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CD Proceedings of the 4th Language in the Realm of Social Dynamics International Conference "The Multi-Dimensions in an Era of Language and Teaching". University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok. 2012. pp. 23 - 32.

The definitive version of this article was published as Bunsom, T. and Watson Todd, R. (2012) India's Unchanging Social Structures: A Discursive Investigation of Power Relationships in A Passage to India and the White Tiger. CD Proceedings of the 4th Language in the Realm of Social Dynamics International Conference "The Multi-Dimensions in an Era of Language and Teaching". pp. 23 - 32. University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok.

**India's Unchanging Social Structures:
A Discursive Investigation of Power Relationships in
*A Passage to India and The White Tiger***

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Abstract

Different scholars such as Larzar (1993) and Maley (2001) point out the various benefits of literature, one of which is its function as a window into the history, politics and culture of a country. India's modern history can be divided into the long period of British colonisation and its more recent independence. With colonial India plagued by extreme inequalities in power, we might expect these inequalities to be reduced after independence. To see if these expectations are fulfilled, we examine four dialogues between characters in different positions in society from Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) representing the colonial period and Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) representing the independent period. The analysis is based on Searle's speech act theory (1979). The findings suggest that Indian society remains unchangingly hierarchical.

1. Introduction

India's modern history can be roughly divided into the pre-independent period and the post-independent one. As a colony, India was ruled over by the British for over 300 years, from 1612 to 1947. During this period of colonisation, the country witnessed a wide segregation of people and power. It can be argued that prior to the arrival of the British, Indian society had already been very hierarchical and caste-bound. However, the British colonisation of India further complicated the power structures within the society and brought tremendous change in the political, economic and cultural framework of the country. Following invasive British-style social reforms, trades and industries replaced agriculture, unevenly creating urban middle-classes and widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The Britons, nevertheless, were exclusively regarded as superior to the local Indians. They were appointed rulers along with the few native elite while the majority of local Indians assumed the roles of humble subjects, unjustly treated by the colonial government that imposed harsh rules such as land taxes upon their people.

This injustice ultimately led to the rise of the Indian National Movement in late 19th century. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1855, marking a significant political movement for independence. Eventually, India received her long-hoped-for independence in 1947 after a series of protests led by Mohandas Gandhi whose philosophy of civil

disobedience attracted international attention. To welcome the historical moment of freedom, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru delivered a hopeful speech "Tryst with Destiny" at the approaching hours of midnight of 14/15 August 1947:

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny. And now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new. We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell...

Nehru wanted to see independent India as a safe haven for all the Indian people, free from divisions of social class, ethnicity or economic wealth, the dominating and humiliating features of the colonial society. Reading Nehru's optimistic remark on the future of India, we might expect that the social inequalities experienced during the colonial times would be reduced after independence.

2. Research Question

While the leaders of the Indian independence movement may have been hoping for a more equitable society following independence, such aspirations do not necessarily become reality. There is perhaps an equal likelihood that unequal power structures remain with indigenous Indian elites taking over the role of the former British colonisers. The goal of this paper is to examine written texts from both periods to see if Nehru's aspirations were realised. In other words, we aim to answer the following question:

Are power relationships and social structures in independent India different from those in the colonial period?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Selection

We initially looked for two novels that could clearly represent the pre-independent and post-independent Indian society. After careful consideration, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) were chosen. The former was included for its widely-accepted status as a classic work of literature; the latter for winning the Man Booker Prize award and for its authentic portrayal of modern Indian society (Kapoor, 2008).

Then, we selected four dialogues from the novels (two from each) to analyse the interactions among characters in different positions in society. These were chosen on the basis that they involved clear interaction between characters at different levels of Indian society.

3.2 Overview of Data Analysis

The method of analysis is based on Searle's speech act theory (1979). Each turn in the dialogues is examined to identify speech acts, and then these are categorised following Searle's typology. Dominant speech acts in each dialogue are then investigated to shed insight onto the power hierarchies among the speakers.

