

# Study of Death of Salesman from the Perspective of Macropragmatics

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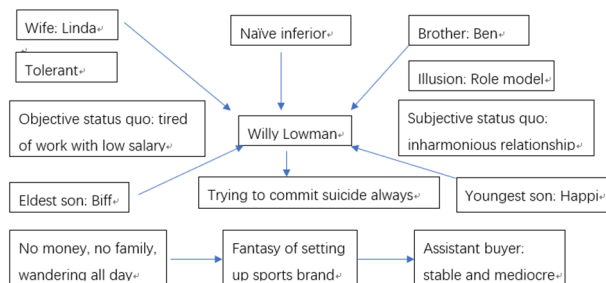
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**Abstract.** Arthur Miller, a well-known playwright known as "the conscience of American drama", won the peak of his creative career by writing *Death of a Salesman*, and thus won the Pulitzer prize for drama. *Death of a Salesman* tells the story of how Willy Loman, a salesman, a nobody in the bottom of American society, was gradually disillusioned. Willy was also an excellent salesman with eminent business ability in his youth. At that time, he was happy and simple, and he only wanted to realize his beautiful dream. His wife, Linda, was a good housekeeper, and his two sons made him proud also. However, with time passing by, good luck was drifting away from him, and his life was gradually falling into chaos. From the perspective of macro-pragmatics, this paper analyzes the concrete application of speech act theory and conversation principle theory in *Death of a Salesman* to help the readers better understand and grasp the theme of the work-the disillusionment of the "American Dream" and its practical significance: the increasing urbanization process and the rapid development of the 5G era have undoubtedly brought revolutionary influence to individuals, families and society. It has given millions of dream - seekers a much broader world to display their talents, but it may also make them be overdependent on technology and intelligence for another thing. We should recognize the situation clearly, keep up with the pace of the times, embrace new things with an open mind, and be creative "dreamers" in the new era.

**Keywords:** Macropragmatics; *Death of a Salesman*; American Dream; 5G Era.

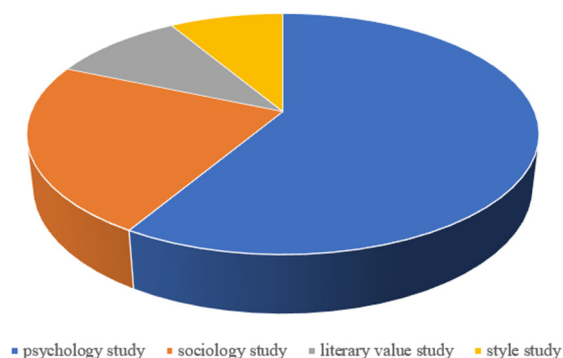
## 1. Introduction

"*Death of a Salesman*" is a world-renowned work by Arthur Miller, a modern dramatist, and it is recognized as a masterpiece of modern tragedy. The work focuses on the unfortunate experience of a salesman, Willy Loman, who is in his twilight years. Although everything goes wrong in his life, Willy always seems to believe that he and his son will succeed in the end. Not until his later years was his belief collapsed, and he finally decided to deceive insurance money by suicide, hoping to gain a chance and hope for his family. ( Fig. 1)



**Fig 1.** Willy's family relationship diagram

Since the publication of *Death of a Salesman*, experts and scholars have been devoted to the study of this work. Some people analyze it from the perspective of psychology, some study it from the perspective of sociology, some study its literary value, and some learn its style, but almost no one studies it from the perspective of macro pragmatics.



**Fig 2.** Research status of Death of a Salesman

Seen from the above pie chart (Fig. 2), nearly none of the researchers have referred to the pragmatic research of the work. Therefore, this paper will analyze the function and significance of speech act theory and conversational implicature theory used in the work from the perspective of macro pragmatics, so as to better understand the theme of the work-the disillusionment of the American dream and its practical significance. With the increasing urbanization process and the rapid development of the 5G era, individuals, families and society are all greatly affected by it: our life is more convenient, our work is more efficient, everything is more convenient and intelligent, and everything is brand-new. Because of its revolutionary influence, millions of dreamers will have a broader world to display their talents, but it may also make them rely on technology and intelligence excessively, thus making their "dream" a bubble. Therefore, in the era of artificial intelligence, we should clearly understand the social situation, keep up with the pace of the times, embrace new things with an open mind, and be creative "dreamers" in the new era. We must never be like Willy, who didn't realize until his death that he was actually the product of the tragedy of society and the times, but also the victim of the "American Dream", while our "Chinese Dream" was created by the times and society and will be naturally realized, on the other hand.

