

ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS OF NATASHA ROMANOFF IN BLACK WIDOW: A SEARLEAN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Semantics is the study of meaning in language, including how the meanings of words and expressions relate to each other in various forms of discourse. One key branch of semantics is speech act theory, which examines how utterances function as actions. According to Austin, there are three types of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. This study focuses on illocutionary acts, which are intended actions performed by the speaker through speech. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method and analyzes the utterances of Natasha Romanoff in the movie Black Widow. The study aims to identify the types and purposes of illocutionary acts used by the main character. Based on Searle's (1979) classification, illocutionary acts are divided into five types: (1) assertive, (2) directive, (3) commissive, (4) expressive, and (5) declarative. The results show that four types of illocutionary acts are found in Black Widow. In the assertive category, there are six data points used for stating, claiming, and predicting. In the directive category, there is one data point used for ordering. In the commissive category, four data points are found, used for threatening and refraining someone from doing something. Finally, in the expressive category, there are two data points used for condoling and complimenting. These findings reveal how language is used performatively in film to convey emotion, intent, and psychological depth.

Keywords: *black widow movie, speech act, illocutionary, semantics*

Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has become a globally influential platform that not only entertains but also reflects complex social, psychological, and linguistic dimensions through its character-driven narratives. Among its many titles, Black Widow (2021) stands out due to its emotionally layered protagonist, Natasha Romanoff, who is portrayed as dealing with past trauma, identity crisis, and psychological pressure—all of which are reflected in her patterns of speech. This makes the film a compelling subject for pragmatic analysis, especially from the perspective of speech act theory, where utterances carry not only literal meanings but also performative and psychological functions.

In film dialogue, characters often express more than what is literally stated; they perform actions, reveal emotions, and negotiate meaning through their words. This aligns with the concept of illocutionary acts, as introduced by Austin (1962) and further

Commented [li1]: Terdapat kalimat yang agak berbelit dan beberapa kesalahan tipografi (misalnya "dta" seharusnya "data"; "Commisive" vs "Commissive").

developed by Searle (1979), where speech is not just about saying something, but doing something through saying. For instance, commands, requests, promises, and expressions of regret are all examples of utterances that do something rather than just state something. As emphasized by Searle, these acts are key to understanding fictional discourse, especially in dramatized or emotionally charged narratives.

Black Widow offers a particularly rich ground for such an analysis. As a character haunted by her past and struggling with inner conflict, Natasha's utterances are often loaded with layered meanings that require careful interpretation. Her speech reflects not only her strategic and assertive personality as a spy, but also her trauma, guilt, and longing for connection—psychological dimensions that influence her language use. According to Yuwana (2023), understanding how illocutionary acts operate under psychological tension enables a deeper appreciation of how communication is shaped by emotional states, particularly in cinematic storytelling. In light of these observations, the research problems in this study are stated as follows: 1) What types of illocutionary acts are used by the main character in *Black Widow*? 2) What are the communicative purposes behind these illocutionary acts?

The objective of this research is to identify and analyze the types and purposes of illocutionary acts employed by Natasha Romanoff in the film *Black Widow*, thereby illustrating how pragmatic choices in language reflect psychological states and narrative functions.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of speech act theory with psychological interpretation, applying pragmatic analysis to a modern MCU film that has not been widely explored from a linguistic-pragmatic perspective. By combining insights from semantics, pragmatics, and character psychology, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how meaning is constructed and conveyed in cinematic discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon Speech Act Theory, particularly the model proposed by John L. Austin (1962) and expanded by John R. Searle (1979). Austin classified speech acts into three components; 1) Locutionary acts – the literal utterance and its grammatical meaning, 2) Illocutionary acts – the intended function behind the utterance (e.g., requesting, commanding, apologizing), 3) Perlocutionary acts – the actual effect or response the utterance has on the listener.

This research focuses on illocutionary acts, as they directly reflect the speaker's intentions and are central to interpreting how characters in films perform actions through language. Searle further refined the classification of illocutionary acts into five categories; 1) Assertives (statements of fact, beliefs), 2) Directives (requests, commands), 3) Commissives (promises, refusals), 4) Expressives (apologies, thanks, emotions), and 5) Declarations (statements that bring about change, such as resignations or baptisms).

