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## Negotiating Power: Speech Acts Shaping Power Dynamics in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"

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### Abstract

The present research aims to conduct a discourse analysis study of power dynamics in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning". The categories of the speech acts theory, namely, directives, assertives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, are examined in the interactions between Abner Snopes and other characters, viz., his young son Sarty Snopes, on one hand and other characters representing the socio-economic system, on the other, seeking to find out how these speech acts contribute to weaving the discourse of authority, resistance, and ethical choice in the story. Previous studies have explored this side of the struggle from different perspectives, including psychological, historical, and socio-economic, but not linguistic. This is where the

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current study makes its contribution. The findings demonstrate Abner's heavy use of directives in exerting his control over those who are weaker than him, such as his family members and servants. Meanwhile, he resorts to silence to confront and challenge the authority of those in power. Sarty, the son, on the other hand, used a variable range of those categories of speech acts as well as silence, exposing an evolving character along the story. The study concludes that power dynamics in literary discourse can be reflected through language as effectively as they are thematically portrayed.

**Keywords:** Speech Act Theory, Power dynamics, Authority and resistance, Discourse analysis, Barn Burning

التفاوض على السلطة: كيف تُشكّل الأفعال الكلامية علاقات القوة في قصة «حرق الحظيرة» للكاتب

**William Faulkner**

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### المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إجراء تحليلٍ تداوليٍّ لديناميكيات القوة في قصة «حرق الحظيرة» للكاتب ويليام فوكنر. وتُفحص فئات نظرية أفعال الكلام، وهي: التوجيهات (Directives)، والإخباريات/التقريرات (Assertives)، والالتزاميات (Commissives)، والتعبيريات (Expressives)، والإعلانات (Declarations)، في التفاعلات التي تدور بين أبنر سنوبس والشخصيات الأخرى، ولا سيما ابنه الصغير سارتي سنوبس من جهة، والشخصيات التي تمثل النظام الاجتماعي والاقتصادي من جهة أخرى، بهدف الكشف عن كيفية إسهام هذه الأفعال الكلامية في تشكيل خطاب السلطة والمقاومة والاختيار الأخلاقي في القصة.

وقد تناولت دراسات سابقة هذا الجانب من الصراع من زوايا مختلفة، منها النفسية والتاريخية والاجتماعية-الاقتصادية، إلا أنها لم تتناوله من منظور لغوي. ومن هنا تأتي إسهام هذه الدراسة. وتُظهر النتائج أن أبنر يعتمد بشكلٍ كبير على الأفعال التوجيهية لفرض سيطرته على من هم أضعف منه، مثل أفراد أسرته وخدمه. وفي المقابل، يلجأ إلى الصمت لمواجهة سلطة أصحاب النفوذ وتحديها. أما سارتي، الابن، فقد استخدم طبقاً متنوعاً من فئات أفعال الكلام المذكورة، إلى جانب الصمت، مما يكشف عن تطور

شخصيته على امتداد أحداث القصة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن ديناميكيات القوة في الخطاب الأدبي يمكن أن تتجلى من خلال اللغة بالقدر نفسه من الفاعلية التي تتجلى بها على المستوى الموضوعاتي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** نظرية أفعال الكلام، ديناميكيات القوة، السلطة والمقاومة، تحليل الخطاب، «حرق الحظيرة»

## 1. Introduction

Exercising and exerting power are no longer limited to the physical level. Language has been proved to be a powerful tool to achieve this aim. Through discourse, people can shape relationships and construct realities, such as practicing dominance, intimacy, hierarchy, and establish ideological norms that affect how events and groups are understood. As a mirror of life, literature through its discourse can effectively reflect this evolving role of language in the life of human beings. Power dynamics in literary discourse can be captured through narrative voice, dialogues, character interactions, stylistic choices, and linguistic patterns in a way to allow readers to understand how relationships, mainly power and authority, are negotiated between characters to create alternative worlds that question societal assumptions. The present study aims to shed light on how language represented by the speech acts categories is used by Faulkner in *Barn Burning* to power assertion or defiance, whether within the Snopes family or in relation to the broader social structure, i.e., historical context of the American South.

Thus, this study is set out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the specific Speech Acts categories that Abner Snopes predominantly uses to reflect his authoritative and coercive character?
- How do Sarty's speech acts evolve throughout the story to reflect his moral and psychological development?
- How does silence serve as a strategic communicative act in the power struggle, whether between Abner and Sarty, or between Abner and other characters?
- How does the analysis of speech acts in *Barn Burning* support our understanding of the broader themes of authority, resistance, and ethical choice in the story?

## 2. Literature Review

Speech Act Theory, as one of the basic concepts in language philosophy and pragmatics, examines how people use language to perform actions rather than simply describing or conveying information. Austin originated this theory in 1962 through his seminal lectures, which were later compiled in a book titled *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin coined the term *performative utterances* to indicate that when people speak, they actually do things, such as saying “I apologize,” “I declare,” and “I promise”, which are actions in themselves. Consequently, three types of speech acts have been identified: the *locutionary act*, referring to the act of saying a particular sense and reference; the *illocutionary act*, involving the intended function of the utterance (such as promising, threatening, or ordering); and the *perlocutionary act*, which is related to the effect of the utterance on the listener (like persuading, scaring, or amusing).

