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Extending Your Mind: Non-Standard Perlocutionary Acts in "Hush"

Abstract

In the context of a series remarkable for its interest in linguistic expression and its exploration of the formal possibilities of dialogue and metaphors for dialogue (such as fights), "Hush's" experiment with non-vocal forms of communication demands critical attention. Analysis of this episode reveals dense patterns of authority, community and convention which interplay among characters and between characters and audience. Through a speech act theory-based examination of the public and private language games that are being played, and the uses of vocal and non-vocal communication, we identify examples of non-standard perlocutionary acts and the roles that these acts play in extending the agent's mind into their environment.

Introduction and Part One

(1) "Hush," the tenth episode in season four of *Buffy*, silences speech for its central twenty-five minutes. In place of the normal processes of linguistic activity, characters are obliged to communicate by writing down or acting out their thoughts and feelings. Their speech acts become acts of writing. In this essay we want to explore how speech act theory can be extended to communication in non-spoken form. Speech act theory is a philosophical description of linguistic utterances which has been adopted and adapted by literary critics and theorists for the analysis of (usually) prose narratives. In its original form, in John Austin's seminal *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), speech act theory insists that successful analysis of sentences must understand them within the context of the circumstances in which they are uttered--for example, who is speaking to whom and on what occasion. But Austin is anxious about what he terms "parasitic" or non-serious contexts, specifically excluding acting from the contexts in which some kinds of speech act can be said to take place: "a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy" (21-22). This is because in these kinds of context it is unclear whether the person speaking contributes intention to what is being spoken. An actor can speak a line without "intending" its meaning herself; the person who did the "intending" is either the author of the line, or the imaginary character the actor is playing. But in literary criticism since Searle, for example in Mary Louise Pratt's 1977 *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, speech act theory has been extended so as to be applicable to contexts in which intention is similarly complicated, including both the dialogue of characters within a written fiction and the narration itself. At its simplest level, this form of criticism considers the written

sentences that form, say, the third-person narration in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to be a kind of "speech" on the part of the narrator and thus open to a similar kind of analysis as sentences spoken by a person during a conversation in the extra-textual world. Equally, where the narrator is intradiegetic (i.e., a character within the fiction itself, as for instance Esther Summerson in Dickens' *Bleak House*), his/her utterances can be treated in the same way as the speeches of non-narratorial characters, and analyzed as if the characters were holding a conversation in the world beyond the text. Whether we consider *Buffy* as speech (because of its use of dialogue) or as writing (because its dialogue is scripted by someone other than the character supposed to be speaking it), then, speech act theory can be used as a theoretical tool for analyzing the utterances of the characters.

(2) The remarkable stylistic feature of "Hush," of course, is that utterances are not spoken, but written, despite the fact that both the "speaker" and the "listener" are present at the moment of utterance. Classically, writing has been thought of as a mediation or extension of speech, to be substituted for it in circumstances where the speaker and listener are not both present at the same time. Such a model has tended to conceptualize speech as primary and writing as secondary. Thus, Saussure argued that "language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first" (23). This is characteristic of the privileging of speech over writing that Derrida identifies as phonocentric and hence logocentric, that is, as privileging presence over absence. Writing, in the classical model, is for situations determined by absence and, Derrida suggests in "Signature Event Context" (1971), therefore "carries with it predicates which have been subordinated, excluded, or held in reserve [...]" (329)_ [1] The iconic moment of writing in "Restless" (the final episode in season four), when Willow inscribes--or, to use Derrida's term, iterates--one of Sappho's odes on Tara's skin, puts the eeriness of writing in the context of presence to erotic use. In "Hush," writing with the addressee present invokes agape rather than eros (as when Giles responds with a consoling embrace to Willow's uncommunicative but phatic message "Hi Giles"). Throughout its silent portion, "Hush" pits the authority of writing against the immediacy of speech, questioning the value of the associations the characters and audience make with each kind of interaction.

