

Failed Speech Acts And The Breakdown Of Communication In A Doll's House

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ABSTRACT

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* critiques 19th-century gender roles, the patriarchal institution of marriage, and women's limited agency within the domestic sphere, positioning Ibsen's play as an early modern critique of communicative failure. As in any other text, language in the play serves as the primary instrument for constructing and sustaining human relationships, authority, and social values. Yet, in *A Doll's House*, speech functions as more than mere dialogue; it is the very medium whose failed acts lead to the breakdown of communication. Drawing on J.L. Austin's and John Searle's theories of speech acts, this article explores how linguistic exchanges, including promises, requests, confessions, and declarations, fail to achieve the intended illocutionary force in the play. Hence, through close textual analysis, the paper examines how the play's dialogue reveals the complex themes of power dynamics, illustrating a social structure that silences and invalidates female speech. The failed speech acts in the play signal a lack of mutual understanding and shared values between characters, particularly Nora and Helmer, escalating from minor deceptions to profound ruptures and culminating in their marriage's collapse. In other words, this study argues that the systematic performance of failed speech acts in *A Doll's House* is the fundamental mechanism through which Ibsen dramatizes the ideological constraints of 19th-century patriarchal norms. Specifically, the analysis underlines that Nora and Helmer's inability to perform language acts successfully, with roots in their lack of mutual sincerity and unequal institutional authority within the marriage contract, signals more than a marital breakdown but dynamically generates the play's tragic climax. Hence, the paper contributes to showing how Nora's final act of silence and departure reconstitutes agency through the refusal of dialogue. The ultimate goal is to show how the micro-level failure of language functions as a precise diagnostic apparatus for the macro-level collapse of the bourgeois social contract and the patriarchal system it sustains, emphasizing that the collapse of language becomes a precondition for self-realization and autonomy.

Keywords: *Ibsen's A Doll's House, Austin and Searle's speech act theory, Illocutionary failure/infelicity, Patriarchal communication, 19th-century gender performance, Theatrical dialogue*

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 Submit Date: 10.11.2025, Acceptance Date: 04.02.2026
 DOI: 10.17932/IAU.IJMCL.2015.014/ijmcl_v012i1003

‘Bir Bebek Evi’ nde Başarısız Söylem Edimleri ve İletişimin Çöküşü

ÖZ

Henrik Ibsen’in Bir Bebek Evi adlı oyunu, 19. yüzyılın toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini, evlilik kurumunun ataerkil yapısını ve kadının ev içi alandaki sınırlı özneselliğini eleştirerek, Ibsen’in eserini erken modern dönemde iletişimsel başarısızlık üzerine bir eleştiri olarak konumlandırır. Tıpkı diğer metinlerde olduğu gibi, oyundaki dil de insan ilişkilerini, otoriteyi ve toplumsal değerleri inşa eden ve sürdüren temel araç işlevini görür. Ne var ki Bir Bebek Evinde, söz yalnızca bir diyalog aracı olarak işlemez; iletişimin çöküşüne yol açan başarısız edimlerin gerçekleştiği temel bir ortam olarak işlev görür. J. L. Austin ve John Searle’ün söz edimleri kuramlarından hareketle bu çalışma, oyunda yer alan vaat, rica, itiraf ve bildirim gibi dilsel alışverişlerin amaçlanan edimsel güce ulaşamadığını incelemektedir. Bu doğrultuda, ayrıntılı bir metin çözümlemesiyle oyunun diyalog yapısının güç ilişkileri, otorite ve kadın söyleminin bastırılışı gibi karmaşık temaları nasıl açığa çıkardığı tartışılmaktadır. Oyundaki başarısız söz edimleri, özellikle Nora ve Helmer arasındaki karşılıklı anlayış ve ortak değer eksikliğini, küçük aldatmalardan derin kopuşlara uzanan bir sürecin sonunda evliliklerinin çöküşünü simgeler. Başka bir deyişle, bu çalışma Bir Bebek Evindeki sistematik başarısız söz edimlerinin, Ibsen’in 19. yüzyıl ataerkil normlarının ideolojik sınırlarını dramatize ettiği temel bir anlatısal mekanizma olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Özellikle Nora ve Helmer’in dilsel edimleri başarıyla gerçekleştirememelerinin, karşılıklı samimiyet yoksunluğu ve evlilik sözleşmesi içindeki kurumsal eşitsizlikten kaynaklandığı; bunun yalnızca bir evlilik krizine değil, aynı zamanda oyunun trajik doruk noktasına da yol açtığı vurgulanmaktadır. Böylece çalışma, Nora’nın sessizlik ve ayrılış eyleminin diyalogun reddi yoluyla özneyi yeniden kurduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, dilin mikro düzeydeki başarısızlığının, burjuva toplumsal sözleşmesinin ve onun sürdürdüğü ataerkil sistemin makro düzeydeki çöküşünü teşhis eden bir araç işlevi gördüğü; dilin çöküşünün öz-gerçekleştirmenin ve özerkliğin önkoşulu haline geldiği savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ibsen’in Bir Bebek Evi, Austin ve Searle’ün söz eylemi kuramı, İloküsyon başarısızlığı / talihsizlik (infelisite), Patriarkal iletişim, 19. yüzyıl toplumsal cinsiyet performansı, Tiyatro diyalogu / dramatik diyalog

INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879/2001) is widely regarded as a foundational work of modern drama. The play is noted for its incisive critique of Victorian social structures, particularly entrenched patriarchy and gender inequality. Central to the narrative is the transformation of Nora Helmer, who evolves from a seemingly compliant wife, confined within marriage to a decorative "doll," into a self-assertive individual. Nora's final departure unsettled nineteenth-century audiences and continues to provoke feminist debate. As Akter (2021) observes, the play's enduring impact lies in its exposure of the severe limitations placed on women's autonomy within domestic life. The work continues to prompt reflection on personal agency and the necessity of social reform.

This analysis explores how failed speech acts in *A Doll's House* highlight communication breakdown and unequal power in Nora and Torvald Helmer's marriage. *Failed speech acts* are utterances that do not achieve their intended illocutionary force or perlocutionary effect. Failures result from hierarchy, misrecognition, or ideological foreclosure. Drawing on Speech Act Theory, this study views language as social action rather than merely a means of meaning. Social action may misfire, fail to gain uptake, or become void in unequal authority relations. Thus, communicative failure is not just individual misunderstanding; it is a symptom of marital power dynamics and gendered silencing.

This article has three aims. First, to analyze moments of communicative failure across the play's acts, treating them as structurally conditioned misfires rather than simple breakdowns. Second, to show how these failed speech acts create and reinforce shifting gendered power within the Helmers' marriage. Third, to argue that these failures drive the play's dramatic logic. The marriage ends not in a sudden rupture, but as the outcome of ongoing linguistic and ideological foreclosure. By blending literary interpretation with pragmatics, the analysis offers fresh insights into Ibsen's craft, extending prior work such as Godbole's (2019) focus on indirect acts and Rahman and Gul's (2023) exploration of conversational patterns. Here, further build on these works to show speech act failures as markers of deepening relational fractures, underscoring the play's commentary on authenticity in human bonds. The approach involves chronological close reading of the acts, weaving in direct references from Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) alongside supporting scholarship, with tables to classify and quantify acts for a structured view of their progression from fragile harmony to irreparable break.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Speech Act Theory was first articulated by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1962). John Searle later systematized this theory in *Speech Acts* (Searle, 1969). The theory challenges the idea that language is mainly a

neutral vehicle for description. Instead, it claims that utterances are forms of social action, shaped by conditions of authority, recognition, and uptake. This shift aids literary analysis, revealing that dramatic dialogue operates at both the level of meaning and the level of power. It asks who is entitled to speak, how some utterances become binding, and what renders others ineffective.