Searle (1969) later expanded and developed Austin’s model of speech acts, specifically categorizing the illocutionary act into five essential types: **assertives**, **directives**, **commissives**, **expressives**, and **declarations**. Additionally, Searle introduced the concept of **felicity conditions**, which must be met for a speech act to be successful. These conditions comprise factors such as the speaker having the authority to perform the act, the availability of the appropriate circumstances in which the act is uttered, and the speaker’s sincerity in performing the action.

Discourse analysis, the study of speakers’ use of language in relation to context, has utilized the speech acts theory by examining how speakers produce illocutionary act categories to perform specific social actions such as exerting and challenging power. Literary discourse proves to be the best genre for such a study, as literature is often considered to be reflecting the real dynamics of life. In addition to using it as a means of informing and description, characters and narrators use language to perform functions such as promising, threatening, exerting and resisting authority. Accordingly, speech acts theory becomes an insightful tool for analyzing dialogues, character interactions, and narrative voice. This view is introduced by Pratt (1977) and Bollobás (1980),

arguing that speech acts can effectively represent authentic interpersonal dynamics. Similarly, Toolan (2016) highlights the significance of this theory in shedding light on the role of literature in reflecting and critiquing societal power dynamics.

Although silence is often perceived as the absence of language, it functions as a communicative act when it conveys specific meaning within particular contexts. Săftoiu (2018) examines the impact of character silence in literary discourse and concludes that it is as significant as written or spoken language. Silence fulfils three distinct functions: *explorative*, which seeks information or initiates interaction; *directive*, which issues indirect orders; and *representative*, which expresses feelings such as acknowledgement or agreement.

*Barn Burning* tells the story of the Sartoris family living in the American South after the Civil war. Abner Snopes, the oppressive, authoritarian father, challenges the socioeconomic system represented by wealthy landowners whom he believes to have mistreated him. So, he burns their barns. Abner's family lives in a morally complex relationship between the father and his younger son, Sarty, who initially behaves as a submissive, obedient character to his father's orders. With the progress of the story, Sarty experiences an ethical and psychological struggle leading him eventually to realize the fact that his father's actions are both immoral and illegal. This leads Sarty's to rebel against his father's authority and a final break from everything he once knew.

Previous studies examined Faulkner's *Barn Burning* from psychological, historical, moral, and socio-political perspectives. Starting with Kartiganer's (1979) study that explored the psychological motives deriving both Abner and his son's behaviour. The study traces Sarty's character development from being submissive to his father's will to a rebellion individual, resisting his father's immoral actions. As for Abner, Kartigner labels his use of fire and silence as a metaphor for both his resistance to the socio-economic authority and humiliation of those whom he perceives to be weaker than him. Another study conducted by Fowler (1981) did not see the struggle between Sarty and his father as a reflection of the latter's attempt to defy those who in power. rather it is found deeply in Sarty's own perception of justice and truth. Sarty betrays his father and warn Major de Spain. This resulting from the moral awakening that Sarty experiences,

leading him eventually to pay a costly price to severing with his family. Jelliffe (1994) studies Faulkner's story from another perspective, highlighting how the author's language is rich in metaphor, flashbacks, and flashforwards to create a narrative that uncovers the psychological and ethical dimensions of time. He confirms that Sarty's moral awakening that we witnessed as readers at the end of the story reflects his potential agency and ethical choice. Godden (1995) adopts a Marxist psychoanalytic reading of *Barn Burning*, aiming to explicate the story as a deep reflection of the Southern American society following the Civil War. Godden explains that the economic system dominating this society in that historical period worked on shaping the identity of people and their perception of reality. In Kirchdorfer's (2014) study of the text under investigation, approach was from a totally different perspective, namely, humour. Despite the fact that *Barn Burning* has always been seen as a story showing the tragic end of a family, this study attempts to shed light on humour, ranging from the grotesque to the satirical, as an element Faulkner employs to balance the story dark themes.

What can be noted from the above survey of the previous studies that examined Faulkner's *Barn Burning* is that none of them has attempted to analyse the language used by its characters in order to interpret how the different forms of struggles are reflected through it. Thus, the current study aims to do that through examining the speech acts that are mainly uttered by Abner Snope and his son Sarty to show how power is negotiated between those two characters on one side and between them and the other characters in the story on the other side. In doing so, the study endeavours to prove that power dynamics can be best studied throughout language especially in literary discourse.

### **3. Methodology**

The study works through a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. The speech acts uttered by the characters, especially those revealing power dynamics and produced by Abner and Sarty, are first collected from the story parts that involve dialogues and character interactions. Then, these utterances are classified in terms of the categories of speech acts recognized by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969): assertives, directives, commissives,

expressives, and declarations. The frequency of occurrence (both in raw numbers and percentages) of each category is identified and set into tables for each of Abner and Sarty so as to interpret their significance later.

