

EXPRESSIVE SPEECH ACTS IN *LITTLE WOMEN* MOVIE

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Abstract

This research investigates the types and strategies of expressive speech acts uttered by the female main character in the 2019 movie *Little Women*. Employing a qualitative content analysis design, the study focuses on the female protagonist's utterances that contain expressive speech acts. The data for this research are drawn from the movie transcript of *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig. Documentation is used to collect the data, which are then analyzed using Searle's (1979) theory for types of expressive speech acts and Yule's (1996) theory for strategies of expressive speech acts. The analysis reveals 35 instances of expressive speech acts, including nine apologizing, three congratulating, eight deploring, seven expressing gratitude, two welcoming, and six wishing. Additionally, the research identifies 18 direct speech utterances and 17 indirect speech utterances. This study highlights how the types and strategies of expressive speech acts contribute to the characterization of the main female character in the movie.

Keywords: *expressive speech act; female; pragmatics.*

1. Introduction

In language interaction, communication can be achieved if the listener understands the meaning of what the speaker says. According to Kpogo & Abrefa (2018) communication is a transactional process that involves at least two people interacting in order to create some meanings. Speech act is one of the many subfields of pragmatics which tries to figure out the speaker's meaning followed by actions

The use of expressive speech acts by women and men is interesting to explore because each gender has its own unique way to communicate something. According to Maltz & Borker (2018), women often use words with exaggerated connotations, while men use straightforward language to make more of an impression. Lakoff (1973) states that women use reinforcing words more often than men. Women may be more sensitive to their surroundings and more likely to express their emotions by using more adjectives to describe things and their feelings and they also good at using dramatic and emotional adjectives and adverbs, but men are afraid to do so for fear of offending society.

Speech act is studied under the umbrella of pragmatics. Yule (1996) states that speech acts describe how the speaker means, what the speaker intends, and what the listener understands through it. Searle (1979) proposes seven classes of speech acts, such as thanking, congratulating, apologizing, condoling, deploring, welcoming, and wishing. In contrast to other pragmatic meanings, expressive speech acts reflect emotions rather than

beliefs or intentions. Understanding speech acts is important not only for the speaker and listeners but also for some daily conversation, conversation stories, conversation books, movies, songs, poems, etc.

This research investigates expressive speech acts in the movie *Little Women*. The film is chosen as it serves as a form of visual communication between directors and audiences, featuring conversations that reflect daily life. Sari (2020) notes that cinematic language helps filmmakers convey their thoughts, feelings, and stories to the audience. *Little Women* is particularly relevant as it addresses themes of romance, life, death, family, dreams, social classes, poverty, and gender inequality.

2. Literature Review

There have been previous studies exploring expressive speech acts in movies. Adelia (2022) studied expressive speech act in *Enola Holmes*, Widyowati (2019) investigated expressive speech acts used by John and Savannah as the main characters in *Dear John* movie, Rahmawati (2021) explored expressive speech acts used in *Crazy Rich Asian* movie, Royanti (2019) conducted research on expressive speech act in *La La Land* Movie. Kusumawardani & Yulianti (2023) conducted research on expressive speech acts of the main character in *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* movie, Wea and Bram (2022) studied directive and expressive speech acts used by Travis Parker in *The Choice* movie, Aritonang (2023) investigated expressive speech acts in *Avatar: The Way of The Qatar* movie, Gulo (2023) did research on expressive speech acts in “*Sonic the Hedgehog 2*” movie, and Safitri, (2023) analyzed illocutionary act in *The Window* movie.

Most of those previous studies focus on investigating the types of expressive acts. Some of them also investigate the function and the meaning of the expressive speech acts used by the characters in the movie. While the theory on the types of expressive acts proposed by Searle (1979) is generally deployed, some previous studies combine the Searle’s theory with the theory of the functions of expressive speech acts by Norrick (1978) and by Clark (1996), the theory of ethnography of communication by Hymes (1974) to explain the context of expressive speech acts, or the theory of the meaning of speech acts by Vanderveken (1990).

This research similarly focuses on expressive speech acts. However, this study investigates more on the expressive speech acts of the main female character. Moreover, this research also investigates the strategies used by the main female character in uttering the expressive speech acts. This research used Searle’s theory (1979) to analyze the types of expressive speech acts and the theory of Yule (1996) to analyze the strategies of uttering the expressive speech acts.

3. Research Method

This is a qualitative study with a content analysis design. Content analysis is used to evaluate human behavior indirectly by analyzing their communications; it is exactly what the term implies: an analysis of the usually, but not always, written content of a communication (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The data of this research are utterances containing expressive speech acts used by the female main character in *Little Women* movie and the data source is obtained from the transcript of *Little Women* movie (2019) by Greta Celeste Gerwig. The researchers use documentation in collecting the data. In addition, in analyzing the data, the

researchers use Searle’s theory (1979) to analyze the types of expressive speech acts and Yule’s theory (1996) to analyze the strategies of expressive speech acts. The data explanation codes used in analyzing data are as follows:

1/LW/AP/DS

1 : number of the datum

LW : referring to “Little Women”

AP : referring to “apologizing” as the expressive speech act

DS : referring to “Direct speech” as the strategies of expressive speech act

These are the meanings of the coding for the type of expressive speech act and strategies of speech act:

1. AP : Apologizing

2. CD : Condoling

3. CG : Congratulating

4. DP : Deploring

5. TH :Thanking

6. WL : Welcoming

7. WS : Wishing

8. DS : Direct Speech

9. IS : Indirect Speech

4. Results and Discussion

The data analysis resulted in 35 data of expressive speech acts are found in the *Little Women* movie.