(3) Although "Hush" is certainly a particularly interesting example of how the series investigates the kinds of effects that speech can have in and on the world, it is by no means unique in having this concern. Throughout the series, speech acts are under scrutiny because they are part of the fundamental rules of the Buffyverse. In the episode preceding "Hush," "Something Blue," Willow works a spell which aims to invest her spoken words with the power to change the world in accordance with her will. Her spell goes awry so that it is only her expressions of insecurity or resentment that acquire this power, resulting in mishaps for all the Scooby Gang. Willow has attempted to give her speech acts radical perlocutionary force, or extreme power to alter reality. One of her experiments with this extreme power is to order a book to speak its words to her, but the book stubbornly remains silent. Following the denouement in which Willow renounces her power of changing the world by speaking her desires, she appears wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "Speak No Evil," a text written on her body contradicting her former speech practices. This sets the scene for "Hush," in which evil cannot be spoken, because evil is the absence of speech, and in this absence writing takes over.

(4) At least for the first five seasons, *Buffy* operates within an economy of textuality, in which writing, reading, and replicating texts is the principle means of exchange within the human realm. But, as a rule, the operations of this textual economy are made clear to the reader via conversation. It is through the Scooby Gang's dialogue that we learn what texts are being received and investigated and what results are being achieved. Of course, television shows rarely ask viewers to read more than a few words direct from the screen; reading has to be mediated via voice-over or via the characters; but in *Buffy* central characters spend immense amounts of time reading, on-screen as well as off, and this investment in reading is signaled to the audience via spoken commentary. William Wandless is right to insist on the affective structure of the "research" scenes in *Buffy*: "research [in the first three seasons] offered *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a degree of internal unity: the team rendezvous in the library regularly served as a kind of familiar, and often comfortingly familial, intermission between an initial encounter with a threat and the informed response to

follow" (para. 2). But the emotional effect of these scenes is a product of their emphasis on the social. The Gang read together, asserting the comfort of presence in the face of the disconcerting absence that characterizes the written text. As viewers we are hardly permitted to recognize this absence; we rarely see more than a glimpse of the pages of the books in Giles' library. We are allowed to see a woodcut of the current monster far more often than we are allowed to read text about it. Instead we rely on dialogic interchanges between the characters about the subject of their reading. We enter the textual economy of the Buffyverse at the stage where written tokens are being exchanged for oral ones, preparatory to the final exchange into violence.

(5) "Hush" is perhaps the most important single episode in the *Buffy* canon in terms of dealing with the operations of this textual/conversational economy. It inverts the usual sequence of exchange so that instead of reading and writing becoming manifest to the viewer through conversation, conversation is translated into reading and writing experiences which are made as available to the viewer as to the characters. This inversion is the result of an invasion by what are named to us, in writing, as "fairy tale monsters." The characters never ask, and we never learn, how these monsters have made their way out of textuality into actuality, but they impose the silence of the written text on Sunnydale, stealing all human voices in order to facilitate their work of stealing seven human hearts. [2] This cardio-theft is a grisly parallel to the romantic entanglements in which all the Scooby Gang find themselves during this episode, a warning to those considering giving their hearts to loved ones. This is a typically *Buffy* metaphor, of a kind which we are, by this fourth season, adept in spotting and "reading." But "Hush" is also doing much more specific work than these large-scale metaphors usually do. In this essay we focus on "Hush" as an extraordinarily dense and rich set of arguments about the manifestations of language in different kinds of community.

(6) "Hush" is not the only episode in which conversation is translated into writing. There are examples in earlier seasons of writing standing in for speech, but these instances are localized and a matter of conforming to social convention. For instance, in "Lie to Me" Willow and Buffy pass each other notes about Drusilla during class; they obey what we assume must be a rule or at least a convention enforcing silence during lessons. But the prolonged, enforced absence of speech in "Hush," affecting the whole of Sunnydale, causes a breakdown in social convention. Indeed, this breakdown is so severe that Riley and the Initiative are mobilized to maintain order in a town which has withstood countless demonic onslaughts but which descends into anarchy, drunkenness, and religious mania in a matter of hours when deprived of the power of conversation. A shot of a broken fire-hydrant jetting water high into the air stands as a metaphor for the fountains of speech which usually characterize Sunnydale social life, but also signals a slide into urban dereliction and social decay.

