

The role of performative verbs in the English educational discourse in British and American fiction

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ABSTRACT: The issues of performativity of the English educational discourse (EED) are considered. Under the educational discourse, the authors understand the educator's statements to the educatees in order to make an educational impact on them. The aim of the study is to define the types and characteristics of performative verbs in the English educational discourse. The authors suggest that performativity can become one of the important characteristics of educational discourse. The data for this study were collected from the English-language fiction of the 19th–21st centuries, devoted to the problems of education and upbringing. Attention is paid to performative verbs as the basis of EED. The classifications of Austin, Searle and Apresyan are taken as starting points. The results of the analysis show that performative verbs are typical of the EED, but their activity and frequency vary. The performativity of a verb depends on its position in the sentence. In some positions in the sentence, they may lose their illocutionary power and the ability to carry out an action; in this case, they are used in the phatic function. The analysis shows that the EED has a high degree of performativity, which can be considered a characteristic feature of the discourse under study.

KEYWORDS: performativity; performative verbs; illocution; communication; English educational discourse

1. Introduction

Pedagogical discourse as a linguistic phenomenon has been given due attention in a number of works in recent years. However, limited attention has been paid to one of its types, educational discourse, which is just beginning to attract researchers. By educational discourse, we mean the educator's statements to those being educated in order to produce an educational influence on them. Little scholarship devoted to educational discourse considers its genres and styles (Srebryanskaya and Uvarova, 2019; Tsinkerman, 2014), the pragmatism of its communicative tonality (Ilyinova and Tsinkerman, 2019), phatic ways of communication between the teacher and the pupil (Gurchenko, 2019), "progressivist" pedagogic discourse of individualized teacher-pupil communication (Chouliaraki, 1998), based on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), verbal and non-verbal aggression in pedagogic discourse (Andriianova, 2023), the construction of the teacher's authority in the discourse under consideration (Xing, 2014), and some others, dedicated to the study of various aspects of educational discourse (Kodelja, 2023; Truba, 2022). At the same time, educational discourse has a number of characteristic features that

require close attention, among which is the performativity of this discourse, which has not been previously studied, nor is there any existing research on it. The performativity of discourse is a complex phenomenon that includes several parameters, which will be discussed further in detail. One of the important factors of the performativity of discourse is the presence, frequency and function of performative verbs in the latter. There is no doubt about the importance of performative verbs in determining the degree of performativity of educational discourse, since the discourse under consideration is almost entirely based on them. As a result, we suggest that performativity can become an important characteristic of educational discourse. The idea of studying performativity of discourse as its characteristic feature has not been put forward before, which determines the relevance of this work.

The performativity of discourse can be viewed as its characteristic, or its property. Karasik (2007) gave a comprehensive description of performative characteristics of discourse. One of the factors that the scholar puts forward is: “at the forefront in determining performativity is the speaker’s right to do something as a *fait accompli*” (Karasik, 2007). The linguist proposes “to distinguish not only performative and non-performative statements, but also similar types of discourse” (Karasik, 2007). The description of the characteristics of performative discourse given by Karasik made it possible to put forward a hypothesis that educational discourse is largely performative, being based on many performative verbs. By this, we mean the fact that speech acts (SA) in educational discourse are semantically close to the meanings of many performative verbs: SA of praise, reproach, instruction, motivation, order, etc. At the same time, educators as active participants of communication in EED use verbs in their speech, many of which are among the performative verbs mentioned by Austin (1986), Searle (1976) and Apresyan (1995).

2. Data and methods

This research is devoted to revealing the role of performative verbs in determining the degree of performativity of educational discourse, which can be considered one of its characteristics. Our attention is focused on educational discourse. The data for this study were collected from the British and American fiction of the 19th–21st centuries, devoted to the problems of education and upbringing. The fiction contains educators’ utterances to pupils in order to exert an educational influence on them. Our analysis was conducted with the use of the following methods: discourse analysis, descriptive, contextual, interpretative, and linguistic pragmatic research methods, as well as quantitative calculations.

Instruments: The search for performative verbs was conducted with the use of the computer program WordFind2 which filters a text picking sentences with required words and showing the number of these words in the text.