Furthermore, a qualitative analysis is conducted on samples of these speech acts so as to highlight how power is negotiated by characters whether through showing the role of these utterances in exerting power or challenging it. Thus, each instance is subjected to a meticulous analysis to uncover its three layers as a speech act, namely, locutionary, identifying the literal meaning of an utterance; illocutionary, indicating the narrative communicative value of the utterance such as asserting or challenging power; and perlocutionary, recognizing the impact of the utterance on the recipients, with particular attention to responses such as compliance, resistance, or behavioral change.

#### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

This section presents a qualitative and quantitative analysis and discussion of the speech acts—both verbal and silent—employed by the protagonist, Sarty, and his father, Abner Snopes.

##### **4.1 Abner’s Speech Acts: Enforcing Domination and Control**

Abner’s language can largely be described as authoritative and coercive, primarily through his use of specific types of speech acts to reinforce his dominance and control over others on the one hand, and to challenge them on the other.

Table 2: Abner’s Speech Acts - Category and Frequency

<b>Speech Acts</b>	<b>Directives</b>	<b>Assertions</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	<b>29 (78%)</b>	<b>8 (22%)</b>	<b>37 (100%)</b>

Abner Snopes articulated 37 exchanges with either his family members or other characters. These exchanges fall under various categories of speech acts (as shown in Table 1) . Directives constitute the highest number of these speech acts, with 29 instances (78% of the total). 23 instances of them

have the locutionary structure of commands with short imperative sentences that leave little room for negotiation or resistance, such as:

1. "Go get in the wagon."
2. "Get back."
3. "Get out of the chairs and help your Ma unload."
4. "Go to the barn and get that can of oil we were oiling the wagon with."
5. "Get out of my way, nigger."

The illocutionary force of these commands reflects Abner's aim to exert control and assert his dominance over others, primarily his family (in the first four instances), whose immediate compliance represents the perlocutionary effect of these commands. Ultimately, Abner's commands serve to strengthen his role as a dominant figure who demands obedience. The frequent use of this category of speech acts shows a relationship that is based on authority and fear, but not mutual respect or care.

Instance no. 5 is a directive issued by Abner to Major de Spain's servant. In its locutionary force, the directive is a forceful, direct command through which Abner tells the servant to step out of his way. Yet, in its intent, i.e. its illocutionary force, this command represents Abner's attempt to aggressively assert his dominance and control over someone whom he considers to be weaker and inferior. Additionally, Abner refers to the servant as "nigger", aiming to dehumanize the servant in a way that reinforces his aggressiveness. The command with the derogatory word attached to it obviously shows Abner's perceived superior status within the racial and social hierarchy. As for the perlocutionary force of the utterance, the reaction or response that Abner awaits from the servant is immediate obedience out of fear of potential punishment, submission, and humiliation. This interaction reflects the superior status that Abner is placing himself within and behaves accordingly with those he regards to be weaker than him, including his family members, despite the fact that he himself would not accept being treated in such a way by those who are superior to him in the social hierarchy.

The rest of the six directives produced by Abner are classified as: three instances of condensed commands, one question, one warning, and one suggestion, as follows:

6. "Yes," his father said. "You"
7. "Not that," his father said. "The wagon gear."
8. "Not you," the father said. "Lennie. Take hold of him. I want to see you do it."
9. "Did you put the cutter in that straight stock like I told you?"
10. "You'll hold him better than that. If he gets loose don't you know what he is going to do? He will go up yonder."
11. "Maybe I'd better tie him."

Instances 6-8 represent the condensed commands articulated by Abner. In their locutionary structure, instance no. 6 contains only the subject, whereas commands 7 and 8 are in the negative form. In these three commands, Abner once again asserts his authority over his family, ordering them to do what he wants. The subject pronoun 'you' in instance no. 6 refers to Sarty, as Abner decided to take him along when he went to see Major de Spain. Sarty expected his brother to be chosen, but Abner selected him instead. Instance 7 shows a command where the father corrected his sons on what they should do to prepare the wagon for their trip to the second trial. So, Abner negated a previous assumption with "Not that", and specified the intended object with "the wagon gear". A similar situation occurs in instance no. 8, where Abner chose Lennie, the mother, to tie up their son—rather than the aunt—to prevent him from going to Major de Spain to reveal Abner's plan to burn the barn.

In their illocutionary force, these three commands reflect Abner's attempt to assert his authority over his family by choosing specific individuals and tasks to carry out his orders. Abner intentionally chose Sarty to accompany him to meet the new landowner, even though he knew pretty well that Sarty often disagreed with his anti-landowner behavior. This represents an obvious assertion of dominance, confirming that Sarty would remain under his direct influence (instance 6). Abner was not only issuing general orders; he was clear in relation to which items he wanted tied,

showing them he was closely watching every move they made (instance 7). He went to the most end of his tyranny when he enforced a mother, viz. his wife, to tie up her own son, Sarty. Such an act crosses what is logically considered an acceptable behaviour, conducted by Abner just to consolidate his authority in a humiliating way over the family. Abner had further stated that he would watch the binding, combining instruction with direct surveillance. This ensures that the obedience that Abner expected from his family is mandatory and would be further accomplished under his watchful eye (perlocutionary force). Consequently, through these commands which are accompanied by a direct and close observation, Abner asserts his domineering status in the family hierarchy. Behaving in such a way consolidates the power dynamics, leaving his family members to respond passively through complying with his will.