So, what is pragmatics? Hu Zhuanglin, a well-known linguist in China, defined it as a term to study language application, paying attention to the semantics of the speaker or the semantics of the article. Furthermore, linguists Liu Runqing and Wen Xu divide linguistics into macro linguistics and micro linguistics respectively.

**Table 1.** Classification of linguistics according to research perspectives

	Categories	Definitions	Examples
<b>Research perspective</b>	<i>Microlinguistics</i>	<i>The study of the microscopic variations of language</i>	<i>Dialectology, stylistics</i>
	<i>Macrolinguistics</i>	<i>The study of the whole language system</i>	<i>modern Chinese, ancient Chinese</i>

In the field of linguistics, macro linguistics studies the organic relationship between the meaning of words and the meaning they refer to. Because language itself is a complex process, we pay attention not only to individual language expression, but also to the analysis of larger language fragments, which contains two very important theories: speech act theory and conversation principle theory. The following will interpret Death of a Salesman from these two aspects respectively

## **2. The Application of Conversation Principle Theory in Death of a Salesman**

In 1975, H.P. Grice, a philosopher at Oxford University, first put forward the theory of conversation principle in *Logic and Conversation*: "Our conversation is usually not composed of a series of unrelated words, otherwise it will be unreasonable. They are often cooperative actions, at least to some extent; Participants all admit to some extent that there is one or a group of common goals and at least one mutually acceptable direction." [1] In short, "make what you say, at the stage where it happened, conform to the recognized goal or direction of the conversation you participated in." [2] This principle is called cooperative principle, which is abbreviated as CP. The theory of conversation principle includes four principles: quality principle, quantity principle, relationship principle and mode principle. The following will discuss in detail how the work *Death of a Salesman* achieves the purpose of conversation by violating the above four principles.

### **2.1. Speaking False Words--Violation of the Quality Principle**

The first rule of quality principle insists that do not speak what you know false. In *Death of a Salesman*, the article begins with Willy's sentence "I'm so tired that I can't do it" [3]. As we all know, people will not die easily unless they are seriously ill or suddenly encounter natural and man-made disasters. It can be seen that this sentence of Willy is obviously an exaggerated expression to vent his exhausted emotions. So, what is the semantic intention of the author by violating the quality principle?

As an old salesman, Willy devoted his whole life to the company, but he faced the threat of being fired in his later years. So he complained to his wife, "I'm so tired that I can't do it." [3] First of all, Willy, who has been blindly confident and boasting, is old, and the hero who was shrouded in the shadow of the "American Dream" no longer exists. Secondly, the subtitle of *Death of a Salesman* is "a two-act drama with elegy", which consists of two parts: the first two acts are the first part, which mainly describes how Willy's "American Dream", which has been shrouded in the illusory halo of American business culture, is shattered. However, as a devout follower of the "American Dream", Willy looked forward to the day of success even till his death, but he didn't know the cause of his own destruction. This is the second part of the work. It can be seen that, as the opening of the work, the sentence "I'm so tired that I can't do it." lays the sad main tone of the whole play and indicates the tragic ending of the protagonist: Willy's "American Dream" will eventually be shattered, and the rich myth of the United States is only a deceptive scam; Willy's tragic experience is not only a personal tragedy, but also a social tragedy.

### **2.2. The Content of the Conversation Cannot Meet the Needs of the Conversation---Violation of the Principle of Quantity**

The second principle of the conversation principle theory requires that the conversation content meets the information needed for the current conversation. In this drama, there are two typical sentences that obviously violate this principle: "Business is business" and "Sales is sales". Every normal person knows that business is business and sales is sales. There is no doubt that these are two different things. On the surface, these two sentences are using nouns to explain nouns, which seems to be two meaningless nonsense without conveying any practical information. But in fact, these two sentences violate the principle of quantity. Based on the conversational principle of "the speaker is cooperative", the above two sentences have implications. The following will make a concrete analysis of the sentence "business is business" to understand its implication.