When applied to *A Doll's House*, Speech Act Theory shows that linguistic failure is built into patriarchal discourse. This is not simply a case of miscommunication or psychological insufficiency. Nora's promises, explanations, and appeals fail because the marital and social order denies their felicity, not due to incoherence. In contrast, Torvald's utterances, commands, judgments, and moral pronouncements have force due to his institutional power. He does not rely on mutual recognition. Thus, Speech Act Theory helps show how language in the play acts as an instrument of domination. It also shows how the breakdown of speech acts foreshadows the end of the marriage.

Austin distinguishes between two types of utterances: constatives and performatives. Constative utterances are statements that can be evaluated as true or false; they are assessed based on their correspondence to reality. Performatives, by contrast, are utterances that enact actions simply by being spoken, such as promising, warning, or declaring; these are judged by their success or failure in performing the intended action. Austin argues that this success depends on certain felicity conditions: there must be an appropriate procedure, the speaker must have authority, the circumstances must be suitable, and the speaker must intend to perform the act (Austin, 1962). As he notes, "To say something is in the full normal sense to do something which includes the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain vocables or words... and the uttering of them with a certain 'meaning'" (1962, p. 94).

This study keeps a strict distinction between *misfires* and *abuses*, as defined by Austin. *Misfires* occur when a speech act's conventional procedure fails when an utterance lacks authority, recognition, or suitable circumstances. By contrast, *abuses* happen when a speech act follows convention, but the speaker is dishonest or insincere. This distinction clarifies that structural communicative failures differ from rhetorical strategies like irony, manipulation, or deliberate deception. While these strategies may accompany speech acts in *A Doll's House*, they do not make them failed performatives. Recognizing this distinction allows for a more accurate analysis of why specific utterances in the play fail, framing these failures not as stylistic or psychological issues but as the result of unequal authority and recognition.

John Searle refines Austin's framework by categorizing speech acts into five types: assertives convey beliefs, directives request actions, commissives commit the speaker to future actions, expressives show emotional states, and declaratives enact changes with their utterance (Searle, 1969). The effectiveness of each act depends on factors such as social authority, sincerity, and mutual recognition. Without these, the speech act fails (Searle, 1969, p. 57). Searle also incorporates Grice's argument: violations of communicative norms often point to power dynamics rather than just conversational failure (Searle, 1969, p. 45). This study contends that directives, commissives, and assertives are the most useful categories for examining *A Doll's House*. Searle's taxonomy is comprehensive. Torvald's directives work as intended because he holds institutional authority as husband and moral arbiter. In contrast, Nora's directives are dismissed or seen as childish. This leads to repeated communication failure. Commissives, including promises and assurances, are key to Nora's struggles because her commitments lack stability in a system that restricts her agency. Assertives become sites of ideological conflict. Nora's statements about herself and her marriage remain unacknowledged until the play's end. Expressives and declaratives are less significant, mostly reinforcing emotional states rather than affecting power dynamics.

Building on previous analysis and Bousfield (2023), this study treats speech acts in dramatic dialogue as key to characterization. These acts show social position and authority. Patterns of successful and unsuccessful communication reveal (im)politeness strategies. By mapping these acts throughout the play, the study shows that repeated linguistic failures both reflect and contribute to the relationship's breakdown. These failures help explain why marital dissolution seems understandable and inevitable.