Instances 9-11 show variable structures of directives. In their locutionary force, instance 9 is a question, instance 10 is a warning about potential consequences, and instance 11 states a suggestion. As far as their illocutionary force is concerned, Abner employs them to assert his authority. Through the question, Abner aims to ensure Sarty's compliance. Abner utters the warning (which is a statement) to have a dual function. He explains to his wife how to tie up Sarty and, at the same time, warns her of what she might face if she does not obey him. Finally, there is the suggestion that explicates Abner's readiness to act by himself once he senses the mother is not accomplishing the task properly. In terms of the perlocutionary force of these directives, we can note that they function to solidify Abner's control and his expectation of his family's unquestionable submission. Thus, Abner is not merely making commands, but is also making sure that they are being executed, warning of consequences for disobedience, and demonstrating that he is totally ready to step in in case his orders are not followed.

Threats and intimidation are evident in Abner's assertions, which are the second most frequently used speech acts, with 8 instances (22% of the total). For example:

12. "You were fixing to tell them. You would have told him."

13. "You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you."

14. "I aim to. I don't figure to stay in a country among people who ...."

15. "I reckon I'll have a word with the man that aims to begin tomorrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months."

16. "Pretty and white, ain't it? That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it."

Abner directed assertions no. 12 and 13 at his son Sarty during a private conversation after the first trial we witness in the story, when Sarty was asked to testify against his father. The locutionary force of these assertions combines accusation with a conditional threat. The illocutionary force conveys Abner's warning to Sarty about the consequences of betraying his own family. The perlocutionary effect of these threats is to provoke fear and guilt, compelling Sarty to stay loyal out of fear of losing his place in the family. Intimidation can thus be viewed as a key method that Abner heavily employs so as to assert his dominance, ensure obedience, and enhance his authority within the family by making Sarty realize the consequences of his betrayal.

Abner uttered the assertion in instance 14 during his first trial when the judge dismissed the barn-burning case and advised him to leave town. The statement in its locutionary force simply expresses Abner's intention to leave the town, although he did not finish his sentence, reflecting his rejection of the town and its people. In its illocutionary force, Abner uses it to assert his control over his life and his family's destiny, demonstrating his independence and rejection of external pressures. The impact that Abner's statement left on the judge (perlocutionary force) is the sense of finality and determination. Meanwhile, not bothering himself to finish the statement reflects that Abner views the people of the town unworthy of hearing him finish his statement.

Instance 15 is an assertion Abner uttered to inform his family of his intent to meet the new landowner he was supposed to work for. He used the metaphor "owning me body and soul" to strongly indicate the control this man would have over him. In its illocutionary force, this assertion demonstrates Abner's resentment and refusal to be subjugated to someone, implying his intention

to challenge it. The perlocutionary force of this assertion involves Abner's attempt to make his family understand that he was still in control of his fate, refusing to be dominated by anyone. Thus, the power dynamic exposed here is represented in Abner's hinting to his family of the possibility of resisting this new authority.

Abner made the assertion in instance 16, loaded with racial tension, irony, and criticism. In its locutionary form, Abner refers to something 'pretty and white', pointing out the pristine condition of the white rug in Major de Spain's house. Meanwhile, Abner made a cynical remark on the whiteness of this rug, claiming it is due to 'nigger sweat'. The implication of such a remark would be in hinting at how the landowners exploited the black laborers. He further enquired whether de Spain was satisfied with the "nigger sweat," or wanted to mix it with "white sweat", an ironical remark that condemns the society's hypocrisy in giving superiority to the white race, yet subjecting them to the same conditions of hard labour just as the black race. Abner uttered this assertion when his son Sarty accompanied him to meet Major de Spain. Hence, it can be understood that the perlocutionary force of such remarks would be to make Sarty understand why Abner maintains immoral and destructive behaviour against those who are in power, revealing through the power dynamic of this assertion Abner's resentment, resistance to, and challenge of the legitimacy of wealthy landowners who made their fortunes through exploiting both white and black workers.

It can be noted from the instances analysed above that the prevailing category of speech acts that Abner primarily used is the directive, emphasizing what has been repeatedly mentioned about his authoritarian and coercive personality. Abner's commands are direct and strict, throughout which he could ascertain his power over those who are both weaker than and inferior to him, namely, his family members and Major de Spain's servant, creating in consequence an aggressive environment of fear and intimidation. Threats and accusations produced by Abner in the form of assertions were mainly aimed at suppressing any potential resistance or disobedience, especially on the part of his son, Sarty. Additionally, Abner uses silence as a strategy of communication, reflecting the same

attitudes of dominance and oppression just like his actual spoken language, as will be seen in a later section below.