So why did Howard, Willy's young boss, say to Willy that "business is business"? Just to tell him that business is business? Of course not. Although Willy has devoted himself to the company for thirty-six years: he has opened up a market for the company's goods and won a good reputation, he is now sixty-three, and he is old and useless. He can no longer be competent in sales promotion or even any other job, so he can't generate income and profit for the company. Therefore, this ruthless and sophisticated businessman boss is unwilling to hire another "waste" to drag down the company. In his mind, business is profit, that is, making money. Since he can't make money, what's the use of

keeping him? Furthermore, the phrase "business is business" can also be understood as "decision is decision". As the boss of the company, Howard is a businessman first, and everything should be for profit. Therefore, when he made the decision to fire Willy, no one could stop him, let alone talk to him about the world, contribution and dedication. In this way, the author Miller makes the characters' unique characteristics jump from the page by violating the quantitative principle in the theory of conversational principle. A simple and straightforward sentence allows us to witness the tragic fate of the low-level nobody like Willy who is cheated by his own American dream, and to see the snobbery and ruthlessness of American businessmen and the cruelty and ruthlessness of American business society.

The disillusionment of Willy's "American Dream" is his personal tragedy, but also the collective tragedy and social tragedy at that time, which can arouse everyone's resonance and reflection.

The second point of the principle of quantity points out that what you say should not be superfluous information. It is mentioned in the work that when Willy recalls the happy time he spent with his sons Biff and Habbie, his words are full of pride and proud. At that time, he was simple and happy, full of vitality. When asked about his conversation with the mayor by his son Biff, Willy began to talk vividly as if he had become the mayor's guest. According to the principle of quantity, when greeted by the mayor, Willy only needs to answer the word "early", but he has thrown the hatchet instead. For example, he used "a good city" three times in a row, and also used some grandiose words such as "famous", "big" and "cradle of revolution" to show how excellent he is. Obviously, Willy wants to establish prestige in front of his son, let his son feel his excellence and make him proud of their father. This flashback is in sharp contrast with Willy's present situation: middle-aged Willy is confident, happy and hopeful; Old Willy was bleak and exhausted, however. Miller used expressionism to describe the mental outlook of the characters with delicate brushstrokes, externalized the psychological changes of the characters, and let readers deeply feel the conflicts and pains in the hearts of various characters through the alternation of time and space.

### **2.3. Nothing in Words, Unclear Expression-Violation of the Principle of Relationship and Mode**

The other two principles of the conversational principle theory are the principle of relationship and the principle of mode. The former means that what is said should be relevant, while the latter means that what is said should not be ambiguous or obscure, but should be simple and orderly. However, at the beginning of the work, in the process of presenting the dialogue between Willy and young boss Howard, Howard's language violated these two principles.

When Willy took the initiative to find his boss Willy to talk about work, Howard kept vague and avoided answering positively. On the contrary, he deliberately rambled and kept interrupting Willy, only talking about things that had nothing to do with work. Obviously, on the one hand, Willy considers himself a successful person, loved and welcomed in the company and admired and respected by his wife and children at home. He boasts that he has made great contributions to the company, so his demands should naturally be met. On the other hand, Howard knew exactly what Willy was going to talk about, but he deliberately chose not to listen. As a businessman, Howard believes in the principle of putting interests first. He only cares about money and benefits. No matter how much an employee has contributed to the company, if he is no longer useful for the company, whoever he is must leave. This is the reality. It can be seen that in the dialogue between Willy and Howard, Howard's intentional interference and irrelevant answer actually hinted at the tragic ending of Willy's imminent unemployment crisis and suicide.

## **3. The Application of Speech Act Theory in Death of a Salesman**

The left-side subfigure in Fig. 4 shows the three- Speech act theory was first put forward by Oxford philosopher Austin, and then further improved by Searle. They all believe that language is not only used to inform events or describe things, but also to carry out a specific behavior, which is speech act.

Austin put forward three concrete behaviors to show that people do three things at the same time when they speak: speaking behavior, acting behavior and taking effect behavior. Searle divides performative sentences into five categories.(see the chart below).

**Table 2.** Five types of speech acts

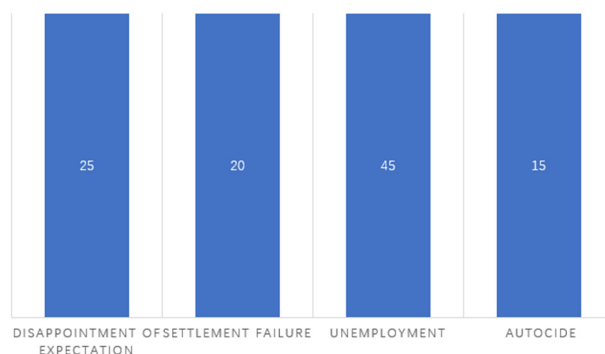
<b>Five types of speech acts</b>	<i>Representatives</i>	<i>The verbs for this action are: claim, state, declare, affirm, negate, clarify, etc.</i>
	<i>Directives</i>	<i>The main verbs for this behavior are: ask, command, instruct, suggest beg, invite, etc.</i>
	<i>Commissives</i>	<i>The main verbs for this kind of behavior are: promise, refuse, threaten, etc.</i>
	<i>Expressives</i>	<i>The main verbs for this behavior are: brag, commiserate, thank, welcome, congratulate, mourn, etc.</i>
	<i>Declarations</i>	<i>The main verbs that express this action are: claim, appoint, designate, declare, etc.</i>

The following will take declarative sentences as an example to analyze Death of a Salesman.