3.3 Limitations of the Study

This research is preliminary, and we are aware that the selection of the data could be criticised. In choosing four dialogues, we are excluding all the descriptive or narrative passages on the basis that these are less likely to shed light on power structures than the dialogues. In addition, we also realise that restricting our analysis to only four dialogues could lead to accusations of bias in data selection. However, the four passages chosen were those where differences in social status between the characters interacting in the dialogues were clearest.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Literature as Data

Beyond the pleasure of reading, it has been argued that literature can provide many benefits, such as broadening readers' notions of what it means to be human (Hall, 2005). For our purposes in this paper, however, we are concerned with what literature tells us about society, rather than how reading literature can be of benefit. Lazar (1993) and Maley (2001) argue that literature can provide a route into understanding the culture, politics and history of a society. While recording actual interactions may provide more valid data on power structures, this is only possible for present-day society. To compare present-day power structures with those of the past, recordings are not possible. The only way to access interactions from the British colonial era is through literature. Basing our investigation of power structures in society on literary representations could be criticised as analysing inauthentic language since linguistic creativity could take precedence over authenticity (Cox, 1991). However, some literature attempts to provide realistic instances of language use (Jakobson and Pomorska, 1987), and the two novels chosen for this study fall into this category. Analysing extracts from *A Passage to India* and *The White Tiger*, then, should provide valid insights into Indian society, both historical and present-day.

4.2 Speech Act Theory

The core idea of speech act theory, which was originally proposed by J. L. Austin (1962), is that when we make utterances, we not only say something about the world but also perform actions. For example, through "I am sorry", we perform an act of apologising. These actions reflect our beliefs about the state of the world. For instance, we only give a command when we believe that the recipient is in a social position to accept a command from us. In this way, speech acts provide a window into social structure.

Searle (1979) extends Austin's original theory by classifying speech acts into five groups:

(1) **Declarations:** speech acts that change the world via utterances, e.g. naming, baptising, and sentencing. To perform a declaration appropriately, a speaker needs to have a special institutional role and be in a specific context. For example, the statement "I now pronounce you husband and wife." must be said by a priest or marriage registrar at a wedding ceremony.

(2) **Representatives:** speech acts that state what the speaker believes (or does not believe), e.g. stating, affirming, asserting, denying and describing. An example of a representative is: "It was really hot today".

(3) **Expressives:** speech acts that state what the speaker feels, e.g. apologising, thanking and congratulating. This type of speech act expresses psychological states and can be statements of pleasure, pain, likes, or dislikes. For example, “I’m really grateful.”

(4) **Commissives:** speech acts that speakers use to commit themselves to some future actions, e.g. promising, offering and threatening. They express what the speaker intends (or does not want) to do. For example, “I will help you.”

(5) **Directives:** speech acts that the speaker uses to get someone else to do something, e.g. requesting, commanding, and suggesting. They express what the speaker wants but, unlike commissives, it is the hearer who has to comply with the statement. For example: “Could you open the window, please?”

In using speech acts to shed light on social structures, directives provide perhaps the clearest insights. A more powerful social actor may command a less powerful one, but if the two social actors are of the same power level a request is more likely and this may need to be mitigated. While the implications of the other speech act types for power relations may not be as clear as for directives, choices in what to say in the speech act (e.g. someone with less power is less likely to use a representative to disagree) and how to say it can still provide insights into social structure.

5. Data

The four chosen dialogues are presented below. Two of the dialogues are from *A Passage to India* and the other two from *The White Tiger*. All the names of the characters are omitted and replaced by letters in order for readers to approach the dialogues impartially. The analysis of the dialogues will then yield more reliable results because by overlooking the characters’ ethnic backgrounds and social positions, we can focus on the interactions of the speakers, that is, what and how they speak rather than who they are. All the names, social positions and ethnic backgrounds of the speakers will be disclosed in the “discussion” section.

Dialogue 1

A: Please make yourself at home.

B: May I really, Mr. A. It’s very good of you. I like unconventional behaviour so extremely. The fact is I have long wanted to meet you. I have heard so much about your warm heart from the Nawab Bahadur. But where is one to meet in a wretched hole like Chandrapore? I’ll tell you what: I used to wish you to fall ill so that we could meet that way.

