualities should lack refinement—but look at her now! It proves there is some justice in the world."

On hearing this, Baochai began to exhort Baoyu to learn from Xiangling's power of concentration and to make effort to do well in his "proper work", which is a typical speech of Baochai that causes Baoyu hates the most. Poetry is a means of living beyond the common customs that defined what was *proper* for spoony characters who stick to true feelings such as Baoyu, Daiyu and Xiangling. They tend to lead a poetic life, which are sensitive to the tragic fate hidden behind the appearance of prosperity, regardless of people's sex, social status and quality. However, as a conservative lady who tried to be *proper* all the time, Baochai missed the point of Baoyu. The author wrote that *Baoyu did not reply* to indicate the distinction between the spoony and the conservative and the fact that Baochai *genuinely* failed to recognize this sincerity and serious-

ness.

Opponents may otherwise argue that Baochai recognized the sincerity and seriousness of Xiangling's request. The reason why she responded with playful remarks and seemingly irrelevant reminders even if she recognized that was simply because neither did, she agrees with Xiangling to learn poetry nor did she want to break her heart, which is in line with the conservative and understanding image of Baochai. They might introduce Grice's theory of conversational implicature to support this argument [12]. Grice proposed the Cooperative Principle (CP) and its attendant four maxims to explain how implicatures can be calculated in conversations. To be brief, sometimes people say something that violates certain maxims on purpose to deliver hidden meanings. According to Grice, what Baochai *said* to Xiangling violated the maximum of manners, because to answer a request, a confirmed attitude such as answering "yes" or "no" is sufficient, but Baochai did not avoid unnecessary prolixity. However, Baochai did not violate the CP, so she must have some implicatures here, which is to refuse Xiangling's request.

Nevertheless, this reason is also unfounded. On the one hand, there is no other evidence suggesting that Baochai was aware of the seriousness and sincerity of Xiangling's request. On the contrary, the evidence has already been presented as mentioned above. On the other hand, it is not appropriate that just inferring that Baochai recognized the sincerity of Xiangling's request simply from the fact that she made feedback. This is because this inference relies on the premise that a speech act can be considered successful as long as it gets the hearer's feedback. Nevertheless, this premise is incorrect. An example can demonstrate that even without recognizing the speaker's sincerity, relevant feedback can still be made. Consider the classic case of sexual refusal: a woman sincerely says "no," but the man misinterprets it as flirting rather than recognizing her refusal. He may continue the sexual activity as feedback to the women's refusal. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that feedback is sufficient to prove the hearer's recognition of sincerity.

4. Discussions of Systematic Recognition Failure

This section proves that Baochai's recognition failure was not momentary but systematic. This paper defines systematic recognition failure as when the scene is reproduced, the hearer's failure to recognize the speaker's intention, sincerity, seriousness, and authority will remain unchanged. First of all, Baochai's failure to understand Xiangling's sincerity and seriousness in learning poetry is systematic. As a spoony person, Xiangling has a natural

tendency to live beyond common customs and often has some divine moments. She has too many hidden feelings to express and poetry is the only outlet she can think of. Therefore, it is natural for her to request sincerely and seriously to learn poetry. However, as a conservative lady who strives for secular interests for her family all the time, Baochai always exhorts herself with the teachings of Neo Confucianism, to the point where she becomes apathetic to true feelings, which is why she is remarked as “cold beauty.” Therefore, the spoony’s obsession with poetry are unreasonable to her, and Xiangling’s sincerity and seriousness cannot be expected by her.

On the other hand, the contradiction of Baochai’s talent and her belief is systematic as well, reflecting the predicament of women at that time. Baochai’s predicament and Xiangling’s being considered dull are two sides of the same coin. From the linguistic perspective, the conversation between the spoony and the conservative involves recognition of failure systematically.

5. Conclusion

With adopting Austin’s speech act theory as a theoretical framework, this paper argues Xiangling’s request to learn poetry was silenced in her conversation with Baochai, and Baochai’s recognition failure of her sincerity and seriousness is systematic. The spoony is considered as dull, because others cannot recognize their sincerity and seriousness. Therefore, the reason why Xiangling wants to learn poetry and the reason why her request was silenced are almost the same. The conversation between Baochai and Xiangling reflects systematic cognitive barriers between two types of women oppressed by the social system and ideology at that time, which is consistent with the tragic

tone and critical attitude of Dream of the Red Chamber.

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