3. Theoretical background

For the first time, the performative as a linguistic concept was used and introduced into scientific scholarship by Austin (1986) in the fifties of the last century. At the same time, he argued that performatives, being in fact speech acts themselves, are the embodiment of actions and they fix the facts (Austin, 1986). Over the following decades, the theory of illocution and performativity not only found confirmation, but also received further development. For instance, Mabaquiao (2018), tracing the theory from Austin’s initial statement to Searle’s development, suggests further systematization in terms of general approaches to the philosophy of language (Álvarez, 2005; Mabaquiao, 2018). Linguists believe that a distinctive feature of performative utterances is their purposeful impact on the addressees of speech through an appeal to their emotionality, while the action of such utterances is carried out through the subconscious structures of the individual’s brain (Matveeva, 2010). Such acts involve the speaker “making

an attempt to make public his mental state” (Cohen and Levesque, 1990).

Researchers also note that no successful classification of performative verbs can be completed unless performatives are clearly defined (Hlebec, 2015; Wierzbicka, 1987). The basic definition of a performative is that “this is a statement equivalent to an action, an act” (Arutyunova, 1976). Chetyrkina (2006) distinguishes such properties and features of performative communicative actions as:

- traditionality (performatives do not change in time and space and are assigned to certain situations in which the speaker and listener occupy fixed status roles),
- indexicality (on its basis, the participants learn the symbolic essence of a performative utterance),
- iteration (frequency, precedence, and citation),
- media (the ability to broadcast special knowledge, meanings and sensual images),
- diligence (impresses the recipient and arouses his interest in the speech event),
- collectivity (passed down from generation to generation and imposed on individuals) (Chetyrkina, 2006).

To these features, Formanovskaya (2007) adds others. According to her classification, performative statements are characterized by the following features:

- equationality (equality to action),
- self-reference (synchronicity of the fact of language/speech and the fact of reality),
- autonomy (naming oneself, especially in direct speech acts),
- equitemporality (coincidence of speaking time and action time),
- are not subject to verification (cannot be true or false),
- can be successful (effective) or unsuccessful (ineffective) (Formanovskaya, 2007).

The main element of a performative utterance is the performative verb. Most of the features mentioned above are associated with a performative verb and are revealed only when correlated with speech actions that this verb evokes. A performative communicative unit possesses a very stable structure: it includes the designation of the subject of speech and the verb itself, as a rule, used in the singular, first person, present tense (Kryukova, 2009). Mita agrees with Kryukova that “The utterance that contains performative verb explicitly has subject pronominal I, present simple tense, and direct object. The meaning of performative verb contains declarative, representative/assertive, expressive, directive, and commissive meaning (Mita, 2019). Karasik adds important features to these characteristics of performative verbs. He explains in what case a performative verb presents an action: “A constitutive sign of performativity, among others, is the use of the indicative mood in the first person of the present tense. Performative verbs are actions only if the corresponding verb is spoken by a person with certain powers. The sign of performativity is a status indicator” (Karasik, 1991). This indication of status of very important for our research, since any educator a priori has a higher social status, than a pupil, and gives the ground to consider educational discourse a performative one.

It is the verb that determines the status of the performativity of a speech utterance, semantically expressing the action.

Taking into account the scholars’ opinions, we summarize the characteristics of the performativity of discourse as follows:

- the speaker should have the right to make something a fait accompli,
- the speaker must have the goal of influencing the addressee of speech through an appeal to his emotions and carry out a purposeful action towards the addressee,

- the statement must be equivalent to an action, an act,
- based on the statement, the participants learn a new sign essence,
- the statement transmits special knowledge, meanings and sensory images,
- statements correspond to the norms of culture that are passed from generation to generation and are imposed on individuals,
- the event of utterance and reality are synchronous,
- the speaker identifies himself through the 1st person singular—"I".

In the center of a performative discourse is the performative verb. According to the author of the theory of performativity Austin, one should distinguish a number of performative verbs that determine the corresponding type of utterance: verdictives, expositives, commissives, exersitives, and behabitives (Austin, 1986).

