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Language in Action: Illocutionary Acts in *Anne with an E*

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ABSTRACT

Illocutionary acts are speech acts in which the speaker encodes an intended meaning in an utterance, and the listener decodes this meaning from the utterance. Illocutionary acts are not based on form (grammar) but rather on meaning. This study examines illocutionary acts used by the characters in the first season of the Canadian period drama television series *Anne with an E*, presented by Netflix. The subtitles presented by the series were analyzed using a Searle approach. Contextual cues that shed light on the nuances of the utterances and expressions of the characters were noted. The results of the study indicated the presence of all five primary classifications of illocutionary acts within the series. These illocutionary acts were ranked from the most to the least prevalent, beginning with *assertives*, accounting for a substantial 40.72% of the total dataset, followed by *directives*, constituting 30.13%. *Commissives* were observed to be 7.26% of the instances, while *expressives* made up 21.14% of the dataset. Finally, *declaratives* were the least frequently utilized, representing a mere 0.86% of the total data. Thus, language serves not only to convey straightforward sentences but is also used to express both actions and interactions.

Keywords: Speech Acts; Illocutionary Acts; *Anne with an E*

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1. Introduction

Language is a means of communication used by humans to establish social relationships through conveying ideas, emotions, information, commands, invitations, and suggestions^[1]. Human interaction relies heavily on language and communication on a daily basis, and it can be achieved when the listener and speaker understand each other's thoughts, desires, and feelings^[2]. It is essential for both parties in communication to comprehend each other's speech acts to understand the message that is conveyed by the speaker and to prevent any possible misinterpretation. It is difficult to understand a particular language used by a particular community, referred to as *a language community*, which is created by people within the circle of communication^[3]. This comes from the fact that language, as a purposeful instrument, expresses both deliberate and unintentional behaviors, as speakers articulate specific behaviors in words and actions, and the meanings conveyed can exhibit variation contingent upon the context in which the communication takes place. Thus, to capture word meanings, it is necessary to go beyond a mere structural analysis of sentences, as these do not pertain to the speaker alone and are also influenced by various factors, including the target audience, temporal factors, geographical location, and the immediate situation and context^[4].

According to the concept of speech act, language acts in the following roles: 1) locutionary, 2) illocutionary, and 3) perlocutionary^[5]. Illocutionary acts are the most important, which consist of five types: 1) *assertives*, statements of belief or fact; 2) *directives*, commands or requests; 3) *commissives*, promises or commitments; 4) *expressives*, emotions or attitudes; and 5) *declaratives*, actions taken in speech, such as resigning or naming^[1, 6]. The concept of meaning is linked to textual manifestation, where texts provide a linguistic representation of social interactions^[7]. It is essential to acknowledge that language pervades many facets of human expression and features prominently in literary works and cinematic or theatrical productions. Thus, in developing a comprehensive understanding of contextual meaning, pragmatics assumes a pivotal role, elucidating the contribution of context to the comprehension of individuals' intended meanings, purposes, and actions^[8].

Illocutionary acts are a vital tool for analyzing communication strategies in various media, including movies,

speeches, and television shows. Earlier studies have revealed how different types of illocutionary acts are employed by characters to achieve specific communicative purposes, which are often influenced by their roles and the given narrative context^[9-15]. For example, in the films *You Are My Home* and *SpongeBob SquarePants*, directive acts are the most common type of speech act strategy in the narrative^[9, 10]. In *Prison Break*, the prominence of directive speech goes along with commissive and representative acts, showcasing the characters' intentions and commitments within the storyline^[12]. By contrast, assertive or representative acts, which seek to instill confidence and assurance, dominate in Barack Obama's speeches^[13]. These acts serve as powerful tools for conveying credibility and inspiring audiences. Likewise, the prevalence of assertive acts is also evident in the TV series *Heroes*, where they were integral to fostering trust and conviction in the characters and viewers^[14]. Another notable study examined declarative acts in the legal drama *My Lawyer, Mr Jo*, underscoring how the declarations were employed to establish authority and enact change in a legal setting, reflecting the weight of language for judicial contexts^[15].