A: You know me by sight then?

B: Of course, of course. You know me?

A: I know you very well by name.

B: I have been here such a short time and always in the bazaar. No wonder you have never seen me, and I wonder you know my name. I say, Mr. A?

A: Yes?

B: Guess what I look like before you come out. That will be a kind of game.

A: You’re five feet nine inches high.

B: Jolly good.

(p. 59)

Dialogue 2

B: Before you go, for you are evidently in a great hurry, will you please unlock the drawer? Do you see a piece of brown paper at the top?

A: Yes?
B: Open it.
A: Who is this?
B: She was my wife. You are the first Englishman she has ever come before. Now put her photograph away.
A: Really, I don't know why you pay me this great compliment, B, but I do appreciate it.
B: Oh, it's nothing. She was not a highly educated woman or even beautiful, but put it away. She is of no importance, she is dead. I showed her to you because I have nothing else to show.

(p. 107)

Dialogue 3

C: Wait. I have instructions for you. D, you're not in the Darkness any longer.
D: Yes, sir.
C: There's a law in Delhi.
D: Yes, sir.
C: You know those bronze statues of Gandhi and Nehru that are everywhere? The police have put cameras inside their eyes to watch for the cars. They see everything you do, understand that?
D: Yes, sir.
C: The air conditioner should be turned off when you are on your own.
D: Yes, sir.
C: Take some interest in this, Brother, you'll have to check up on the driver when I'm gone.
E: The driver's honest. He's from Laxmangarh.
C: Don't talk like that. Don't make a joke of what I'm saying.
E: One minute, one minute. I'm talking to a friend in New York.

(pp. 141-2)

Dialogue 4

F: Another drink, driver.
D: Yes, sir.
F: Pour one for your master now.
E: No, I don't drink much, really, I'm fine.
F: Don't be silly, E. I insist – fellow, pour one for your master. Stop that sneezing and drive us towards Jangpura, son.
D: Sorry, sir.
F: Driver. Are we near Jangpura?
D: Yes, sir.
An hour later.
E: Let's go home. D, let's go home, I said!
D: Yes, sir.

(pp. 218-9)

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Results and Interpretation

According to speech act theory, social hierarchy and power relationships can be identified from the speakers' interactions. At first glance, we can see that in all the dialogues, most statements of the characters do not fit in the first category (declarations), except one made by

the speaker C in dialogue 3, mainly because their utterances are not in a specific context that requires them to make such declarations. Based on the interactions among the speakers, all the characters are conversing in everyday contexts despite some differences in the level of politeness. The second category, representatives, can be found in all the dialogues and they are equally distributed in the first two dialogues but in the third and fourth dialogues, speaker D's repeated statements of "yes" are worth elaboration. The outstanding speech acts of the first two dialogues are the third category (expressives), the speech act of feelings, dominantly uttered by speaker B and only twice by speaker A. However, there are very few expressive statements in the last two dialogues except a short one made by speaker D in the fourth dialogue. Interestingly, the fourth category (commissives) and the fifth (declaratives) which are not prevalent in the first two dialogues seem to dominate most of the utterances made by speakers C and F.

The speech acts identified in the four dialogues are given in the tables below:

Dialogue 1

Speech Acts	Speaker A	Speaker B
Declarations	-	-
Representatives	- You're five feet nine inches high. - I know you very well by name.	- I have been here such a short time and always in the bazaar.
Expressives	-	- May I really, Mr. A. - I like unconventional behaviour so extremely -The fact is I have long wanted to meet you. - I have heard so much about your warm heart from the Nawab Bahadur. - I'll tell you what: I used to wish you to fall ill so that we could meet that way. - But where is one to meet in a wretched hole like Chandrapore? - Jolly good.
Commissives	-	-
Directives	- Please make yourself at home.	- Guess what I look like before you come out.