Searle (1976) in his later work critically analyzes Austin's taxonomy. He offers an alternative classification of performative verbs: 1) assertives, 2) commissives, 3) directives, 4) declaratives, and 5) expressives (Searle, 1976). Taking into account the points of intersection between the two classifications, Searle explains how his "classification" is related to Austin's (Searle, 1976). The "List of basic categories of illocutionary acts" proposed by him is, indeed, semantically close to Austin's types of performatives. Searle's taxonomy of performative verbs deserves special attention due to the specificity of the basic concept—the illocutionary force contained in each of the performative verbs: representatives, directives, commissions, expressives, and declaratives (Searle, 1976).

As we can see, the meanings of these classes of verbs correspond to the goals of educational discourse: to try on the part of the speaker to get the listener to do something; to impose on the pupil the obligation to perform some future action or follow a certain line of behavior; to demonstrate the responsibility of the educator for reporting a certain state of affairs; and to establish a correspondence between content and reality. All these meanings fully correspond to the semantics of speech acts of educational discourse. Searle does not provide a complete list of performative verbs. However, we can find it in Austin's work (Austin, 1962).

For a practical study of EED and establishing its performativity, we compiled a list of these verbs, taking into account the taxonomy of illocutionary acts by Searle and Austin with the list of verbs of the latter. As we can see, a number of the verbs listed in the classifications of Austin and Searle are an integral part of educational discourse. It is this circumstance that makes us interested in their study, since it makes it possible for us to confirm our hypothesis about the performativity of educational discourse.

In addition, there is also a Russian classification of performative verbs based on their semantic core. Apresyan offers a more detailed classification of performative verbs (Apresyan, 1995). The researcher identifies 15 groups of verbs, instead of the five proposed by Searle and Austin: 1) specialized messages and approvals, 2) recognition, 3) promises, 4) requests, 5) suggestions and advice, 6) warnings and predictions, 7) requirements and orders, 8) prohibitions and permissions, 9) consents and objections, 10) approvals, 11) convictions, 12) forgiveness, 13) speech rituals, 14) specialized acts of transfer, alienation, cancellation, refusal, etc., and 15) names and purposes. It is easy to see that the meaning of each of the mentioned groups is basic for the SA in educational discourse: promise, warning, offer, advice, demand, order, prohibition, permission, consent, objection, condemnation, forgiveness, naming, appointment, and speech rituals. Since such situations are most directly related to educational discourse, our assumption regarding the performativity of educational discourse is confirmed in this case as well. If we take into account Searle's instructions regarding the semantics of the discussed classes of verbs, we can

theoretically conclude that educational discourse is largely performative. This point of view needs to be tested in practice.

4. Results

The study material is constituted by utterances of educators containing performative verbs in British and American fiction of the 19th–21st centuries. All the performative verbs were classified based on the classifications of Searle and Apresyan. These verbs were introduced into the program WordFind2 in the 1st person singular with the pronoun “I”. Texts from more than 100 books of British and American literature were processed. The results of the computer search for the verbs showed a context with the required verbs and the frequency of each verb in the text. All outcomes were calculated and processed.

The results of the analysis of the performative verbs, based on their semantics and frequency, are as follows:

1). assertives:

a) specialized messages and approvals

The research has shown that this group of verbs in EED is not fully active: out of the 22 selected verbs, only 6 (37%) are used in the educator’s speech. The most frequent performative verb in this group is *suppose*.

“*I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper.*” (Travers, 2008)

“*I suppose we’ll be neighbors.*” (Harris, 2003)

The results of the calculations were summarized in the tables for every piece of fiction. Here are the results of the analysis of two books.

Every verb from Austin’s lists of performative verbs was loaded into the programme Wordfind2.

The results of the calculations were summarized in the tables for every piece of fiction. **Table 1** and **Table 2** present the results of the analysis of the two books.

Table 1. Bronte “*Jane Eyre*” (Bronte, 2006).

I assert	0	I concern	0	I swear	0	I proclaim	0
I declare	4	I remind	0	I pledge	0	I publicize	0
I assure	5	I confess	2	I give oath	0	I pronounce	0
I predict	0	I prove	0	I give my word	0	I state	0
I inform	0	I suppose	50	I insist	1	–	–
I tell	9 (perform 4)	I assume	0	I announce	0	–	–

Table 2. Harris “*Blackberry Wine*” (Harris, 2003).