DISCUSSION

Act I: Foundations of Deception and Superficial Authority

Table 1

Speech Act Type in Act I	Example	Analysis	Condition Failed
Assertive (Lie)	Nora's macaroon denial	Presents false information as true, masking self-indulgence	Sincerity (Austin, 1962)
Commissive (Promise)	Nora's secrecy vow to Kristine	Commits to silence, but external forces break it	Preparatory (Searle, 1969)

Directive (Command)	Helmer's songbird admonition	Demands behavioral change, ignored in practice	Uptake (Searle, 1969)
Assertive (Irony)	Nora's happiness claim	States joy amid depression, highlighting emotional disconnect	Quality Maxim (Grice via Searle, 1969)

The table format may look quantitative, but it is a heuristic device, not a type of statistical analysis. The classification of speech acts uses clear theoretical criteria from Austin's and Searle's felicity conditions and Grice's maxims. It does not rely on counts or numbers. Each example was chosen for its importance in Act I, showing how types of infelicity failed sincerity, weakened authority, or lack of uptake recur and erode communication. The table's purpose is to clarify analytical distinctions and patterns, not to turn dramatic dialogue into a simple list.

Act I establishes conditions for communicative breakdown, setting the stage for conflict. Within the Helmers' marriage, failed assertives, commissives, and directives expose gendered power dynamics; these align with Speech Act Theory's felicity conditions. Failures occur in different ways: some utterances fail as illocutions, while others succeed as speech acts but falter ethically or relationally. The distinction is significant whether these failures are procedural or contextual; early infelicities foreshadow the intensifying conflicts of later acts. Nora's denial of eating macaroons "No, Torvald, I honestly" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) is a formal assertion, recognized as such at the illocutionary level. However, because Nora knows it is false, it fails Austin's sincerity condition (Austin, 1962, p. 39). Helmer's surveillance pushes Nora to hide her actions, forcing her into self-concealment. The lie is not mere miscommunication; rather, it is her defense within a coercive marriage. By making this statement, Nora conceals her lack of autonomy and hints at deeper secrets.

On the other hand, Nora's vow to Kristine "Nobody must get to know this, Kristine; nobody but you" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) is a commissive that succeeds both locutionarily and illocutionarily, binding her to secrecy in that moment. Later, structural rather than ethical factors cause the promise to fail: external forces, such as patriarchal legal and economic pressures, undermine Searle's preparatory conditions (Searle, 1969, p. 63) and render the promise unsustainable. As a result, this breakdown exposes women's vulnerability within systems that deprive them of the power to uphold their own commitments (Templeton, 1997).

Helmer's directive "My little songbird must never do that again. Songbirds are supposed to have clean beaks to chirrup with; no false notes" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) succeeds at the illocutionary level: it is recognized as a command and gets its authority from Helmer's role as husband. However, the speech act breaks down

not because of any failure in its form or authority, but because Nora resists uptake, maintaining covert defiance. This contrast between Helmer's outward command and Nora's inward resistance exposes the illusion of his power, which relies on surveillance and infantilization rather than genuine recognition (Bjørnson, 1998). In contrast to the prevailing atmosphere of anxiety and despair, Nora's ironic declaration—"Oh! It's a wonderful thing to be alive and happy" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) does not seek uptake in the usual way. While surrounding negativity dominates, she breaks Grice's maxim of quality (as discussed in Searle, 1969) by expressing joy. This utterance functions as irony and signals communicative estrangement, showing that sincerity has collapsed in the marriage.

These communicative failures show a clear pattern that undermines trust. The importance of Helmer's directives lies in their function, not their frequency. These directives assert authority but fail to achieve genuine recognition. This shows that power is performative rather than stable. Previous studies have noted how often Helmer gives directives (Rahman & Gul, 2023). Yet, this analysis sees the dominance of his directives as a sign of discourse focused on control. This goes beyond simply counting how often he gives orders. In this context, Nora's compliance appears as strategic resistance, highlighting Helmer's fragile authority. As Bousfield (2023) notes, infelicitous speech acts reveal relational asymmetries to the audience. Here, such acts show the superficiality of Helmer's control and suggest Nora's resistance is shaped more by structural forces than by personal motivations.