#### **4.2 Sarty's Speech Acts: Resistance and Moral Conflict**

Table 2 exposes the type and frequency of occurrence of Sarty's speech acts. Unlike Abner, Sarty uttered various types of speech acts throughout the story. It is also important to mention that Sarty's speech acts have evolved through the story in type, tone, and intent in a way to reflect the internal psychological and emotional struggle that he was living, shifting his relationship with his father, Abner Snopes and leading him eventually to develop a sense of justice and moral awakening that liberate him from Abner's tyrannical authority.

Table 2: Sarty's Speech Acts -Category and Frequency

<b>Speech Acts</b>	<b>Assertions</b>	<b>Directives</b>	<b>Commissive</b>	<b>Expressive</b>	<b>Declarations</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	<b>9(26%)</b>	<b>15(44%)</b>	<b>4(12%)</b>	<b>6(18%)</b>	<b>0(0%)</b>	<b>34</b>

A close examination of the speech acts produced by Sarty shows how he develops from a submissive, compliant individual to a defiant character who resists oppression and is committed to justice. Directives (with 15 occurrences, 44% of the total) emerge as the most frequent category of speech acts produced by Sarty, with the majority taking the form of questions, followed by commands and warnings, as illustrated in the following examples:

17. "Me?" he said.
18. "Ain't you going to ride?"
19. "Don't you want to ride now? We kin both ride now."
20. "What . . ." he cried. "What are you . . ."
21. "Ain't you going to even send a nigger?" he cried. "At least you sent a nigger before!"

22. "Lemme be."

23. "Lemme be, I tell you."

24. "Lemme go!" he cried. "I don't want to have to hit you!"

25. "Barn! Barn!"

Directives 17, 18, and 19 were uttered by Sarty at an early stage of the story, and all take the form of questions (locutionary act). Their illocutionary force suggests Sarty's attempt to connect with his father, but they also reveal his growing internal conflict and eventual resistance. In directive 17, Sarty seeks clarification about why his father chose him to accompany him to meet Major de Spain, showing the hesitant and passive character of Sarty. Abner replied and affirms that the command is directed to Sarty (perlocutionary act). Directives 18 and 19 are constructed in the form of yes-no questions that Sarty directs to his father, inquiring about his intentions. They also reflect Sarty's willingness to form some sort of a bond with his father through sharing an experience, although Sarty actually suspects his father's evil intentions concerning the rug incident. As for the perlocutionary effect of these inquiries, Abner totally ignores them. Abner responds to the first question by making the command ("No. Give me your foot"), whereas the second question was completely disregarded on the part of Abner, leaving Sarty's attempt to connect unaccomplished. Instance 20 appears in a form of a fragmented question, reflecting Sarty's internal conflict and how he is unable to express how he really feels. This demonstrates his growing frustration with his father's actions and his difficulty in making sense of the morality and the outcomes of Abner's choices. The fragmented question uncovers Sarty's critical transformation and foretells his ultimate awakening and breaking the ties with his family. In instance no. 21, Sarty directly challenges challenge his father's authority by asking why his father did not send someone else to burn the barn, as he had done previously (locutionary force). In its illocutionary force, the question expresses Sarty's frustration and disbelief at Abner's decision to handle the arson himself, exposing his growing resistance to his father's actions. The question's effect is to heighten the tension between them, as Sarty openly questions Abner's decisions.

The directive speech acts aiming as commands were exclusively directed by Sarty toward his mother, with just three instances, namely, 22, 23, and 24. This limited distribution reflects the rigid power dynamics within the Snopes family hierarchy. Faulkner uses this to show that Sarty cannot command his domineering father, nor can he command his siblings, likely because they all share a subordinate status. His mother, occupying a middle ground and being a marginalized character, becomes the only feasible target for his assertions of will. The first two commands occur immediately after Sarty is attacked, following his father's first trial. His mother, concerned about his wound, tries to comfort him, but Sarty insists that she leave him alone by repeating, "**Lemme be.**"

In instance 22, Sarty commands his mother to leave him alone, expressing a need for space or autonomy (locutionary act). The illocutionary force of the command suggests that Sarty needs to free himself from his mother's physical or emotional restraint. Simultaneously, it expresses his frustration with his lack of agency and his wish to act independently, marking the start of his resistance to family constraints. The perlocutionary effect of this command on the mother can be described as minimal, as she believes that it is her duty to maintain the family and prevent Sarty from challenging his father. Sarty repeats the same command in instance 23, "**Lemme be,**" adding "**I tell you**" to reinforce his determination. The illocutionary force reveals his growing disappointment, prompting him to demand freedom to assert authority. Meanwhile, the directive perlocutionary effect signals the tension that arises between Sarty and his mother as he struggles to liberate himself from the protective pressure she exerts on him. The repetition emphasizes Sarty's attempt to declare his independence, revealing at the same time the inner struggle he experiences between his loyalty to the family and his evolving ethical awareness.