4.1 Types of Expressive Speech Act

The types of expressive speech act are analyzed using Searle’s theory (1979) showing 7 types of expressive speech acts. In this research, out of 35 data, six types of expressive speech act are found and presented in table 1.

No.	Types of Expressive Speech Acts	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Apologizing	9	26%
2.	Condoling	-	-
3.	Congratulating	3	8%
4.	Deploring	8	23%
5.	Thanking	7	20%
6.	Welcoming	2	6%
7.	Wishing	6	17%
Total		35	100%

Table 1. Types of xpressive speech act found in Little Women movie

The examples of each type of expressive speech act is as follows:

a) Apologizing

05/LW/AP/DS

Meg : “What have you done?”

Jo : “I’m sorry you shouldn’t have asked me to do it!”

Meg : “I can’t go! I’m spoilt! My hair!”

Context : The incident happened after Jo accidentally burned Meg's hair just before going to the party. Jo apologized for what she had done to Meg's hair. she also said that she should not have asked to help decorate Meg's hair because she could not do it. The conversation happens when the female main character burned Meg's hair. Jo apologizes for what she has done by saying **"I'm sorry"** and it is categorized as apology speech act.

b) Congratulating

12/LW/CG/IS

Amy : "Laurie told you?"

Jo : **"Yes. Amy, I'm so happy for you. This was meant to be."**

Context : Amy asked Jo if Laurie had told her that they were engaged. Jo has told Laurie about their engagement plans and Jo was happy and congratulated Amy because they were meant to be together. This conversation is categorized as congratulating because the main female character felt happy with the good news and by saying **"I'm so happy for you."**

c) Deploring

13/LW/DP/IS

Jo : "Don't touch me, thanks! I already feel ridiculous."

Amy : "You could be pretty if you tried."

Jo : "Don't want to, won't do it."

Context : While making over Meg, Jo's sister, Amy, also wanted to make over Jo so that she would look beautiful at the party. Jo, did not like dressing up. Amy persuaded her telling her that she could look beautiful if she tried. However, Jo rejected it outright saying that she was not beautiful and did not want to look beautiful. In the situation above, it can be said that the main female character is deploring because she does not want to be called beautiful. The utterances of deploring is **"Don't want to, won't do it"**.

d) Thanking

2) 22/LW/TH/DS

Friedrich : "You're on fire!"

Jo : **"Thank you."**

Friedrich : "I have the same habit, you see?"

Context : Friedrich saw that Jo's coat was on fire, so he told Jo that she was on fire. Jo, who was shocked by this, immediately put out the fire and thanked Friedrich for telling her that her coat was on fire. This conversation is categorized into thanking speech act because the female main character uses the word **"Thank you"** to thank the addressee.

e) Welcoming

28/LW/WL/IS

Laurie : "Wake up! Wake up!"

Jo : **"Teddy! You're back!"**

Laurie : "Are you glad to see me then?"

Jo : "Yes!"

Context : Jo was taking a nap and suddenly Laurie woke her up. Laurie, who had traveled to France for a long time, finally went to see Jo again. Jo was very happy with Laurie's presence in her house. In this situation, the female main character felt glad to see Laurie in her house and she welcomed Laurie. Hence, the utterance **"You're back"** belongs to speech act welcoming.

f) Wishing

31/LW/WS/DS

Hannah : "Goodness only knows. Some poor creature came a-beggin', your ma set straight off to see what was needed."

Jo : **"I wish she could help other people at a time convenient to us."**

Context : The conversation happened when March family was celebrating Christmas, but Jo's mother came and told her children to give their Christmas meal to people in need. Jo hoped that her mother could help other people at a convenient time to her family. In uttering wishing, the speaker used the sentence "I wish she could help other people at a time convenient to us" containing the word **"I wish"** which is recognized as a wishing speech act.

4.2 Strategies of Expressive Speech Act

The strategies of expressive speech acts are analyzed using Yule's theory (1996). Accordingly, this research finds two strategies of expressive speech act i.e., 18 direct speeches and 17 indirect speeches as shown in table 2.

No.	Strategies of Expressive Speech Act	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Direct Speech	18	51%
2.	Indirect Speech	17	48%
Total		35	100%

Table 2. Strategies of expressive speech act found in the Little Women movie

The examples of the strategies are presented as follow;

a) Direct Speech

1. 04/LW/AP/DS

Beth : "Why is her hair off?"

Jo : **"Meg, I'm so sorry!"**

Meg : "What have you done?"