As noted, it is undeniable that movies have an important role in our society. Speech acts are crucial for all forms of communication in encoding messages that can even change attitudes^[16]. In addition, filmgoers can learn speech acts from movies, including actors' acting and literary elements of the script, which provide a reflection on human lives full of both actions and interactions among the characters through interpreting speech acts in different contexts^[17]. These studies show the diverse use of illocutionary acts across different contexts in terms of different outputs, showing how characters leverage speech to communicate effectively, influence others, and fulfill their narrative roles. Examining the illocutionary acts as a subset of the speech act, valuable insights into the interplay between language and context can be derived, showing the power that illocutionary acts have for shaping meaningful communication, is essential. In addition, the study of linguistics can examine speech acts portrayed in movies, including in acting and literary elements, reflecting on human life, which is full of both actions and interactions among the characters, interpreting speech acts in different contexts^[16, 17].

This study performs an analysis of illocutionary acts

during the first season of the Canadian period drama television series *Anne with an E*, which was selected based on its accessibility and popularity with viewers of all ages. This series features 50-minute episodes with stories that continue over multiple seasons, whereas ordinary movies typically tell a complete story in a single installment. This study specifically focused on the speech acts seen in the inaugural season of *Anne with an E*, adapted from Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. The series centers on an orphan, Anne, who is navigating life, seeking acceptance and love, and possessing a unique perspective that sets her apart from the other characters. With a 91% positive audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, the series is a suitable subject for scholarly analysis. It also seeks to provide critical insight into the nuanced meanings and implicit actions that are conveyed through speech, offering linguists a more profound understanding of the communicated message.

2. Materials and Methods

This study applied a descriptive qualitative method to interpret and analyze the experiences, behaviors, events, or objects of speech acts according to their natural setting in the series *Anne with an E*^[18]. For the collection of data, English subtitles for the series were derived from *Netflix* and were checked for correctness to match of the actual language appearing in the series. The subtitles were then analyzed through the examination and categorization of the

data, drawing on Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1979) theories, dividing speech acts into assertive, directives, commissive, expressive, and declarations^[1, 5, 6]. In the analysis process, the segmentation of 2,604 utterances was guided by sentence-level pauses, intonation shifts, and speaker transitions. For accuracy and readability, each segment was also reviewed to ensure the completeness of its boundaries. In addition, a pragmatic approach was adopted in this study to investigate the characteristics of the characters that appeared in *Anne with an E*, based on their utterances and settings. To present the results of the study, descriptives such as mean and standard deviations were also applied.

3. Results

The first season of *Anne with an E* consists of seven episodes containing 2,604 utterances, covering all five categories of illocutionary acts listed above. **Table 1** indicates that the most common group speech acts were the *assertives*, constituting 40.72% of the utterances, with 1,046 instances in total. Subsequently, *directives* were 30.13%, accounting for 774 occurrences. *Expressives* followed closely, with 21.14%, or 543 instances. *Commissives* made up 7.16%, with 184 instances. Finally, *declaratives* were the least frequent speech act and accounted for 0.86% of all utterances, documented in just 22 instances.

Table 2 describes all five illocutionary acts among the main characters as in different contexts:

Table 1. Summary of the illocutionary acts.

Types	Total Utterances	Percentage
Assertives	1,046	40.72%
Directives	774	30.13%
Expressives	543	21.14%
Commissives	184	7.16%
Declaratives	22	0.86%
Total	2,569	100 %

Table 2. Examples of illocutionary acts.

Assertives
- <i>I can see why she's longing for the latest fashions.</i>
- <i>Anne is not an orphan anymore. She's been adopted.</i>
Directives
- <i>Anne Shirley has a very bad temper. Now, stand here and stay put, and the rest of you pipe down!</i>
- <i>Bring her over to the table! Hurry! Roll her onto her belly. Hold her feet. Come on, Minnie May, cough! Cough, Minnie May! Cough!</i>

Table 2. Cont.