In instance 24, Sarty makes his final command, which occurs at the end of the story when his mother tries to prevent him from warning Major de Spain about his father's intention to burn the barn. The locutionary form of the command shows Sarty demanding that his mother release him, warning her of the possible consequences if she refuses. The illocutionary force of the command reveals Sarty's desperate attempt to stop his father's fatal actions, even if it involves resisting his

mothers constraints physically. Hence, we can hear him shouting, “**I don’t want to have to hit you!**” although he may not seem relieved with the idea of threatening his mother. This command can be considered a critical moment in Sarty’s moral awakening, as he is now determined to prevent his father’s destructive actions. The command demonstrates Sarty’s fierce internal conflict, as he is ready to end his relationship with his mother for what he believes to be right and moral. Warnings constitute the final type of directives that Sarty utters near the end of the story, exactly when Sarty decides to warn Major de Spain that his father would burn the barn. These warnings are firm and emotionally loaded because Sarty, at these moments, feels that the only thing that can be done is the right thing. They also demonstrate that Sarty’s inner struggle between his family loyalty and his sense of justice has reached its peak. Furthermore, they show Sarty’s complete transformation from a submissive son to an individual who is ready to stand by the values he believes in. So, Sarty shouts “**Barn! Barn!**” to Major de Spain in instance 25, warning him of his father’s endeavor to burn the barn (locutionary form). The illocutionary force urges one to be wary of Abner’s imminent revenge. At the same time, it demonstrates that Sarty’s belief in justice has prevailed over his loyalty to his family, revealing his readiness to do what he believes is ethically right, even at the expense of betraying his father. The perlocutionary effect of the warning is reflected in Major de Spain’s immediate action to protect his property, while readers are left in suspense about what will happen to Abner, sympathizing with Sarty for the high price he must pay to achieve justice.

Assertive speech acts are the second most frequent type uttered by Sarty, occurring 9 (26%) times. The following examples are drawn from various phases of the story, each reflecting a different aspect of Sarty’s character.

26. “You done the best you could!”

27. “If he wanted it done different why didn’t he wait and tell you how?”

28. “He ain’t done it! He ain’t burnt . . .”

29. “He won’t git no ten bushels neither. He won’t git one. We’ll . . .”

Sarty's assertiveness in *Barn Burning* reveals the structure and significance of his speech acts in negotiating power within the family and broader societal hierarchies. Instance no. 26 is produced by Sarty in an attempt to console Abner, with an illocutionary force of justifying his father's failure in relation to the rug incident and a perlocutionary effect of maintaining familial loyalty, highlighting Sarty's subordinate role early in the story. Similarly, in example no. 27, Sarty uses a rhetorical structure to shift blame to Major de Spain in a defensive attempt to align with his father while subtly expressing frustration at the injustice they face. Sarty produces instance no. 28 during the second trial, his father is subjected to, this time related to the rug incident rather than barn burning. It seems that Sarty is still affected by the first trial during which he remained silent and was unable to lie to defend his father. Sarty feels confused and does not know what to choose: his loyalty to his father or telling the truth. During the second trial and in response to his father's accusation of betrayal in the first trial, Sarty tries to sound resolute and stand by his father. Yet, doubting his father's actions dominates him, leading him to utter a fragmented denial. Finally, there is instance 29 where Sarty expresses his feelings, which turn out to resemble his father's in being a powerful resistance to systemic oppression. Despite its fragmented structure, the assertive utterance Sarty produces aims at reflecting his support for Abner. Collectively, these speech acts highlight Sarty's evolving moral awareness in negotiating power, showing his transformation from a passive, obedient character into a strong voice that resists both his father's authority and the systemic exploitation.

Expressive speech acts that Sarty produces are essential for reflecting his emotions, particularly in his moral transformation. These acts occur 6 times (18%), mainly appearing later in the story through his internal monologue and limited dialogue. The following are some key instances involving these acts:

30. "I could keep on, he thought. I could run on and on and never look back, never need to see his face again. Only I can't. I can't."

31. "Father! Father!"

32. “He was brave!” he cried suddenly, aloud but not loud, no more than a whisper:

“He was! He was in the war! He was in Colonel Sartoris’ cav’ry!”

Through the locutionary form of instance 30, Sarty expresses his genuine feelings about breaking away from his father’s authority for good, while still acknowledging his emotional connection to his father. Hence, Sarty shows his desire for freedom, which is unattainable at the moment as he is not ready to sever his emotional ties with his family entirely. This struggle is emphasized through repeating “**I can’t. I can’t.**” The perlocutionary effect prompts readers to sympathize with Sarty in his complicated dilemma. Instance 31 also features repetition when Sarty runs to warn Major de Spain of his father’s intention to burn the barn. While running away, Sarty was calling out to his father, hoping that Abner would change his mind. Sarty’s cry reflects the profound agony he is experiencing. Although he feels that he is doing the right thing and changing his family’s path, betraying his father would come at a high cost: the death of his father. Instance no. 32 is the last expressive speech act produced by Sarty in the story, which occurs after he learns of his father’s fate. He declares his father’s bravery (locutionary act) as an attempt to honor his father’s memory by balancing admiration for Abner’s past with resentment of his present actions (illocutionary force). By doing this, Sarty implies that his father was not naturally abusive or rebellious but was driven to these acts by harsh circumstances. Sarty achieves closure through justifying Abner’s actions and reconciling the complex, dual nature of his father’s character.

