



## A Discourse Analysis of Alice Munro's “How I Met My Husband”

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### ABSTRACT

Stories have always attracted and entertained human beings. Whether it is West or East, man has always shown interest in listening and telling stories. All of us have listened story from our grandmother, grandfather and from our parents. They told us stories to teach us some morality or to entertain us. Apart from that we read stories in our school books as well. Today the situation has changed a little due to the electronic gadgets like mobile phones, computers and televisions because now children as well as their parents have no time and interest to listen or tell stories. But it does not mean that we do not like to listen or to tell stories now.

“How I Met My Husband” is a short story written by Alice Munro, first published in 1974 as a part of her collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. It is a story which has many common subjects of our society like love, marriage, cheat and desire. Since the time of its publication so many people have read it and enjoyed it. Some of them also interpreted it in their own ways. I have also read it and I decided to interpret it on the paradigms of discourse analysis theories. I have taken three theories of discourse analysis i.e. speech act theory, politeness theory and cooperative principle for analyzing the short story. So, this paper will try to apply the above theories of discourse analysis on the short story.

**Keywords:** *Discourse, speech act, propositional, illocutionary, perlocutionary*

### Introduction to Discourse analysis:

The term discourse analysis is not a very new in the field of academics. It has a history of more than sixty years. But even today it is not a very easy term for most of the scholars. The reasons behind this are so many and one of them, and perhaps most important, is that people, generally, do not get proper attention while speaking to someone or listening to someone. Today, discourse analysis is a widely known term as it is used in a number of fields like, philosophy, psychology, sociology, education, medical science, technology, language learning, translation, and linguistics.

Discourse analysis is considered to be a field for linguists. A linguist is a person who scientifically studies a language and is able to speak and understand almost all the language of the world. But as we know it is not possible for a man to know all the languages of the world, a good linguist is supposed to know at least four to five languages.

### Some definitions of discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a study of the ways in which language is used in texts and contexts. The basis of the discourse analysis tradition lies in the interest developed in the 1970s in Speech Act Theory.

M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham, in their book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*(2005) wrote: “Developed in the 1970s, discourse analysis "concerns itself with the use of language in a running discourse, continued over a number of sentences, and involving the

interaction of speaker (or writer) and auditor (or reader) in a specific situational context, and within a framework of social and cultural conventions".

Peter J. Binkert, in his book *A Glossary of Terminology used in the Study of Language and Linguistics*, defines discourse like this:

**“DISCOURSE** — the name given to linguistic units larger than a sentence including paragraphs, conversations, dialogues, speeches, and so on. Spoken discourse refers to such units in SPEECH; written discourse refers to such units in writing.”

Further Binkert defines discourse analysis also in that very book and writes:

**“DISCOURSE ANALYSIS** — the analysis of discourse, including especially the relationship between linguistic expressions and the context in which they occur, the choice of particular expressions in particular situations, the transitions that occur from one sentence to the next, taking turns, the introduction of new information not previously mentioned, and so on”.

With the help of this paper I will try to give an introduction to *one* approach to discourse analysis, that is, to the analysis of language as it is used to enact activities, perspectives, and identities.

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to *fit* the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write *creates* that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place.

### What is Discourse Analysis?

**Discourse:** Discourse is a way in which we humans integrate language with non-language “stuff,” such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others.

Discourse can be defined in three ways:

- Language beyond the level of a sentence

- Language behaviours linked to social practices
- Language as a system of thought

Discourse Analysis is a modern discipline of the social sciences that covers a wide variety of different sociolinguistic approaches. It aims to study and analyse the use of discourse in at least one of the three ways stated above, and more often than not, all of them at once. Analysis of discourse looks not only at the basic level of what is said, but takes into consideration the surrounding social and historical contexts. Discourse analysts will look at any given text, and this just means anything that communicates a message, and particularly, how that message constructs a social reality or view of the world.

### Speech Act Theory and “How I Met My Husband”

A speech act is a minimal functional unit in human communication. Just as a word is the smallest form found in a language and a morpheme is the smallest unit of language that carries information about meaning, the basic unit of communication is a speech act. It attempts to explain how speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and how hearers infer intended meaning from what is said. Although speech act studies are now considered a sub-discipline of cross-cultural pragmatics, they actually take their origin in the philosophy of language.

Definition: 1. “any of the acts that may be performed by a speaker in making an utterance, as stating, asking, requesting, advising, warning, or persuading, considered in terms of the content of the message, the intention of the speaker, and the effect on the listener.” (Dictionary.com)

1. “an utterance that constitutes some act in addition to the mere act of uttering” (Dictionary.com)

### The meaning of Speech Acts

According to Austin’s theory (1962), what we say has three kinds of meaning:

1. **Propositional meaning** – the literal meaning of what is said,

For example, in “How I Met My Husband” the narrator said, “We watched the plane land across the road, where the fairgrounds used to be.”

An another example is, ‘It’s cold in here’.

2. **Illocutionary meaning**- the social function of what is said,

For example, in “How I Met My Husband” Dr. Peeble says, “It’s okay. He knows what he’s doing.” Here, Dr. Peeble was indirectly suggesting to his family members not to make noise on hearing the airplane’s roaring which was passing over their home.

Another example, I want to give here is, ‘It’s cold in here’ could be:

- an indirect request for someone to close the window,
- an indirect refusal by a friend or say servant who has been asked to open the window in a cold morning
- a complaint implying that someone should know better than to keep the windows closed.

**3. Perlocutionary meaning-** the effect of what is said,

For example, Mrs. Peebles, in “How I Met My Husband”, says to his family members who were standing outside their home to see the plane, “All right. Let’s go back in the house. Let’s not stand here gawking like a set of farmers.” resulted that all the members went inside the home.