Context : This direct expressive speech act happened when the female main character, Jo, accidentally burned her sister's hair. The Strategy of the expressive speech act in this dialogue is categorized as direct speech because Jo directly said sorry to apologize with the utterance **"Meg, I'm so sorry!"**

2. 26/LW/TH/DS

Friedrich : "If you ever come to California, I would love to see you."

Jo : "I don't know that I will, but **Thank you.**"

Context : Before Friedrich returned to California, he told Jo that he would be very happy and welcomed to meet her in California. Jo, who did not know he was going to California, was impressed and grateful for what Friedrich had offered. The speech act uttered by female main character is thanking expression of speech act by saying

“Thankyou” and this is categorized as direct speech because the female main character said the thanking expression directly.

3. 35/LW/WS/DS

Beth : “Is he coming home?”

Jo : **“Don’t I wish I could go.”**

Amy : “Poor Jo - we can't give up our only brother.”

Context : After eating with the family, Jo’s mother surprised her with a letter from his father. Jo hoped she could help his father and went to the war as an older sister. This expression showed that the female main character expressed wishes so this is categorized as expressive speech act. The intention of this datum is wishing expressive speech act using direct speech strategy because the female main character uttered wishing by directly saying **“Don’t I wish I could go”**.

b) Indirect Speech

1. 2/LW/AP/IS

Mr. Dashwood : “We'll look at it. Tell her to make it short and spicy. And if the main character is a girl, make sure she's married by the end. Or dead, either way.”

Jo : **“Excuse me?”**

Context : Jo apologized for not being convinced by Mr. Dashwood's words and then she tried to ask him what the ending meant. This datum is categorized as apology speech act because Jo intended to apologize politely by using “Excuse me”. The intention of apologizing was not uttered by saying sorry but using the word **“Excuse me”**. Therefore, this conversation is included into indirect speech because the female main character’s intention of apologizing was uttered indirectly.

2. 10/LW/CG/IS

Amy : “Aunt March is going to Europe! she wants me to go as her companion.

Jo : “Europe? With you? “

Amy : “Yes, she wants me to work on my art, and my French, of course.”

Jo : **“That’s wonderful Amy.”**

Context : Jo knew the news that her sister would go to Europe and she felt happy and impressed with her sister. This datum is categorized as congratulating expressive speech act since the female main character used congratulating utterance; the utterance and gesture showed that the speaker wanted to congratulate her sister. The intention of congratulating was indirectly uttered by the female main character by **saying “That’s wonderful”** with intention to congratulate and to show happiness, so this conversation strategy is indirect speech.

3. 20/ LW/DP/IS

Jo : “She says the whole book that she doesn't want to marry.”

Mr.Dashwood : “Who cares? Girls want to see women married! Not consistent!”

Jo : **“No, It isn’t the right ending.”**

Context : After giving him the manuscript of the story that was to be published, the editor asked Jo to change the ending to make the main character got married. Jo disagreed because she still wanted her character to live on her own, not the way the

editor wanted her to. This situation conveyed that the female main character deplored what editor said to change the ending since Jo did not want to make her character married. This showed that the female main character strongly disagreed with the editor and the disagreement was conveyed by the strategy of indirect speech because the female main character did not utter the exact word of deploring, hating or disagreeing but using the sentence **“No, It isn’t the right ending.”**

In this research, the majority of expressive speech act types proposed by Searle (1979) are present in the data, including apologizing, congratulating, deploring, thanking, welcoming, and wishing. However, the condoling type is absent, likely because the movie does not depict a scene of condolences following the death of Jo’s sister. The female main character avoids showing sadness or distress, perhaps to maintain an appearance of strength.

The predominance of apologizing speech acts (nine occurrences) and deploring speech acts (eight occurrences) suggests that the main female character embodies both femininity and boldness. Additionally, the balance between direct speech (18 utterances) and indirect speech (17 utterances) highlights the character's assertiveness.

This research supports previous studies on the use of expressive speech acts by female characters in movies, confirming typical female language patterns. However, when a female character is portrayed as non-social, there is a proportional variation in the use of expressive speech acts and the strategies related to the directness of speech.

5. Conclusion

This research investigates the types and strategies of expressive speech acts used by the female main character in the movie *Little Women*. The findings reveal 35 instances of expressive utterances, including apologizing, congratulating, deploring, welcoming, and wishing speech acts. The two most dominant types are apologizing and deploring, highlighting the main character's bravery and boldness. By apologizing for her mistakes and taking responsibility for her actions, she demonstrates both accountability and strength. This research offers valuable insights into how the female main character is represented through her use of expressive speech acts and their directness. It enhances our understanding of the gendered aspects of language use in films, illustrating how the main character employs expressive speech acts in her interactions with others. This contributes to the broader discourse on gender representation in media, emphasizing the complexity and depth of female characters through their linguistic choices. This study also aligns with previous research on expressive speech acts, confirming the nuanced ways in which female characters communicate. By examining the character's use of both direct and indirect speech, the research underscores her assertiveness and the strategic deployment of language to navigate social interactions. This highlights the importance of considering both the content and the form of speech acts in understanding character development and representation in film.

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