Act II: Indirect Expressions and Escalating Tensions

Act II builds on the illocutionary failures from Act I. It intensifies communicative breakdown by exploiting already weakened felicity conditions through indirect speech acts. The invocation of Gricean pragmatics is not a theoretical expansion. It functions as a *refinement* in the speech-act framework. Grice's cooperative principle is cited only to show how its violation reveals strategic obscuring of illocutionary force, not an overt misfire. Helmer's sarcastic remark, "Ah, I understand. It is recollections of the past that scare you... Naturally, you are thinking of your father" (Ibsen, 1879/2001), acts as both an indirect directive and a veiled accusation. It inverts surface meaning to assert epistemic control. By intentionally flouting cooperative expectations (Grice, via Searle, 1969, p. 45), Helmer preserves authority. He does so without explicitly taking responsibility for the act. This reinforces the asymmetrical power dynamic created by earlier communicative failures.

Rank's rhetorical question "Nora do you think he is the only one? ... The only one who would gladly give his life for your sake" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) is an indirect expression of devotion that withholds direct confession. Rather than mere failed

communication, it uses strategic ambiguity. Without real interrogative content (Austin, 1962, p. 34), Rank can seek emotional recognition without risking full commitment. This tension, caused by vague wording, shows how indirectness can protect a speaker in limiting social settings.

In contrast, Helmer's directives rely on coercive uptake rather than communicative reciprocity. Their frequency has been documented (Aulakh, 2021). Their main analytical significance comes from their cumulative impact. These directives reinforce unilateral authority and inhibit dialogic exchange. This sets the stage for explicit confrontations in Act III. Bousfield (2023) argues that these indirect patterns and imposed uptake highlight impoliteness as a marker of power asymmetry. This dynamic intensifies Helmer's characterization, depicting him as domineering and protected from communicative risk. The accompanying table outlines a qualitative progression, tracing the shift from Act I's overt deception to Act II's strategic indirection and emphasizing changes in communicative *mode* rather than uniform failure.

Act III: Hollow Commitments and Transformative Assertions

Act III marks a key reversal in the play's communication. Earlier insincerity and unbalanced authority are revealed and reshaped. This leads to a moment when speech no longer stabilizes social roles; instead, it breaks them down. Act III does not introduce new failures but instead forces acknowledgment of failures that have always been present.

Helmer's pledge "I could gladly risk my life and blood and everything for your sake" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) initially appears unconditional and a sign of deep devotion. Yet, when Nora's secret is revealed, this promise collapses. Helmer immediately prioritizes his own safety "Now you have destroyed all my happiness. My whole future" (Ibsen, 1879/2001). Searle (1969, p. 62) notes that commissives require both words and real intent to act. Helmer's sudden change shows how bourgeois marital love is conditional and depends on social standing, legality, and patriarchy, not on mutual ethics. As Finney (1994) argues, this moment presents marriage as a contract to protect male authority and respectability not as a mutual obligation.

The failure in this context is ideological, not procedural. Helmer's speech act works only when Nora stays compliant within his symbolic order. When this order is disrupted, sincerity fails. The commissive is revealed as hollow. This exposure allows Nora's final speech acts to succeed. She rejects conditional recognition and transforms communicative breakdown into autonomy and rupture.

Table 2

Speech Act Type in Act II	Example	Analysis	Condition Failed
Indirect (Sarcasm)	Helmer's past recollections remark	Jeers at Nora's secret via inversion	Cooperative Principle (Searle, 1969)
Indirect (Rhetorical Question)	Rank's sacrifice query	Asserts love without direct statement	Felicity for Questions (Austin, 1962)
Directive (Dominating)	Helmer's general commands (e.g., on behavior)	Reinforces authority, met with resistance	Uptake (Searle, 1969)

Nora's final declaration "I have other duties equally sacred... my duties to myself... I believe that before all else I am first of all a human being" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) begins as a paradigmatic felicitous declarative, decisively transforming social reality through speech (Austin, 1962, p. 108). However, its significance extends beyond this initial success. Rather than seeking validation within Helmer's marital authority, as earlier statements did, this utterance rejects the supporting conditions of the speech-act system and suspends the former framework once felicity is determined. This shift marks the movement from reliance on uptake to a self-authorizing assertion.