Commissive speech acts are the statements through which speakers commit to future actions. It seems that this category of speech acts scored the least frequency as Sarty uses them only 4 (12%) times. These acts unveil his developing agency and his transformation from a submissive character to someone who actively struggles with internal conflict. This pattern of transformation is consistent with what has been previously observed with Sarty’s use of the other speech acts. Below is an interpretation of the key commissives Sarty uttered in *Barn Burning*:

33. “I’ll wash to-night.”

34. “He won’t git no twenty bushels! He won’t git none! We’ll gether hit and hide hit!  
I kin watch .”

The locutionary act of instance no. 33 shows Sarty's promise to his mother to wash his wound later in the evening. Regarding its illocutionary force, Sarty responds to his mother's concern about his physical state, which reflects the wound he got as a result of the attack following his father's first trial. The perlocutionary effect of this commissive act reassures his mother and shifts her focus from his immediate physical condition. However, through this promise, Sarty also aims to present himself as capable of taking care of himself—though, in reality, his primary concern lies elsewhere. For Sarty, the events in court and the stirring of his moral conscience, which creates an internal conflict between loyalty to his family and his desire to tell the truth, are far more significant. In instance no. 34, Sarty promises to support his father's resistance to the fine imposed on them for the rug incident (locutionary act). The illocutionary force of this statement is Sarty's attempt to demonstrate loyalty to his father, despite his internal feeling that Abner will not surrender easily. While Abner might interpret this as evidence of his son's loyalty, it is clear that Sarty is experiencing a fierce internal struggle due to his emerging moral awareness. This is clearly evident in the fragmented structure “**I kin . . .**”, which foreshadows Sarty's eventual ethical awakening.

Sarty uses a wider range of speech acts than his father, which reflects his evolving character in contrast to Abner's rigid one. At the beginning of the story, Sarty is introduced as a vulnerable child who was overly eager to satisfy his father and prove his loyalty to the family, even though he harbored suspicions that his father's actions were immoral and destructive. As a result, Sarty has mainly used directive speech acts in the form of questions during this stage.

As the struggle escalates, the speech acts Sarty utters tend to be more assertive, peaking in the warning “**Barn! Barn!**”, through which he challenges his father. Sarty is finally able to put an end to his internal conflict by taking a decisive stand against his father's destructive actions. Sarty's language becomes more powerful, indicating that, out of his moral awakening, a new individual is born who is fully prepared to resist tyranny and injustice.

#### 4.3 **Abner's and Sarty's Silences as Speech Acts**

Abner and Sarty utilize silence to negotiate the power dynamics between them. Although these silent moments have thematic importance, they serve distinct functions for each of these two characters, as will be revealed in the following discussion.

To start with, Abner adopts silence in two key situations. The first occurs during the two trials Abner undergoes in the story. In both cases, he chooses to remain silent and refuses to respond to the questions and accusations directed at him by the Justice of the Peace. Abner's silence functions as a form of resistance to authority. As a locutionary act, this silence signifies that Abner deliberately abstains from speech. Meanwhile, as an illocutionary force, silence in this occasion represents Abner's showing contempt for the law and the economic system, believing that they oppressed him. Thus, he expresses his refusal to submit to them and his rebellion against the established social hierarchy.

The second occasion in which Abner adopts silence is in response to his son Sarty's offer of help and connection. During the rug incident, Sarty attempts to reach out to his father, demonstrate loyalty and obedience, and offer assistance through two interrogatives: **“Don't you want to ride now?”** and **“Don't you want me to help?”** **Abner responds to both with silence. As a locutionary act, Abner again intentionally abstains from verbal communication, but this time with his son.** In its illocutionary force, Abner first intends to assert dominance and authority over his son. Second, Abner aims to project an image of strength to his family, portraying himself as a self-reliant man who needs help from no one, not even his own son. The perlocutionary effect of Abner's silence on Sarty is to leave him in a state of emotional conflict, believing that his father still blames him for not supporting him in the first trial; an act that symbolized betrayal of the family.

Sarty, on the one hand, employs silence on three occasions. The first occurs during his father's first trial, when he remains silent in response to the justice's questions about his father's involvement in burning their neighbour's barn. Sarty's silence reflects the internal struggle he is experiencing between doing the right thing, i.e. telling the truth, and his fear of his father. The perlocutionary effect of Sarty's silence is evident in the reactions of the people in the court who

perceive his fear. At the same time, Abner senses the threat of his son's emerging moral awareness, demanding an urgent confrontation between the two.

The second situation where Sarty resorts to silence is when his father confronts him after the first trial. Abner accuses his son of being disloyal to his family (locutionary act). In terms of its illocutionary force, Sarty's choice not to speak up and defend himself may be an effort to avoid physical punishment from his father. Instead, he is not able to justify his silence during the court hearing. However, the perlocutionary effect of this silence on his father confirms that Sarty feels guilty for not speaking up and testifying against his father, making Abner aware of the danger to the future.