(7) At the beginning of "Hush," Buffy experiences a spontaneous dream vision of a little girl, possibly her own childhood self, chanting a rhyme about "the Gentlemen." This rhyme and a fairy tale later found in a book belonging to Giles constitute the only authoritative accounts of the supernatural events which take place in this episode. Before the rhyme can made available to the Scooby Gang and hence useful as a source of information, though, it must be converted into a text. The way in which this is done is an interesting example of how "Hush" reverses the normative process of information exchange. Buffy receives the words in spoken form, dictates them on the telephone to Giles, who transforms them into writing, which we later see him reading both aloud and silently. When this written text is briefly made visible to the viewer, we see that it has become a palimpsest, the rhyme overwritten with annotations, suggestions and notes, including, interestingly but surely misleadingly, the word "political." [3] This document has become a kind of conversation, text interrogating and commenting on itself in a way that parallels the usual spoken conversations between the characters.

(8) Being unable to speak certainly seems to complicate the notion of presence and absence. Enforced silence affects subjectivity by damaging one's sense of being fully present in a given social situation. Does being able to write compensate for this damage? Does it re-stabilize the presence-absence binary which silence attacks? In the lecture sequence in "Hush," Giles uses a series of overhead projector slides he

has prepared which combine writing and images to provide the Scooby Gang with essential information about the nature and aims of the Gentlemen, including the vital fact that they can be stopped by the sound of a human scream. His slides communicate this information to the viewer as well as to the Gang; we are (for once) given equal access to the texts. Towards the end of his presentation Willow interjects with a suggestion, made via gestures, that a recorded scream could be used. But Giles has evidently foreseen this suggestion, since his next slide indicates that only “live” sound will be effective. A recorded scream would be analogous to writing in Derrida’s sense in that it remains intelligible despite the absolute disappearance (or death) of both the original screamer and the people to or at whom s/he was screaming. It survives the death of its context, in other words, and this is why it will not do the work of the “live” scream, which is context-specific and which reasserts the power of presence.

Part Two

(9) In the second part of this essay we intend to examine the use of non-standard forms of speech acts and how they are used as extensions of an individual’s mind as a means of communicating complex and, or, subtle information to the audience and to themselves. We begin by examining the nature of different forms of speech acts [4] and how they, but especially perlocutionary acts, are adapted or developed within the silent episode “Hush.” We then look briefly at their overall use within the language games manifested between different pairs of individuals and within distinct groups.

Speech Acts--a quick recap

(10) This is, by now, familiar territory, but a brief iteration of the main features of speech acts cannot go amiss. There are three general types of speech act: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The first, locutionary acts, are simply the organization of phonemes and words into a recognizable and coherent shape. It must be something other than simply a riot of sounds or the babble of a pre-linguistic child. Willow describes the Wicca meeting in "Hush" as a “babblefest,” but not because the utterances are incoherent--they are, in fact, well-formed English sentences--but rather because the language being used conveys little if any meaning in that context. The language game that Willow – and Tara – expect in the Wicca meeting is so far from the girl scout or woman’s fellowship language game that they actually experience that they recoil from it in simple amusement.

(11) An illocutionary act is a locutionary act that goes one step further; it does something in the world. A statement like “I thee wed” fits the bill perfectly. It makes a statement, thus declaring that the world is in such-and-such a state, and it performs an action, pronouncing a couple to be married.

(12) The third category – perlocutionary action – is the one with which we are most concerned in the current essay. An utterance that has, for example, an effect on a listener or reader’s behavior is deemed to be simultaneously an illocutionary and a perlocutionary act. All perlocutionary acts are also illocutionary, but that not all illocutionary acts are also perlocutionary. The command "You may kiss the bride" is a perlocutionary act. It is an utterance made by someone in authority to effect a change in the behavior of others, and when Anya exclaims to Xander "You don’t care about what I think," she is making a declaration, but it is one which she hopes will affect him, urging him to respond in a certain way. Thus her utterance has both an illocutionary and a perlocutionary force.