Additionally, this research integrates insights from pragmatics and psychology, especially the idea that emotional states influence linguistic behavior. As Yuwana (2023) asserts, characters with complex psychological backgrounds, such as trauma or anxiety, often encode deeper intentions within their speech acts. This makes illocutionary analysis particularly relevant for understanding *Black Widow*'s protagonist, whose utterances reflect both external action and internal turmoil.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology. To perform a descriptive analysis, it is necessary to describe in detail what occurred when a procedure related to the method was implemented. According to Moleong (2011), no detailed arithmetic calculations or statistical analyses are involved in the descriptive qualitative approach, as this method focuses on understanding phenomena in their natural settings. Qualitative research aims to obtain deep insight into social or linguistic phenomena by interpreting the meaning of naturally occurring data. Simbolon et al. (2021) state that qualitative methods are empirical approaches grounded in speakers' observable behaviors and utterances. These methods focus on interpretation rather than measurement (Herman, Sinurat, & Sitio, 2019).

Additionally, Yuwana & Angelianawati (2024) emphasize that qualitative descriptive approaches are essential when analyzing discourse because they allow for contextual interpretation, especially when studying implied meanings in cinematic or literary texts. Qualitative methods also permit a holistic exploration of language use, including emotional and psychological elements conveyed in communication (Yuwana et al, 2024). According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is suitable for exploring complex meanings, relationships, and intentions expressed through language, particularly in narrative or dialogic forms like movie scripts.

The data of the present study are taken from the movie *Black Widow*, which was released in July 2021 in theaters. It is an American superhero movie directed by Cate Shortland featuring Scarlett Johansson as the main character. The data are collected through several steps: (1) the researchers watch the movie, (2) take notes of the dialogues focusing on the utterances of the main character, (3) read the dialogues in the movie script to ensure the accuracy of what is heard, and (4) list Natasha Romanoff's utterances that perform illocutionary acts. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) note, data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions are core elements of qualitative analysis. The researchers in this study apply Searle's (1976) speech act theory to analyze the data through the following steps: (1) identifying the type of illocutionary act uttered by Natasha Romanoff, (2) examining the communicative purpose behind each utterance, and (3) drawing a conclusion based on the findings of the study.

The results of the analysis are presented using tables, descriptive words, selected phrases, and full sentences for ease of understanding. As Sukardi & Yuwana (2017) points out, a clear presentation of qualitative linguistic findings allows for broader audience comprehension and supports the analytical depth needed in examining meaning within social interactions, including those depicted in films.

Result and Discussion

In this section, the researchers focus on the type of illocutionary act uttered by Natasha Romanoff and the purpose of the illocutionary act. In line with the illocutionary act, Searle (1979) classifies the illocutionary acts into five types, namely (1) assertive or representative, (2) directive, (3) commissive, (4) expressive, and (5) declarative.

The Coherence among the types of illocutionary speech and its purpose

No	Types of illocutionary	Number of utterances	Purpose	frequency
1	Assertive	6	Stating Claiming Predictive	4 1 1
2	Directive	1	Ordering	1
3	Commissive	4	Threatening Refraining	3 1
4	Expressive	2	Condoling Complimenting	1 1
5	Declarative	0	0	0
Total		13	-	100%

Tpes of Illocutionary act used and the purposes

Assertive/representative

The term assertive or representative is defined as one of the illocutionary acts which commits the speaker to the truth of the uttered proposition. It is commonly used to represent a state of affairs (Finegan et al., 1997:L344). Such a type of the illocutionary act is divided into some illocutionary forces which include stating, suggesting, boasting, complaining, claiming, and announcing (Leech, 1983:105). Further, Cutting (2008:14) adds some illocutionary forces of the representative, namely describing, hypothesizing, insisting, claiming, swear and predicting. Here identify and explain the representative in the script:

Young : And we also saw fireflies in the backyard. That was my favorite part
Yelena of the whole day.
Melina : No
Natasha : *Yelena, we see fireflies every year.*

This utterance is classified as assertive. The main character said that they are already very used to seeing fireflies. She talked in a very convincing tone.

Natasha : Mom, you've got blood on you.

This utterance is classified as assertive. The main character informing her mother that her mother is hurt.

Thaddeus : I wouldn't worry about me. We got Barton, we got Wilson and that
Ross other guy, the incredible shrinking convict. Rogers is on the run. You
got no friends. Where you gonna go?
Natasha : *I've lived a lot of lives before I met you, Ross.*

This utterance is classified as assertive. The main character meant that Ross doesn't have to worry because she is able and has experiences.