I assert	0	I concern	0	I swear	0	I proclaim	0
I declare	33	I remind	0	I pledge	0	I publicize	0
I assure	89	I confess	27	I give oath	0	I pronounce	0
I predict	0	I prove	0	I give my word	0	I state	0
I inform	0	I suppose	256	I insist	5	–	–
I tell/perform	19	I assume	0	I announce	0	–	–

b) consents and objections

This group is relatively small in comparison with the other groups in the educator’s vocabulary. Out of the 20 verbs, only 5 (25 %) were used in the performative position with a total number of uses 13, which is insignificant.

"I again move the introduction to a new topic. Do you second my motion?" – "Madam, I support you on this point, as on every other." (Bronte, 2006)

"I refuse to sign this robin." (Kaufman, 2019)

2). commissions:

a) promises

The quantitative data indicate that among the performative verbs of the promise, out of 9 verbs of this group, only 4 (44%) were used in EED. The most common verb is *assure*. Its frequency is several times higher than the frequency of the use of the verbs *promise*, *swear*, and *guarantee*.

"Catherine, after all. I assure you I did not above half like coming away." (Austen, 2017)

"I assure you I haven't been so surprised since Christopher Columbus discovered America." (Travers, 2008)

"I promise I'm not here to develop anything." (Harris, 2003)

"I was just trying to make conversation. I swear." (Harris, 2003)

3). directives:

a) requests

The summarized data show that not all performative verbs of request and proposal are used in EED. Of the 8 verbs of this group, only 2 (25 %) were identified in the texts, *ask* and *beg*, which were used in total in the teacher's speech 25 times.

"I beg for dear little Molly to stay on here." (Gaskell, 2012)

"Really, children, really! I don't understand you. Do be good, I beg of you. There's nobody to look after you tonight." (Travers, 2008)

b) suggestions and advice

Of the 10 performative verbs of suggestion and advice, only 5 (50%) were used in the educator's speech. This is more than the verbs of other groups.

"I advise you to live sinless, and I wish you to die tranquil." (Bronte, 2006)

It is interesting that in the fiction of the 20th century, the verbs offer, suggest and propose, which were absent in the EDD in the 19th century, appeared in the teacher's speech.

"I offer you my sincere condolence." (Wilde, 2019)

"Lady Bracknell: That is not the destiny I propose for Gwendolen." (Wilde, 2019)

"I suggest you put any objections you may have in writing and e-mail them to Mr. Bishop." (Harris, 2006)

c) warnings and predictions

The study showed that the frequency of the use of the verbs in this group varies greatly. The verbs are mostly *warn* and *caution*.

"This is a sad, a melancholy occasion; for it becomes my duty to warn you, that this girl, who might be one of God's own lambs, is a little castaway." (Bronte, 2006)

"But I warn you, Andrew, if you catch your death of cold—don't blame me!" (Travers, 2008)

"I see no phantoms, predict no futures." (Harris, 2003)

d) demands and orders

Quantitative data show that all performative verbs of demands and commands are used infrequently in EED. Of the entire group of verbs, only one verb in the educator's speech was identified—*demand*. This suggests that demands and orders were verbally expressed not by performative verbs, but by other linguistic means.

"What am I to imagine, Willoughby, by your behavior last night? Again, I demand an explanation of it." (Austen, 2004)

"Due to Midterms and horsing around I need that E. Credit! I demand you give it to me!" (Kaufman, 2019)

e) prohibitions and permissions

The performative verbs of this group demonstrate the same frequency in the speech of educators as in the verbs of other groups. Of the entire group of the verbs, only *forbid* and *allow* are used in speech. The verbs *permit* and *stop* have an extremely low frequency.