(13) But not all speech acts need be spoken directly by a character; they can, for example, be spoken by a narrator in order to convey information to the audience in a sort of theatrical aside, or they can be written messages used to communicate with other characters, with the audience and, we shall argue, with the self. In “Hush” a great deal of the information, the commands, the demands and the promises have to be conveyed by some other means than the spoken word. In the sort of twist we have come to expect, the entire population of Sunnydale has had their means of producing sound siphoned from them. In Sunnydale nobody can hear you scream; nor, for that matter, can they hear you explain what you think is happening, who

you suspect might be behind it, or what you think should be done about it. [5]

(14) We would all agree that communication is a difficult and dangerous business. There is such a rich array of mental or intentional states to be imparted, and a misconstruction on the part of the audience or listener is always possible, and even more likely when there is a disruption in the linguistic convention. When the Scooby Gang are rendered speechless they have no medium through which to express the complexity of what they are experiencing and, in their silence, they are momentarily unable to act. We quickly discover that the Gentlemen's strength, silence, is the Scooby Gang's weakness. The Gentlemen have no variety of intentional states that have to be communicated: they have only one aim which is made clear in the form of, seemingly, polite gestures to all who matter, and helpfully unclear to those who do not. The Gentlemen's language is private, and the only way that question of the nature of their existence can be resolved is if the Scooby Gang can fracture the privacy and disrupt their language game.

(15) But there is much more going on here and we should also note that having a "voice" can have a unique set of ontological implications. Characters who do not or cannot speak are not really there. They are peripheral and we, as audience, invest little interest in their progress. But there is something more subtle about the connection between having a voice and existing. The Gentlemen have no voices, they make no sound when they walk, they communicate by gesture alone, and they do not exist in any strong empirical sense. They are characters from a fairy tale existence with a transient ontology. They do not simply exist in some antirealist sense when we perceive them, nor do they exist in some empirically real way, for things with an empirical reality have a genesis and the Gentlemen do not; instead they possess a sort of quasi-realism [6], existing and being able to terrorize only while the people of Sunnydale cannot speak.

(16) Attempts to break the enforced silence begin with message boards, and develop into pictures, newspapers with red circles providing emphasis, body language and overheads; all of which stand in – with unequal efficiency – as utterances, and thus speech acts. But this is a curious episode which plays energetically with the visual voice substitutes, and there are a number of interesting non-standard forms of perlocutionary act that we ought to consider more closely.

Non-Standard Forms of Perlocutionary Act

(17) In the first category we have the gestures of the Gentlemen which have an unambiguous perlocutionary force even if they are not perlocutionary acts *per se*. The Gentlemen's behavior conveys to each of them and their straitjacketed friends exactly which changes they wish to have brought about in the world. For example, one Gentleman indicates with delicate movements of his hand and a gracious, deferential bow of his head, that he wishes his colleague to make the incision in the victim's chest and remove his heart. Their actions are perfect, pseudo-respectable "utterances" that are so well-formed that their content is unambiguous, both to the members of that linguistic community and, with only a little reflection, to the audience.

(18) Similarly, we wish to argue that screaming has immense perlocutionary force whilst not strictly counting as a perlocutionary act. It has perlocutionary force, for if it did not, the Gentlemen would not be so determined to silence their potential victims. In normal circumstances we would hope that screaming will have an effect on a hearer's behavior; it would, we hope, urge someone to run to our assistance. But, in the not so normal conditions presented in Sunnydale, the screaming must be hushed because the effect on the Gentlemen as hearers will be a dramatic, though simple, change in their behavior and ontology: their heads will explode and they will cease to exist.