In dialogue 1, with the imperative statement, "please make yourself at home", speaker A seems to have more power than his/her counterpart because he/she is assuming the role of a host. The imperative mode of verb "make", while mitigated, also suggests that speaker B is expected to comply with the other's request. On the other hand, speaker B talks a lot in this dialogue and he/she employs a lot of expressives to convey his/her feelings of eagerness, wish and humility. The verbs "like", "wish" and "want" demonstrate an attempt to assert the speaker's existence but a sense of humility and inferiority can be traced through his/her use of negative words such as "wretched" and "hole". The use of compliments, attempting at pleasing the other speaker, such as "warm heart" and "jolly good" also places speaker B in a lower position.

Dialogue 2

Speech acts	Speaker A	Speaker B
Declarations	-	-
Representatives	- Yes? - Who is this?	- She was my wife. You are the first Englishman she has ever come before.
Expressives	- I don't know why you pay me this great compliment, B, but I do appreciate it	- Oh, it's nothing. She was not a highly educated woman or even beautiful. - She is of no importance, she is dead. I showed her to you because I have nothing else to show.
Commissives	-	-
Directives	-	- Will you please unlock the drawer? - Open it. - Now put her photograph away - But put it away.

Dialogue 2 presents the same pair of speakers. It is revealed that speaker A is an English man and speaker B is a widower whose frequent use of expressives dominates the interactions. In this dialogue, however, expressive statements are uttered in a more apologetic tone to show his and his late wife's undeserving existence and humility. His repeated negations, "nothing", "not a highly educated woman", "of no importance" and "nothing else" express his awareness of inferiority to speaker A. This argument can be further supported by his representative statement, "You are the first Englishman she has ever come before." Through it, the words "first", "ever" and "before" exhibit speaker B's special regard and respect for his counterpart. Perhaps the most interesting remarks in this dialogue are speaker B's directive statements which speaker A is obliged to follow. His imperative commands, "unlock", "open" and "put away" suggest a compromise in the power relations between the two speakers, presumably resulting from their developed intimacy.

Dialogue 3

Speech acts	Speaker C	Speaker D	Speaker E
Declarations	- You're not in the Darkness any longer.	-	-
Representatives	-	- Yes, sir. (repeatedly)	- The driver's honest. - He's from Laxmangarh. - I'm talking to a friend in New York.
Expressives	-	-	-
Commissives	- There's a law in Delhi. - You know those bronze statues of Gandhi and Nehru that are everywhere? The police have put cameras inside their eyes to watch for the cars. They see	-	-

	everything you do, understand that?		
Directives	- Wait. I have instructions for you. Take some interest in this, Brother, you'll have to check up on the driver when I'm gone. - Don't talk like that. Don't make a joke of what I'm saying.	-	- One minute, one minute.

Dialogue 3 introduces a new set of speakers, consisting of speakers C, D and E. Speaker C is the most dominant and most powerful, uttering a series of declarations, commissives and directives. The declaration, which is normally made by officials in special institutional roles, is made by speaker C here, suggesting his/her definitive authority acknowledged by the other two speakers. The statement "You are not in the Darkness any longer", therefore, signals the change of the world of the speaker D, the receiver of this declaration. In addition, his/her legitimate rights are confirmed via commissives of threat directed towards speaker D. "Law in Delhi", "Gandhi and Nehru statues", "police" and "cameras" make speaker D a subject of gaze whose power is taken away. Furthermore, speaker C also uses directives to speaker E, creating another set of power relations. The imperative forms of "wait" and "take" along with calling speaker E "brother" establish speaker C's superior position. Therefore, it can be interpreted from the interaction that in the pyramid of power, speaker C comes first, followed by speaker E who has some negotiation power through his/her sole use of directives in "One minute, one minute" as well as representatives in "The driver's honest" to defend speaker D. Speaker D comes last in this circle of power relations, having no say at all, except his/her recurring representative acknowledgement of order and threat "Yes, sir."