The last instance where Sarty remains silent occurs at the climax of the story, when he watches his father's fatal destiny unfold from afar. The illocutionary force of his silence this time is loaded with potential interpretations. Sarty's sorrow for his father's death is shockingly juxtaposed with his relief from his inner struggle between right and wrong, between loyalty to the family and justice, which has finally been concluded for the best of doing the right thing and achieving justice. Moreover, this silence can be interpreted in relation to Sarty's confusion about the future, where to go and what to do next, after it becomes nearly impossible to get back to his family.

It can be noticed from the analysis above that silence has performed a strategic role in power negotiation. Abner mainly uses it to express particular emotions or impressions. While interacting with those in power, Abner's silence primarily aims to either challenge their authority or reject submission. However, in keeping silent in front of his son, Abner intends to assert his own authority and reinforce his image as a powerful man. Sarty's moments of silence, on the other hand, do not follow a unified pattern. Like his speech acts, Sarty's silence has reflected his evolving personality throughout the story, from a submissive son to a rebellious, determined individual. The beginning of the story reveals Sarty's silence, which demonstrates his obedience to his father, fear of punishment, and a sign of loyalty to the family. Yet, when Sarty starts to realize the immorality of his father's actions, adopting silence becomes part of his internal struggle, which has torn him between his family and his sense of justice. Till the end of the story, he was

silently watching his father's destiny from afar, indicating his confusion between whether he should feel relieved for the end of the inner conflict he was living or feeling sorrow for his father's tragic end and thinking of the vague future awaiting him, alone without the support of his family. To sum up, silence is viewed as a multifaceted tool used to assert power, express resistance, and facilitate personal transformation.

When things are put together, it can be said that the speech acts, whether the ones that have been actually uttered, such as directives, questions and assertives, or those reflected through silence have solidified power negotiation in Faulkner's *Barn Burning*. Language successfully represents general societal themes, such as the conflict between morals and authoritarian oppression, loyalty and justice, and inherited social roles versus self-determined identity. Abner reflects that the tyranny people suffer under can be reproduced later in their behaviour with each other. Whereas Sarty helps us believe that moral transformation in people is still possible.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the current study, through the linguistic and discourse analysis of speech acts, echoes the findings of the earlier research outlined above. Faulkner's *Barn Burning* has been examined from various perspectives, which have all shown consensus regarding the domineering and coercive nature of Abner, both as a father and as a worker, rebelling against the unfair social system through his speaking acts and silence in the same way that Gordon (1995) finds Abner's aggressive actions of burning the barn and ruining de Spain's rug comparable to what the Second Reconstruction prevailing then in the history of American social justice fought to change. In contrast to Sarty's noticeable character development throughout the narrative. Sarty expresses throughout the various types of speech acts that signify his communication in the story what Fowler (1981) examines as Sarty's internal struggle as he tries to build his sense of right and justice away from his father's control. Thus, the present study contributes to confirming the results of previous studies by showing that demonstrating power, whether in exerting or challenging it, is an indicator of conflict between individuals, as reflected in Faulkner's story, thereby enriching the existing critical discourse on Faulkner's work.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study examines how language and silence are effectively employed as speech acts to negotiate power in Faulkner's *Barn Burning*. The analysis of these basic forms in this narrative text, primarily in the interactions between Abner and his son Sarty, as well as in the interactions of each one of them with the other characters in the story, reveals complex dynamics of dominance, resistance, and ethical transformation.

Abner employs the same categories of speech acts throughout the story, reflecting his static character, which is primarily characterized as oppressive, authoritarian, and aggressive. These speech acts are mainly directive and assertives. In contrast, Sarty's speech acts have noticeably shifted from one category to another, reflecting the transformation his character undergoes throughout the story. Hence, the speech acts categories Sarty utters have varied from assertives to directives, commissives, and expressives. Likewise, silence has exhibited the same patterns of representation in the interaction of Abner and Sarty.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the findings of this study complement those of earlier research that examined Faulkner's story from various perspectives, but not linguistic. The speech acts produced by Abner and Sarty, represented by language forms and silence, have strongly supported the psychological, social, and economic motives and struggles identified in previous studies. Accordingly, the study highlights the essential role that language plays in revealing power dynamics between people, in a way to enrich our understanding of Faulkner's critiques of authority, loyalty, and choice.

Ultimately, *Barn Burning* illustrates the fragility of power as it can be swiftly challenged as soon as people cease to be submissive to those who exercise it. Abner constantly performs dominating the others, especially his family members, through his harsh directives. However, this dominance diminishes once his son, Sarty, begins to challenge him with his assertive acts, reflecting his evolving awareness of what is right and fair. Faulkner exposes the essential role of language, whether in exerting authority over others or in freeing them from such an authority. Abner strives to keep his son under his control through violence and appeals to family loyalty, whereas Sarty

eventually sets himself and his family free from this trap through the single word of warning he utters at the end of the story.

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