(19) We have identified two non-standard forms of utterance that have some perlocutionary force, but perhaps Tara's use of a Post-It™ note is the most extraordinarily powerful in the subtlety and complexity of what it manages to convey to the audience, and also in how it is an extension of Tara's mind into her world. The

note, telling us of Willow's room number, functions in a number of different ways. It informs us of a significant development in the storyline, the possibly romantic interest that Tara has taken in Willow. It also alters Tara's world in a significant way to augment her cognitive process of remembering Willow's room number. And in the carrying out of these two functions there is a further implicit function, and that is to change the way the audience is thinking or reacting to the train of events. We wish to argue that Tara's expressive use of the Post-It™ note is an extension of her mind because it is a cognitive action, in every way that an "in-the-head" action would be considered cognitive (Clark & Chalmers 12), and in this way her private language has become public. The private language that we have when we speak to ourselves, have thoughts and reflect, is augmented when we extend that speech and those thoughts into our world in the form of writing shopping lists, doing calculations, drawing a map, and so on. These are all cognitive processes that are now in the public realm and may affect others as much as ourselves. Tara's note to herself as an extension of her mind is a perlocutionary act with a demonstrable perlocutionary force, not just on herself but on us, the readers, as well.

Conclusion

(20) All communication is, in some trivial way, the extension of one's mind, but sometimes when we extend our minds into our world it is to communicate with ourselves. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a system; he says "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism [. . .] it forms with it a system." The system we have in mind is a communicating one, one where mind, body and world are interwoven, where verbal and non-verbal cues are the norm, and where sometimes one is more appropriate than the other. With the entirety of this system in mind we must accept that the mental or inner realm cannot be treated as a realm distinct from the physical body and world. The mind, of necessity, stretches out into the world, leaving clues and "aide-mémoire" for its future self, but also for the audience who need, visibly in a silent episode, to be carried along in their understanding of the relationships that are developing before their very eyes.

Afterthought

(21) It is interesting, and entirely in-keeping with the subject of this episode and the ontological questions that we have touched upon, that the final words that are spoken are between Riley and Buffy; Riley says "I guess we have to talk" and Buffy responds by saying "I guess we do." It is only through talking that their relationship will continue to exist; they are human with empirical reality – or so we are led to believe – and the silence between them has to be broken if they are to survive together.

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[1] Jacques Derrida, ‘signature Event Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 307-330 (p. 329). In this paper Derrida engages explicitly with Austin on the nature of the context needed to understand speech acts and concludes that “context is never absolutely determinable, or rather […] its determination is never certain or saturated.” (p. 310).

[2] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that comparison might be made with season 3’s episode “Gingerbread,” in which a demon in the guise of two murdered children incites hysterical revanchism against witches. During this episode Giles advances the theory that fairy tales may be a way of recording real events, and it might be argued that the fairy tale from which the Gentlemen emerge has performed a similar task. The Gentlemen would thus have reality before they have textuality. From the narratological point of view, however, it is not clear that a fairy tale that is not known to the viewer or the Scooby Gang (with the possible exception of Giles) before it is referred to as an explanation can operate in the same way as a tale like Hansel and Gretel, which is immediately familiar to the Gang and assumed to be so to the viewer.

[3] A similarly misleading text is the inscription “Revelation 15:1,” which appears on a sign indicating a religious gathering’s reading. The relevant verse in Revelation (“And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God”) has no perceptible bearing on any of the events in “Hush,” nor is it at all clear how it would be of consolation or help to the people of Sunnydale in this emergency.

[4] See also Overbey, K.E. & Preston-Matto, L. (2002).

[5] It is now harder for Xander to know what Anya is thinking, even if he does care, and we know that he does. The more usually public world of Xander and Anya is no longer being broadcast, and Xander’s wish to suppress Anya’s public pronouncements on their private life has--if only temporarily--been realized. However, Anya’s copulatory hand gestures once more manage to bring their private life out into a public arena. It is a marvelous moment because the viewer can almost feel Xander’s exasperation with the garrulous Anya. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested that these gestures are also nominated as illocutionary.

[6] We are aware of the technical sense in which Blackburn (1984) uses this term to explain why nonfactual judgments behave like genuine factual judgments. His usage is most particularly directed at talk of psychological states which enable a subject to express value judgments that project their inner states onto the world. There can be nothing that corresponds directly or indirectly to their value judgment, thus they have a quasi-realism. It is the suggestion of this half-life,

expressing the possibility that judgments about the Gentlemen cannot fully behave like factual judgments since they do not correspond to anything that has a real existence.