Dialogue 4

Speech acts	Speaker D	Speaker E	Speaker F
Declarations	-	-	-
Representatives	- Yes, sir. (repeatedly)	- No, I don't drink much, really, I'm fine.	- Are we near Jangpura?
Expressives	- Sorry, sir.	-	-
Commissives	-	-	-
Directives	-	- Let's go home, D, let's go home, I said!	-Another drink, driver. -Pour one for your master now. Don't be silly, E. I insist – fellow, pour one for your master. Stop that sneezing and drive us towards Jangpura, son.

In the last dialogue, another set of power relations is relatively created. Similar to speaker C, speaker F gives a lot of commands to speaker D who can only apologise ("Sorry, sir") and do as he is ordered ("Yes, sir"). Speaker F's constant use of imperatives, "pour",

“don’t be”, “stop” and his/her patronising addressing of speaker D as “son” place him/her at the top of the hierarchy. In the same manner, speaker D’s complete submission puts him at the bottom. Assuming the middle place again, speaker E, however, is located in a more interesting position. His/her refusal to comply with speaker F’s insistence and his/her directive command towards speaker D can be seen as a power struggle of which the exclamation mark is a good illustration.

Therefore, by looking at the anonymous power relations among the six speakers, two speakers from the first two dialogues and four from the last two, we can see that they have different levels of power classified by their dominant speech acts. It seems that those who could make declarative and commissive statements are the ones with the highest level of power while the power of those using representatives and expressives is more ambiguous and needs further scrutiny. In the first two dialogues, Speaker A’s superiority is demonstrated through his taciturnity and his neutral statements which are mainly representatives made to Speaker B. Speaker B’s prevalent use of expressives to reveal his/her feelings of humility and strong determination to please Speaker A compromises his/her power in the interactions. Although Speaker A makes no declaratives or commissives in the interactions, the evidence of Speaker B’s abundant expressives depicts a clear hierarchical structure between the two interlocutors.

In the last two dialogues, Speaker C in Dialogue 3 is the most powerful subject in the interactions with his/her constant use of commissives to threaten Speaker D and directives to give commands to Speaker E. Speaker F’s position is on top of the power structure in Dialogue 4 as his/her utterance of directives obliges Speakers D and E to comply with his/her order. Speakers D and E, appearing in both Dialogues 3 and 4, are placed in the bottom position where they are subject to the power and control of other speakers. However, their speech acts demonstrate that Speaker E is still superior to Speaker D because in their representatives, Speaker E is at least permitted to make complete utterances in the interactions while Speaker D can only accept orders with short, repetitive responses.

6.2 Discussion

The application of Searle’s speech act theory in reading the four dialogues yields different levels of power among the speakers, suggesting hierarchical relationships that are contrasting and complicated in nature, that is, they are both dynamic and static simultaneously. Given the brief struggles for power of speaker B in dialogue 2 and speaker E in dialogue 4, we can argue that the power relations among individuals in these extracts are dynamic depending on circumstances and personal relationships. However, this dynamism is short-lived when it is exposed to a more rigid, hard-to-change ground that is India’s social structure at large dictated by class, familial bonds and the history of colonisation. Speaker D who gets caught in the class structure, therefore, is the most unfortunate of all because he/she never experiences or is given the chance to struggle for power.

To see whether power differentials have changed since independence, it is necessary to reveal the characters’ names and explore their interwoven positions in society. Dialogues 1 and 2 are extracts from Forster’s *A Passage to India* and dialogues 3 and 4 from Adiga’s *The White Tiger*. The former reflects the colonial period and features the typical social interactions between the white colonisers and the local subjects, represented by Mr. Fielding (Speaker A), the British headmaster of a small government-run college in British India and Dr. Aziz (Speaker B), a young Indian physician working for a British hospital in

Chandrapore. The first dialogue presented in the paper was chosen because it recalls the first encounter between Mr. Fielding and Dr. Aziz. As already pointed out, Dr. Aziz expresses a lot of his humility and overt desire to become acquainted with Mr. Fielding. By profession, Dr. Aziz could have been the one with authority and respectability but in colonial India, British officials were automatically considered superior to native, dark-skinned professionals. As Dr. Aziz puts it in the novel, “The local Indians constantly demand kindness from their British masters” (p. 87). In the second dialogue, which was chosen because it shows the more intimate relationship between the two characters, Dr. Aziz is able to negotiate his power in the interactions because of his personal intimacy with Mr. Fielding; nevertheless, the negotiation comes with the price of his revelation of his past to which Mr. Fielding hardly responds. Dr. Aziz is therefore in the lower position once again, caused by his counterpart’s reserved personality, presumably the embodiment of perceived British-ness. The dynamic power relations are thus made static by the demarcating line of the coloniser and the colonised.