Expressives
- All my dresses will be ruined from the smoke! - Why don't you give me that hammer and I'll finish the job myself, if you're too busy being a bully to get it done?
Commissives
- I solemnly swear... to be faithful to my bosom friend, Diana Barry, for as long as the sun and moon shall endure. - Jerry and I will put things right at the green gables and back as soon as we can.
Declaratives
- Yes, I am. I don't think I've ever been so excited in my whole life. Oh... my hands are shaking. Hoo. With this pen... I take you... Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert... to be my family forever. To call you mine... and to be yours. For always. - This is the last time my Diana will ever set foot in your house.

3.1. Assertives

Assertives are the most frequent illocutionary acts in *Anne with an E*. These acts convey factual information or truth, typically reflecting the speaker's perspectives and convictions.

(i) Jeannie: "I can see why she's longing for the latest fashions. Marilla was always a very practical person."

In episode five of the series, titled "Tightly Knotted to a Similar String," at the 22:12 minute mark, the character of Jeannie makes the abovementioned statement, an assertive act used to convey factual information. In this episode, Matthew becomes aware of Anne's longing for a dress to wear to a tea party and decides to buy one for her as a gift. However, at first, Marilla thinks that this is unnecessary. However, Matthew goes to a tailor named Jeannie to have the dress made. Jeannie explains to Matthew that Anne desires something more fashionable and vibrant because the dresses that Marilla makes are plain and unattractive, having subdued colors. This is the reason why Anne wants a new outfit.

(ii) Diana: "Anne isn't an orphan anymore. She's been adopted."

At the 8-minute mark of episode three, "But What Is So Headstrong like Youth?" Diana says, "Anne isn't an orphan anymore. She's been adopted," correcting what Josie Pye talked about Anne. This is an assertive, as Diana states general facts concerning Anne. In this episode, Diana takes Anne to walk around the school on her first day. Both children stop by the classroom where the other children are whispering about the new girl. Diana introduces Anne to the others, from Moody and Charlie to a group of young girls. Josie Pye, one

of these girls, is trying to humiliate Anne by calling her *an orphan*. Diana, as her only friend, utters the statement above to assert that Anne is not an orphan because she has been adopted by the Cuthberts. Diana uses an emphatic vocal tone to state what is on her mind and to bring about belief in her listeners.

3.2. Directives

Directives are the second most common illocutionary act in *Anne with an E*. Directives encourage the listener to take specific actions according to their wishes. Consider the following examples:

(i) Mr. Phillips: "Anne Shirley has a very bad temper. Now, stand here and stay put, and the rest of you pipe down!"

In episode three, "But what Is So Headstrong as Youth," at 41:10, this directive is said by Mr. Phillips, who uses a forceful vocal tone to prompt his listeners to comply with his command. In this episode, Mr. Phillips and the class are frightened by Anne's violence against Gilbert. After Anne is forbidden to speak with him, Gilbert tries to tease her. As a result of this, Anne accidentally slaps him with her slate. Mr. Phillips then calls her to the front and orders Anne to stand there. Following this, Mr. Phillips orders the class to be quiet. In this situation, his informal expression *pipe down* does not entail that Mr. Phillips has ordered his students to stop talking or making unnecessary noise so that he can continue teaching.

(ii) Anne: "Bring her over to the table! Hurry! Roll her onto her belly. Hold her feet. Come on, Minnie May, cough! Cough, Minnie May! Cough!"

In episode six, “Remorse Is the Poison of Life” at 04:52, Anne’s utterance is directive: she is giving a command to the listener. In this episode, Minnie May, Diana’s younger sister, suddenly develops symptoms of the croup. Thus, Diana comes to ask Anne a favor because Anne has specialized knowledge of this disease. While Minnie May’s condition is getting worse. Anne gives orders to Diana to help her prepare Minnie May for treatment and tells Minnie May to cough.