Natasha : What, are you 12?

This utterance is classified as assertive. The main character meant that Mason's deed is too childish for his age.

Yelena : We gotta get outta here. We need to find Dreykov. Are you coming?
Natasha : *I'm right behind you.*

This utterance is classified as assertive. Natasha is making sure that she goes with Yelena.

Natasha : *Besides, if it can work out with the four of us, you know, there may be some hope for the Avengers. Little bit.*

This utterance is classified as assertive. Natasha is predicting that the Avengers will help her.

Directive

The second type of the illocutionary act is directive which is defined as asking the hearer to do something. With the use of directive, the addresser attempts to get the addressee to do some actions as he/she wants. This illocutionary act is subdivided into some types which include (1) commanding, (2) requesting, (3) suggesting, (4) inviting, (5) questioning, and (6) warning. Here identify and explain the directive in the script:

Natasha : *You're in my bed.*
Rick Manson : I'm... I'm not even under the covers.

This utterance is classified as directive. She asks Manson to get off her bed.

Commissive

The term commissive refers to committing the addresser to some future course of actions. In other words, it deals with an action which will be or will not be done in the future course. This illocutionary act is categorised into some illocutionary forces which include (1) promising, (2) vowing, (3) offering, (4) threatening, (5) refraining from doing something, and (6) refusing. Here identify and explain the commissive in the script:

Natasha : *I'm pretty sure Ross has no jurisdiction here. And you should know I'm a better shot when I'm pissed off*

Natasha : *Come on. Think I can't take a punch?*

Natasha : *You just sent away the one thing that would stop me from killing you.*

These utterances are classified as commissive. The main character is threatening her co-workers.

Natasha : *I'll hold them off.*

This utterance is classified as commissive because the main character is trying to refrain her co-workers from fighting.

Expressive

The fourth illocutionary act is expressive. It is defined as a speech act, which expresses a psychological state. This can be in the form of stating pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, anger, joy, sorrow, and the like. The illocutionary act of expressive has some illocutionary forces such as (1) greeting, (2) thanking, (3) apologizing, (4) complimenting, (4) stating pleasure, (5) stating pain, (6) stating doubt, (7) stating confusion, (8) stating

surprise, (9) stating panic, (10) stating anger, and (11) stating dislike. Here identify and explain the expressive in the script:

Natasha : I thought about her every day of my life. Whether or not I admitted it to myself, I did.

This utterance is classified as expressive because it shows her sadness.

Natasha : You've always been a really good friend to me.

This utterance is classified as expressive because it shows her compliment as she's thanking her co-worker.

Conclusion

The analysis of Black Widow reveals that four types of illocutionary acts are employed by the main character, Natasha Romanoff. Specifically, the assertive type appears in six utterances used for stating, claiming, and predicting. The directive type is found in one utterance with the function of giving orders. The commissive type is identified in four utterances, used for threatening or refraining someone from an action. Lastly, two utterances fall under the expressive type, used for condoling and complimenting. These findings indicate that illocutionary acts play a significant role in shaping character interaction and narrative tension within a film. From a pragmatic learning perspective, the study demonstrates how speech acts are not only theoretical constructs but also practical tools for interpreting speaker intention, especially in emotionally charged or psychologically complex situations. Students of linguistics and English language education can benefit from analyzing movie dialogues to sharpen their understanding of speech act functions in real-life communication scenarios. From the standpoint of screenwriting and film dialogue composition, understanding the use of speech acts can help writers develop more nuanced and believable character interactions. Characters like Natasha Romanoff, who carry emotional trauma and psychological depth, require carefully crafted utterances that reflect their internal states while advancing the plot. For future research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies of speech acts across multiple characters in Black Widow or across different genres of film, such as comedy, horror, or drama. Such comparisons may reveal genre-specific or personality-driven speech act patterns, contributing to a broader understanding of language use in cinematic narratives.

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Commented [li2]: Perluas bagian kesimpulan dengan merefleksikan temuan ke konteks pembelajaran pragmatik atau penulisan naskah film.
Berikan saran untuk riset selanjutnya, misalnya eksplorasi perbedaan speech act di karakter lain atau genre film berbeda.

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