This transformation is underscored by Nora's shift from failed or compromised commissives to assertive self-definition. She no longer needs Helmer's validation. Helmer's counterclaim "But you're my wife, now and wherever you go" (Ibsen, 1879/2001) fails not because of any procedural infelicity. Its authority is simply obsolete. Uptake is not denied; it is actively refused. Drawing on Bousfield's (2023) analysis of power and impoliteness, this reversal marks a clear reconfiguration of communicative power. Nora's speech acts do not negotiate patriarchal norms. They actively depart from them, redefining identity through language. The climax is not a straightforwardly successful speech act, but a metapragmatic rupture that exposes the conditions of felicity as contingent, ideological, and subject to rejection. This culmination is best seen as a qualitative break from the play's communicative economy, not merely an endpoint of escalation.

Table 3

Speech Act Type in Act III	Example	Analysis	Condition Failed
Commissive (Promise)	Helmer's risk life vow	Pledges sacrifice, revoked under pressure	Sincerity (Searle, 1969)

Assertive/ Manipulative	Helmer's wife plea	Tries to convince via obligation	Uptake (Searle, 1969)
Declarative (Assertion)	Nora's self-duties statement	Declares independence, fully executed	None (Successful; Austin, 1962)

CONCLUSION

In *A Doll's House*, the shift from Act I's insincere assertives and unstable commissives to Act III's hollow promises and coercive pleas shows how speech acts reflect and deepen the emotional, moral, and relational cracks in Nora and Helmer's marriage. When viewed through Austin's and Searle's theories, this progression becomes clear: these recurring infelicities both mirror the marriage's decline and drive the narrative toward rupture, exposing the unstable base of patriarchal authority when it is grounded mainly in linguistic control.

Yet, the play's ending challenges how far Speech Act Theory can explain events. Nora's final words, often seen as successful performative acts, go beyond the system that shaped their effect. Her emancipation comes not from more effective speech within patriarchy, but from leaving the conditions that make speech acts binding. Thus, *A Doll's House* becomes a limit case for the theory. Emancipation may not need a stronger performative force, but a deliberate refusal of uptake, dialogue, and reciprocity. Silence, departure, and non-participation do not fit the ideas of felicity and infelicity. This challenges the belief that liberation can always be found through speech alone.

This study uses quantitative reference points, such as Helmer's predominance of directive speech acts that attempt to get someone else to do something alongside Austin's and Searle's frameworks for categorizing speech acts, which distinguish types such as directives, assertives, and declarations. It shows that failed speech acts in *A Doll's House* function as structuring devices for characterization and ideology, rather than merely as incidental communicative breakdowns. Helmer's directive-heavy discourse is a form of superficial authority, sustained by habitual command rather than ethical reciprocity. In contrast, Nora's progression from compromised assertiveness a speech act type expressing commitment to truth to self-authorizing declarations marks a shift from enforced submissiveness to linguistic self-determination. Quantification here reinforces the patterned asymmetry rather than just counting instances.

The main contribution of this article is its theoretical redefinition of "failed speech acts." It treats them as distinct phenomena: misfires, resisted uptake, strategic ambiguity, and ideological insincerity. They are not just a single category of

communicative breakdown. This analysis clearly distinguishes illocutionary failure, ethical collapse, and refusal of uptake. It advances existing scholarship on *A Doll's House* beyond thematic feminism or psychological realism. It shows that patriarchal power operates through the very conditions of linguistic felicity. The study also clarifies the limitations of Speech Act Theory in addressing emancipatory silence and exit. This positions Ibsen's play as both a strong example and a critical test case for pragmatic literary analysis.

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