3.3. Expressives

Expressives are the third most common type of utterance in *Anne with an E*. They involve personal emotions or sentiments with respect to a particular matter, as exemplified below:

(i) Ruby: “*All my dresses will be ruined from the smoke!*”

In episode four, “An Inward Treasure Born” at 33:20, the above utterance forms an act expressing her grief. In this episode, Ruby is found crying in Anne’s room after her family’s house has been destroyed by a fire and she has been sent to stay with the Cuthberts. Anne tries to comfort Ruby with the story of Princess Cordelia and her gorgeous gown, but this only makes her realize that all her dresses must have been ruined in the fire.

(ii) Anne: “*Why don’t you give me that hammer and I’ll finish the job myself, if you’re too busy being a bully to get it done?*”

In the same episode, at 36 minutes, Anne’s above statement is an expressive utterance, as it expresses her fury concerning Billy’s speech to Ruby. In this episode, Anne and Ruby bring scones to Gillis’ house but then get humiliated by Billy Andrews, who suggests that they both should stay home and bake cookies. Anne loses her patience and scolds him, using an intense vocal tone, also expressing her emotion.

3.4. Commissives

This commissive act is the fourth type of utterance in *Anne with an E*. A commissive can take the form of making a promise. The speaker usually performs a commissive act with the intention of establishing an agreement with the lis-

tener. The following examples of commissive acts can be deduced from the instances below:

(i) Anne: “*I solemnly swear... to be faithful to my bosom friend, Diana Barry, for as long as the sun and moon shall endure.*”

The above utterance appears in the first episode, titled “*Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny*,” at 1:19:58. This forms a commissive act, as Anne makes a strong oath to become Diana’s faithful friend. In this context, Anne and Marilla receive an invitation to afternoon tea from William Barry, who has a daughter of Anne’s age. Mr. William Barry does this to check that Anne is good enough to be Diana’s friend. After accepting the invitation, Anne is told to be as neat as possible. She has to make the Barry family like her to become friends with Diana. After tea, Anne and Diana go for a walk in the garden. Anne tells Diana about what she imagines. Diana likes Anne, and Anne then asks Diana if she wants to be her friend and persuades her to swear that they will be best friends forever.

(ii) Matthew: “*Jerry and I will put things right at Green Gables and back as soon as we can.*”

In episode four, at 30:11, Matthew makes the above statement as a commissive act, promising that he and Jerry would return soon. In this episode, the villagers come to the Gillis’ house to help extinguish a housefire. After the fire is put out, Rachel announces that the Gillis family would be separated and put up with the Barrys, the Cuthberts, and her family. Mr. Lynde then indicates that the house could be repaired in a week if the villagers cooperated. In this context, Matthew uses a sincere tone in making sure that he and Jerry would return as soon as they can to help repair the house.

3.5. Declaratives

This declarative type of utterance is the least commonly encountered in *Anne with an E*. A declarative act encompasses the action of making an announcement. The speaker uses this declarative act to alter a situation. Some instances of this are provided below:

(i) Anne: “*Yes, I am. I don’t think I’ve ever been so excited in my whole life. Oh... my hands are shaking. Hoo. With this pen... I take*

you... Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert... to be my family forever. To call you mine... and to be yours. For always."

In episode two, "I Am No Bird, and No Net Ensnares Me," at 42:08, the above declarative speech appears, as Anne is making an announcement. In this episode, Anne is finally officially accepted into the Cuthbert family. Marilla and Matthew tell Anne that they hope that Anne will take their last name. Anne is thrilled, as this is the first time that she has had a family. Everyone drinks raspberry cordials to celebrate the Cuthbert family after Anne signs the family Bible and joins Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert's family forever.