Declarative sentences require a specific person to perform a specific task in a specific capacity at a specific time and place with specific words. Austin pointed out in the book *How to Do Things with Words*: Declarative sentences must have a corresponding stipulation procedure, and there are relevant participants and environments, and the procedure must be implemented correctly and comprehensively. Usually, the people concerned must have relevant thoughts, feelings and intentions and be able to take practical actions. In other words, declarative sentences can change the objective real world through one sentence. For example, a man said in front of his parents and relatives, "I want to marry her." This is a typical declaration sentence, announcing the trend of his relationship with his future wife.

In the play, when Willy and Charlie talked about his dismissal from Howard, Willy angrily told Charlie, "That's the little bastard. Can you imagine it? I named him, and I named Howard." [3] On the surface, this sentence looks like a declarative sentence, but it is not. Because this kind of announcement has not produced any practical effect. Why is this so far? This is because Willy didn't choose the right time and place to announce it. More importantly, he didn't have the "power" to announce that the new boss was Howard, and he was already an old man who lost his ability to work. As Charlie said, "Willy, when will you realize that this kind of thing is worthless!" You named him Howard, but you can't sell it. [3] The implication is that no matter how you look at and treat Howard, it will not affect his decision on you at all, because your opinions and actions are meaningless and worthless to him. However, as an addict of the "American Dream", Willy still indulges in the good memories of the past and still dreams of success, which is actually an external manifestation of self-deception by refusing to accept the cruel reality. Willy has always regarded himself as a veteran of the company, and he believes that he is respected and admired by the whole company, which is also the fundamental reason why he has been addicted to the "American Dream". As everyone knows, this is just his wishful thinking and self-love, which can be seen from Charlie's conversation with him. Charlie once told Willy clearly, "only what can be sold in this world is yours." Strangely, you are a salesman, but you don't understand this." [3] It can be seen that Charlie believes that no matter how much Willy has paid for the company and achieved, he will always be just a salesman. This is an ironclad fact that can never be changed. However, Willy disagrees. He thinks that although he sells cars, his sales performance is actually a definition and recognition of the success of self-promotion, and he can get satisfaction and sense of accomplishment from it. Furthermore, for Howard, the boss, there is no past or future in this world, but only now. The aura and glory of the past will be buried, and the immediate interests are fundamental. He doesn't need old and useless employees like Willy,

because he spits and despises them from his bones. Based on this analysis, that "I named him, and I named Howard." can't be regarded as a real declarative sentence, but it can help readers better understand and recognize the characters and grasp the theme of the work and the author's creative intention. The existence of this sentence here makes people feel the sadness and insignificance of the little people at the bottom of American business society. All in all, the death of Willy could be attributed to the following factors in line with their respective significance to his death: disappointment of expectation, settlement failure, unemployment and suicide, which actually could be the consequences of "American dream" .(Fig. 3).



**Fig 3.** Simulated Reasons leading to Willy's death.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although the research on Death of a Salesman is endless, it is rare to make an in-depth analysis of it from the perspective of macro pragmatics. By analyzing the concrete application of conversation principle theory and speech act theory in the work, readers can know and understand the theme of the work from a brand-new perspective. As an ordinary social nobody, Willy spent his whole life pursuing the "American Dream" he recognized and made unremitting efforts for it. He always lives in a fantasy, but he always regards it as reality and is always deceived by it. He lived naively in his dream house, and never realized until his death that in that cold and cruel commercial society, individual's strong desire and beautiful dream could never be realized, and waiting for the ordinary people living in the illusion of "American Dream" was doomed to end in tragedy. On the contrary, our "Chinese dream" was created by the times and society, and it has natural advantages to be realized. The people of China should clearly understand the social situation, keep up with the urbanization process and the rapid development of the 5G era, embrace new things with an open mind, be active "dreamers" in the new era, display their talents in a broader and more open world to create a better new life.

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