Surprisingly similar power differentials can be found in contemporary Indian society. Dialogues 3 and 4 exhibit a modern relationship between people in society where money matters most. Balram Halwai (Speaker D) is the protagonist of the novel who is constantly subject to social injustices and maltreatment because of his unfortunate lack of economic wealth. He is a servant and driver to a well-off Indian family, consisting of The Mongoose (Speaker C) and Mr. Ashok (Speaker E), an American-educated Indian. The hierarchy among the three characters is shown in dialogue 3 in which two parallel sets of power structures are exposed. Between The Mongoose and Balram, the master-servant relationship built upon the concept of wealth is evident in The Mongoose’s language use (order and threat) and Balram’s passive responses. The power play between The Mongoose and Mr. Ashok is determined by their traditional familial bonds in which the younger brother is expected to respect the older one. Mr. Ashok’s status and power struggle, despite its brevity, can be interpreted as a rising power that may replace the old one. Overseas-educated Indians are the new faces of power in modern India. Again, this dynamism is put on hold when it is exposed to a larger social structure: the plutocratic government, represented by a fat man (Speaker F) who works for the Minister of Commerce. In the novel, he is portrayed as an embodiment of the decadence and corruption that is plaguing post-colonial India. Through the dialogue, the man’s abuse of power and his obsession with alcohol take precedence over the other two characters. While Mr. Ashok falls prey to the corrupting power of the government, Balram is victimised by class and social corruption, making him lie at the deepest level of the social hierarchy. Although there is the potential for more dynamism in power relations in modern India as people can move up and down the hierarchy, *The White Tiger* suggests that present-day Indian society is still very hierarchical with large power differences similar to those of colonial times.

7. Implementations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research paper has attempted to show that the relations of power and hierarchy among people of different political and social positions can be detected and investigated via written dialogues in both classic and modern literary texts. Those dialogues of people from different classes are not normally found in official historical documents; therefore, the historical and modern discourse in *A Passage to India* and *The White Tiger* can provide insights into Indian society, both past and present. To further analyse power manifestations in literary discourse, we recommend researchers to exploit other theoretical frameworks in addition to speech act

theory such as Levinson's politeness theory dealing with the notion of 'face', and Halliday's theory of transitivity that investigates the use of 'verbs'.

Furthermore, we recommend researchers to use literary texts as data for the study of historical and modern discourse. Compared with modern language use, historical language use, especially in the area of spoken language, is much more problematic. Historical written language can be researched through sources such as the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). However, sources for the spoken language before recordings are very limited. Literary texts can provide one way of accessing historical spoken language. In addition to providing insights into social issues such as the power relationships investigated in this paper, analysis of literature can also shed light on linguistic issues. For example, rhymes in Renaissance poems can be used to study the archaic pronunciation of words in the 16th century. Literary texts also allow us to gain broader visions into different spoken issues such as tense aspects and shifts of word meanings.

8. Conclusion: Paradise Betrayed

In summation, since colonial times, India has remained unchangingly plutocratic and hierarchical. As depicted in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, colonial India was plagued by the social injustices determined by the rights of the colonisers and the lack of rights of the colonised. Post-colonial India, filled with corruption, poverty and discrimination in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, is a nightmarish betrayal of the hopes and dreams of freedom and equality that the late leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru had wished to instill. This paper has shown that Nehru's wish for equality and freedom in India is yet to be fulfilled and that people in the modern society have continued to suffer from social injustices imposed upon them by the long-established social demarcation since the colonial time.

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