(ii) Mrs. Barry: "*This is the last time my Diana will ever set foot in your house.*"

In episode five, at 29:45, Diana's mother makes the above announcement to Anne and Marilla. This is a declarative utterance, indicating that the speaker is announcing something that will change the situation in some way. The immediate context has held a tea party. Then, the tea party continues with only Anne and Diana. Anne buys wine and drinks it together with Diana, and the two become drunk. When Diana's mother sees the condition of the pair, she is very angry. She accuses Anne of being a bad influence on her daughter, and she tells her to end her friendship with Diana.

4. Discussion

The five categories of illocutionary acts, namely assertive, directives, commissive, expressive, and declaratives, are in focus in this study. These illocutionary acts are used in this study to analyze illocutionary acts made during the first season of the TV Series *Anne with an E*. The study findings indicate that all five types of illocutionary acts appear in the series. Assertives are the most common, making up a significant 40.72% of the entire dataset, as the characters in the drama frequently use assertive to convey opinions, personal perspectives and influence the beliefs of others. The next most common type is directives at 30.13%. Expressives accounted for 21.14%, while commissives were present in 7.26% of instances. Finally, declaratives are used the least, at only 0.86% of the total data. The analysis of these illocutionary acts provides valuable insights, including comprehension of the intentions of the characters in speech,

which is the dominant feature of illocutionary acts. In the first season, the main character of Anne consistently employs assertives, although the way that she expresses her thoughts seems unusual to others.

As has been found in several earlier studies of speech acts in filmed drama, all five types of illocutionary acts are found in *Anne with an E*^[10, 11, 13]. However, some studies have found different results, especially *Prison Break*, *You Are My Home*, and *My Lawyer, Mr Jo*^[9, 12, 15]. In *Prison Break*, only three types of illocutionary acts are found, namely, directives, commissive, and representatives^[12]. Meanwhile, *You Are My Home* features four types, namely, representatives, expressive, directives, and commissive^[9]. By contrast, *My Lawyer, Mr Jo* contains mainly declaratives in legal contexts^[15]. It is noted that directives dominate both *Prison Break* and *You Are My Home*, whereas assertives are most used in *Heroes* and *Anne with an E*. In essence, the prevalence of specific illocutionary acts in these series is associated with the genres. Each series, whether romantic, fantasy, or adventure, brings forth distinct storylines that influence the dialogue and the contextual usage of illocutionary acts.

In addition, an examination of illocutionary acts across films highlights the diverse ways in which language shapes interactions and narratives. For example, expressive acts, such as thanking, apologizing, and congratulating, are prominent in films such as *Night School*, *Big Four*, and *PR-Ku Mung Kowe*, which emphasizes their role in conveying emotions and fostering relationships^[19-21]. Directive utterances, including commands and requests, are instrumental in driving characters' actions and advancing plotlines in films such as *Big Four* and *The Summer I Turned Pretty*^[20, 22]. However, commissive acts, which involve commitments like promises and refusals, reflect characters' intentions, as seen in *Night-books* and *PR-Ku Mung Kowe*^[19, 23]. Finally, representative acts, used to assert or inform, can provide narrative depth and context in films such as *Big Four* and *PR-Ku Mung Kowe*^[19, 20].

Together, these types of speech acts enrich storytelling, shaping character dynamics and narrative progressions. They allow filmmakers to convey complex emotions and intentions, making narratives more engaging and relatable^[21]. For example, films such as *Onward*, *3600 Detik*, and *Kembang Api* incorporate all types of illocutionary acts, with expressive acts being the most prominent. These expressive acts

evoke emotional responses and inspire actions in the audience, as noted in previous studies^[24-26]. Consequently, they produce certain causal effects on the audience—referred to as perlocutionary acts. These acts not only enhance emotional engagement and propel the narrative but also present interpretative challenges. Factors such as situational context and the audience’s cultural background significantly shape the reception of these acts, potentially leading to misunderstandings if not carefully analyzed^[27].