"I dared not allow them to remain fasting till dinner-time." (Bronte, 2006)

"I will not allow that scaly sheathing under any roof of mine." (Travers, 2008)

"Stop it, for crying out loud," said Gilly flatly. "Stop being so sodding childish." (Harris, 2003)

4). declaratives:

a) confessions

In contrast to the previously considered groups of verbs, declarative verbs are very frequent in the SA of educators. The verbs *confess* and *acknowledge* express decisiveness and categoricity, despite smoothed declarative semantics. The verb *admit* is quite common in the meaning of recognition. As for *disclose*, it is used in combination with nouns with the meaning "secret", i.e., the speaker reveals a secret. Attention is drawn to the relatively high frequency of declarative verbs of confession in the EEA. In addition, the quantitative indicators vary significantly in different works from 0 to 56. This can be explained by the individual characteristics and a person's speech preferences.

"I felt that it was correct, but I confess I was not quite indifferent to its import." (Bronte, 2006)

"I admit my ambivalence—when I reread the round robin." (Kaufman, 2019)

"Stay till he comes, and, when I disclose my secret to him, you shall share the Confidence." (Bronte, 2006)

b) approval and condemnation

Performative verbs of this group are also actively used in EED. In the educator's speech, the verb *praise* is often used, while the other verbs are not.

"You know you don't mean what you are saying, and only say it out of contradiction, because I praise him." (Gaskell, 2012)

At the same time, the speech of educators involves approval and condemnation, but these meanings are expressed by other language means.

"It will be quite delightful, I declare!" (Austen, 2004)

c) forgiveness

In the course of the research, it was found out that the verb *excuse* is actively used in the educator's speech, whereas the other verbs are not.

“Jane, I excuse you for the present: two months’ grace I allow you for the full enjoyment of your new position.” (Bronte, 2006)

The 5th group of the performative verbs is expressives which include *apologize*, *congratulate*, *thank*, etc. The examples of using these verbs as performatives are not registered in educational discourse.

The analysis of the linguistic material has shown an important feature of the verbs that have great illocutionary power and are capable of being performative verbs: their illocutionary force depends on the position in the sentence. In cases where the verbs in the 1st person appear in the middle or end of the sentence, they lose their illocutionary and performative powers. In this case, they perform the phatic function of attracting attention or maintaining contact:

“Revenge, I’ll admit, is a part of it.” (Harris, 2006)

“It’s awkward, of course, but not unpleasant. Never happens to either of you, I suppose?” (Travers, 2008)

“Huh—for one of those aeroplanes, I suppose.” (Travers, 2008)

“Took me five years just to get the soil right. I tell you.” (Harris, 2006)

5. Discussion

This study shows that the three classifications of performative verbs are quite compatible. Searle admits that his list of basic categories of illocutionary acts is “semantically close to the types of performatives by Austin” (Searle, 1976). Apresyan (1995) gives a more detailed classification of performative verbs compared to those of Austin and Searle. This research demonstrates that these classifications do not contradict, but complement each other and can successfully be used for the purpose of further research of performativity.

As for the form of performative verbs in the sentence, they possess illocutionary power only when they are used in the first person singular, present tense, and take the initial position in the sentence, as mentioned above. It is also necessary to mention that there is an opinion that a performative verb can be used not only in the present tense but also in the perfect or future tense: “though other configurations (for example, present perfect, perfective past or future) are also attested” (Plungian et al., 2022), as well as the use of the perfect form in the performative present (Wiemer, 2014). We will not argue with the authors, but we have to state that in our research we did not find any examples of the use of the performative verbs in perfect tenses or in a future tense.

Verbs in the 1st person singular, capable of acting as performative, can appear in a sentence in such a form and in such a lexical environment that their illocutionary strength is significantly or completely reduced, and their categoricity is strongly smoothed. So, a modal verb or a form of the subjunctive mood, or an etiquette formula significantly reduce the illocutionary power of a performative verb. The statement loses its categoricity and sharpness. The softening of categoricity meets the traditional rules of English etiquette. It has been established that in EED, the performativity of the verb depends, among other factors, on its position in the sentence. In the final or middle position in the sentence, these verbs in the 1st person may not perform a performative function. In this case, they perform the phatic function of attracting attention or establishing and maintaining contact.