Another example could be, “It’s cold in here” could result in someone closing the windows.

Further, based on Austin’s (1962), and Searle’s(1969), Cohen(1996) identifies five categories of speech acts based on the functions assigned to them. They are the followings:

**1. Representatives** (assertions, claims, reports)

Examples of representatives, in “How I Met My Husband”, are so many. Some of them I wish to quote here:

“This was my first job – working for Dr. and Mrs. Peebles, who had bought an old house out on the Fifth Line, about five miles out of town.”

“The bathroom too. I had a bath in there once a week. They wouldn’t have minded if I one oftener, but to me it seemed like asking too much, or may be risking making it less wonderful.”

**2. Directives** (suggestions, requests, commands)

Examples of directives, in “How I Met My Husband”, also are so many. Let us see some of them:

“In one burst I said, “I wisht you wouldn’t say anything about that dress””.

“Don’t forget. You have my word of honor.”

**3. Expressives** (apologies, complaint, thanks): Now let us see some examples of expressive:

Edie, the protagonist of the story, says “I’m not an expert at sign making”.

Edie says to Chris Watters “Thank you for the cigarette.”

**4. Commisives** (promises, threats, offers): The examples of commissive can be seen here in this conversation between Chris Watters and Edie:

“Why don’t you come over. I’ll take you up in my plane.”

“ I am saving my money”

**5. Declaratives** (decrees, declarations): We see this kind of speech acts in the following lines of the story,

“I am Alice Kelling, Mr. Watters’ fiancée.”

Politeness Theory:

**2. Politeness theory and “How I Met My Husband”**

Politeness theory is the theory that accounts for the redressing of the affronts to face posed by face-threatening acts to addressees. First formulated in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, politeness theory has since expanded academia’s perception of politeness.<sup>[2]</sup> Politeness is the expression of the speakers’ intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another (Mills, 2003, p. 6). Another definition is "a battery of social skills whose goal is to ensure everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction". Being polite therefore consists of attempting to save face for another.

Face is the public self image that every adult tries to protect. There are two types of faces, positive face and negative face. According to Brown and Levinson, positive face is “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others executors” or the positive self-image or personality includes the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved by others. Whereas, negative face is “the want of every adult members that his actions be unimpeded by others” i.e. the freedom of action and freedom of imposition.

**Face-threatening acts:** According to Brown and Levinson, positive and negative face exist universally in human culture. A face threatening act is an act that

inherently damages the face of the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other. Most of these acts are verbal, however, they can also be conveyed in the characteristics of speech (such as tone, inflection, etc.).

### Negative face-threatening acts in “How I Met My Husband”

#### 1. Damage to the hearer:

Dr. Peebles says, “It’s okay. He knows what he’s doing.” By this sentence Dr. Peeble did damage to the hearers because after this sentence all the family members deny to participate in the future act of the conversation.

#### 2. Damage to the speaker:

When Edie goes to meet Chris Watters for the first time to the fairgrounds, Chris Watters says, “Did you want to ride? Sit down. Have a cigarette.” Edie says, “I couldn’t even shake my head to say no, so he gave me one.”, which shows that the acceptance of the cigarette by Edie damage the speaker’s future acts. This can also be done by expressing thanks, accepting thank or apology, excuses etc.

### Cooperative Principle and “How I Met My Husband”:

In social science generally and linguistics specifically, the **cooperative principle** describes how people interact with one another. As phrased by Paul Grice, who introduced it, it states, "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."<sup>[1]</sup> Though phrased as a prescriptive command, the principle is intended as a description of how people normally behave in conversation. Jeffries and McIntyre describe them as "encapsulating the assumptions that we prototypically hold when we engage in conversation".<sup>[2]</sup>

Listeners and speakers must speak cooperatively and mutually accept one another to be understood in a particular way. The cooperative principle describes how effective communication in conversation is achieved in common social situations.

The cooperative principle can be divided into four maxims, called the Gricean Maxims, describing

specific rational principles observed by people who obey the cooperative principle; these principles enable effective communication.<sup>[3]</sup> Grice proposed four conversational maxims that arise from the pragmatics of natural language.<sup>[3]</sup> The Gricean Maxims are a way to explain the link between utterances and what is understood from them.

#### *Obeying the cooperative principle*

Those who obey the cooperative principle in their language use will make sure that what they say in a conversation furthers the purpose of that conversation. Obviously, the requirements of different types of conversations will be different.

#### *Grice's Maxims*

##### **Maxim of Quality**

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

##### **Maxim of Quantity**

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

##### **Maxim of Relation**

###### **1. Be relevant.**

With respect to this maxim, Grice writes, "Though the maxim itself is terse, its formulation conceals a number of problems that exercise me a good deal: questions about what different kinds and focuses of relevance there may be, how these shift in the course of a talk exchange, how to allow for the fact that subjects of conversations are legitimately changed, and so on. I find the treatment of such questions exceedingly difficult, and I hope to revert to them in later work."

##### **Maxim of Manner**

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

**Examples in the story:** See some of the following lines of a conversation between Chris Watters and Edie,

Watters: “I’m not an expert at sign making.”  
Edie: “It’s is very good.”

## Conclusion:

In this way we saw that we can get a lot of advantages if we start giving attention to our daily conversation and use the theories, as stated above, in our practical conversation. This paper is not only an attempt to describe the importance of speech acts in our life but it suggests us that we should be attentive while talking to others. We should, therefore, not only speak with authority but we also need to cooperate in the discourse as well. According to Gee, "In the end, **discourse analysis** is one way to engage in a very important human task. The task is this: to think more deeply about the meanings we give people's words so as to make ourselves better, more humane people and the world a better, more humane place."

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