Furthermore, the role of using speech acts extends beyond fictional contexts and has significant implications in real-life interactions. Unlike films, speech acts in political discourse are used for persuasion, negotiation, and authority. Political leaders frequently use assertive acts to state facts or express beliefs, while directives are employed to mobilize supporters or convey policies^[28, 29]. Commissive are also pivotal in forming commitments to future actions, fostering trust, or addressing promises during campaigns^[23, 30]. This multidimensional use of speech acts highlights their versatility and influence on audience perception and decision-making. For instance, customer service officers employ speech acts to maintain harmony and handle face-threatening situations in Javanese communication by adapting traditional styles to digital platforms like WhatsApp^[30]. Additionally, multimodal communication and historical perspectives are integral to the study of speech acts within specific cultural contexts, such as the Oganese language in transactional interactions^[29, 30].

5. Conclusions

This study examines the use of illocutionary acts—assertives, directives, commissive, expressive, and declaratives—found in the TV series *Anne with an E*. Assertives dominate at 40.72%, and they reflect the characters’ tendency to express opinions and influence others, in particular through Anne’s unique assertive communication style. Following assertives, directives (30.13%) and expressive (21.14%) are at second and third most common utterance forms, and commissive (7.26%) and declaratives (0.86%) are less frequent, highlighting the focus on assertive expression.

This aligns with studies of illocutionary acts conducted on other films, although there are variations due to genre and storyline. Assertives are prevalent in *Anne with an E*

and *Heroes*, while directives dominate in *Prison Break* and *You Are My Home*. Unique patterns, such as the inclusion of declaratives in legal contexts in *My Lawyer; Mr Jo*, indicate the ways in which genres shape characters’ speech and communicative strategies.

This implies that the distribution of illocutionary acts is influenced by genre and storyline, such that assertives dominating character-driven dramas such as *Anne with an E* and *Heroes*, while directives tend to be more prevalent in action and legal narratives, such as *Prison Break* and *My Lawyer; Mr Jo*, as communicative strategies align with thematic demands and audience engagement. The prominence of assertives in *Anne with an E* underscores their role in character building, showcasing Anne’s opinionated and expressive nature, which enhances her relatability. In addition, the limited but context-specific use of declaratives, particularly in legal settings, highlights their situational importance; this provides insight into scriptwriting in genres that require formal pronouncements.

The study of illocutionary acts in different genres and cultural contexts can provide material for linguistics studies. It deepens the understanding of how language functions across narrative structures, showcasing the role that speech acts play shaping character development, relationships, and audience engagement. Cross-genre and cultural analyses can uncover the interplay between language, cultural norms, and storytelling, which can enrich the knowledge of pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

In addition, the examination of audience perceptions of speech acts can highlight the impact of these on communication effectiveness and emotional resonance, providing practical applications for language teaching and media analysis. Finally, focused research on specific acts, such as declaratives, in formal or authority-driven contexts, enhances the understanding of their situational relevance and contributes to the broader study of discourse and language use in specialized settings.

Future research should examine illocutionary acts across diverse genres to uncover patterns and deviations, providing deeper insight into the ways that narrative structures shape language use. Comparative studies of cultural and linguistic variations could examine whether cultural norms influence the prevalence of certain speech acts in TV series. In addition, the investigation of audience perceptions could

show how different illocutionary acts affect emotional engagement and narrative comprehension. Longitudinal analyses could be adopted to track the evolution of types of speech acts in a series to determine how this would reflect character growth and the dynamics of central relationships. Focused studies on declaratives in authority-driven contexts, such as in political or historical dramas, could likewise illuminate their narrative significance.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, T.C.; methodology, T.C.; software, J.N.; validation, T.C., J.N., and R.T.; formal analysis, T.C. and J.N.; investigation, N.S. and R.T.; resources, J.N.; data curation, R.T. and N.S.; writing—original draft preparation, J.N., R.T., and N.S.; writing—review and editing, T.C.; visualization, J.N.; supervision, T.C.; project administration, T.C.; funding acquisition, T.C.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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