The results of our research are compatible with Karasik’s point of view. The scholar develops the theory of performativity even further and applies it not only to verbs, speech acts and utterances, but also to text and discourse. Discourse and text can be distinguished by the degree of performativity, he says. He distinguishes two types of texts: performative and creative. The former is intended for the addressee,

while the latter can be both addressable and non-addressable. Performative texts are largely similar in their function to performative verbs, according to Austin (1986), i.e., with verbal signs, the pronunciation of which in itself is a certain action. “It is possible to build some scale of ‘performativity—creativity’, on one pole of which there are recommendations, instructions, orders, and on the other—lyric poems, including modernist lyrics, which merge with songs without words” (Karasik, 2002). From this point of view, as well as from the standpoint of the above parameters, educational discourse is really performative.

6. Conclusion

As a result of the conducted research, the authors came to the following conclusions.

The EED reveals the features of performativity due to a number of reasons: the multiple uses of performative verbs in it, their meanings corresponding to the educator’s SA, the high illocutionary power of these verbs, and also due to the fact that the educational orientation of the discourse itself involves the manifestation of the educator’s action as a fact: what the teacher tells the pupils is a priori indisputable and must be done. All of the selected features of the performativity of discourse are present in the EED:

- the caregiver has the right to do and declare something to be a fait accompli or to demand it,
- the educator has the goal of influencing the pupil through an appeal to his emotionality and carries out a purposeful action in his direction,
- the educator’s statement (demand, advice, order, etc.) is equivalent to an action, a deed,
- the educator’s statement conveys special knowledge of accepted social and cultural norms, their meanings and sensory images, as well as language means of expressing them,
- on the basis of the educator’s utterance, pupils learn the new symbolic essence of the accepted social, cultural and etiquette norms, as well as the symbolism of performative verbs,
- the event of the utterance and reality are synchronous,
- the speaker identifies himself.

If we turn to the provisions of Searle about illocutionary utterances, we can state that the educator in the process of the discourse “informs others about the state of affairs; tries to get others to do something; commits to doing something; expresses their feelings and relationships; and finally, with the help of utterances, he makes changes” (Searle, 1976) into the existing order of things, guiding the pupil’s actions in the necessary direction. In addition, as Searle points out, often in the same statement, the communicant, in our case the educator, performs several actions from this list at once (Searle, 1976). All this confirms the hypothesis put forward—educational discourse is largely performative. As a result, it can be stated that educational discourse acquires one more characteristic feature—performativity.

The study makes it possible to draw conclusions not only about educational discourse, but also about the specificity of the use of performative verbs in it.

The specificity of EED leaves its mark on their frequency in the speech of educators. Some performative verbs are used very often in EED, others are rare, while the rest are not used at all. So, in our case, not all possible verbs from the lists of the performatives are used, but only *assure*, *declare*, *confess*, *tell*, and *insist* in the performative meaning. The most common one is *suppose*. Of the verbs of the group “consent” in the teacher’s speech, a third of the verbs are used, and the cases of this use are rare. In the group of commissions, the use of the performative verbs is also insignificant. In the group of directives from the verbs of the “request” group in EED, only *ask* and *beg* are used, which are quite frequent. Among the verbs of the “advice” group, only *advise* is relatively actively used. Among the verbs of the groups “offers” and “recommendations” only the verb *offer* is actively used and rarely *invite*. In the group of verbs

“warning”, the verb *warn* is relatively actively used, rarely—*caution*. In the group of declaratives, the verbs of the “recognition” group have a very active use in the performative function in EED. The verb *admit* is rarely used in the meaning of a declarative. Verbs of the group “approval, condemnation” are practically not used. The use of *forgiveness* verbs is very low.

Some performative verbs have never been used in EED. It can be assumed that this is due to the traditions of English etiquette. A speaker who says *I remind, I predict, I inform, I prove, I swear*, etc., looks at least impolite and strange.

In addition, the study allows us to conclude that the degree of performativity of discourse as a process of linguistic activity can be considered one of its characteristics.

Author contributions

Author Natalia Srebryanskaya designed the study, collected the data, chose and used methodology and wrote the first draft. Natalia Srebryanskaya, Irina Bakhmetieva and Valentina Gurchenko provided theoretical background and literature review; supervised, reviewed, and edited the draft. Project administration belongs to Natalia Srebryanskaya. All authors revised the draft for final submission, read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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