

A STUDY OF SPEECH ACTS IN YOUTH LITERATURE FROM LITTLE HOUSE IN THE BIG WOODS

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ABSTRACT

Abstract— This research examines speech acts in youth literature: “Little House in the Big Woods” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. This study aims to investigate speech acts appearing in this literature. Data were collected from the online text and analyzed following John R. Searle’s (1975) classification framework of speech acts.

305 utterances were analyzed. The findings revealed four major categories of speech acts. 1) Representative speech acts included affirmative, confirming, blaming, and concluding statements. 2) Directive speech acts comprised commanding, advising, questioning, warning, inviting, and requesting. 3) Expressive speech acts encompassed greeting, thanking, sympathizing, expressing gladness, commenting, refusing, and complimenting. 4) Commissive speech acts included promising and reassuring. Declaration speech acts were not identified. Moreover, the findings revealed representatives as most prevalent at 190 utterances (62%), followed by directives at 71 utterances (23%), expressives at 43 utterances (14%), and commissives at 2 utterances (1%). These results demonstrate the diverse verbal communication patterns employed in classic youth literature, showing how speech acts function to develop character interactions and narrative progression in children’s fiction.

Keywords— Speech act, Utterance, Youth literature

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to examine types of speech acts demonstrated in “Little House in the Big Woods” by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

INTRODUCTION

Speech acts are the use of language as a tool for communicating to others and indicating the speaker's intentions. Communication can be expressed in various forms of words, such as requests, commands, and apologies. Additionally, they can help listeners understand the purpose behind the speaker’s intended communication. According to Sintamutiani et al. (2019), communication is the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another by using of symbols with semiotic rules that are understood simultaneously. People communicate through various forms, including spoken and written forms.

Literature can be a useful field for finding speech acts because it represents various speech acts in different situations. Each character in literature produces various utterances. Language use in youth literature provides active and straightforward language. The vocabulary might be less academic. In this study, the researcher interested in analyzing speech acts used a youth literature entitled “Little House in the Big Woods.” It was written by an American writer named Laura Ingalls Wilder. The writer adopted her past experience around 1870. It is a semi-

autobiographical children's novel that narrates the life of a pioneer family living in the dense forests of Wisconsin. The story narrates how the family interacts with nature and lives a self-sufficient life. The family lives in a log cabin and describes different seasonal activities such as food hunting, food gathering, and food preservation. The story emphasizes the importance of their environment for survival.

There were several reasons for choosing “Little House in the Big Woods” as the object of this research. The literature is an American classic that has been translated into over 40 languages, such as French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, and Thai. It demonstrates global literary significance, making it appropriate for analysis. There is only the original version. No one has ever adapted the content into a new version. Moreover, the literature received the prestigious Newbery Honor. It is one of the most respected awards in American children’s literature.

LITERATURE & THEORY

The speech act theory is a theory of language that was introduced by John Austin (1962) in his book “How to Do Things with Words.” His theory illustrated that there are three acts that occur simultaneously while communicating. A locutionary act describes only the action of saying something. An illocutionary act is to do something by saying it. A perlocutionary act is performed by means of what is said. Austin (2009) focused on the relationship between language and act. The speech act believed that people not only produce sentences in communicating, but they also perform an action. People do something or they make someone else do something with their words. Some of them are thanking, requesting, and promising. Austin (2009) classified the performatives under five headings. 1) Verdictive, related to the use of judgment for giving a verdict; 2) Executives, dealing with using power or asserting influence, such as appointing, voting, arguing, advising, and warning; 3) Commissives, having the commitment to do something in the future, including declared intention; 4) Behabitives, about expressing attitude; 5) Expositive pertains to clarification of reason, argument, and communication.

Searle (1975) reviews Austin’s theory and developed them. According to Searle (1975), speech acts were categorized into five types.

1. Directives (ordering, requesting, forbidding) aimed at leading the hearer to do something.
2. Declarations (resigning, appointing) aim to create a change.
3. Commissives (promising) show that the speaker undertakes to do something by expressing an intention.
4. Expressives (apologizing, celebrating) reveal the speaker's state of mind with regard to a situation.
5. Representatives/Assertives (suggesting, stating) refer to the speakers’ statements or assertions with their intention to convey information or express beliefs.

There has been research on language aspects of “Little House in the Big Woods.” Romines (1997) analyzes language use and dialect representation in the literature. Zaporozhets and Stodolinska (2021) studied the portrayal of the cultural concept “BORDER” from the perspective of a female child narrator in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s literary discourse, focusing on the depiction of territorial and metaphorical borders to establish the possible influences and

interrelations. Runyeon-Odeberg (2020) investigated of Authorship Based on Selected Works of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane. Register and lexical features were investigated.

In addition, “Little House in the Big Woods” was adopted for teaching English in the classroom. Giyatmi et al. (2018) provided the learners with authentic language materials that are effective for improving the learners’ communicative competence. Giyatmi et al. (2015) found the cultural elements in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House in the Big Woods to support English teaching.

In Thailand, speech acts were observed in various contexts and languages. Attapol Khamkhien (2022) investigates how Thai L2 students realize the speech act of refusal to the initiating acts of suggestions, offers, requests, and invitations with regard to the status of the interlocutor. Ambele (2019) studied the social speech act of refusal strategies in English among university students in the southern part of Thailand. Pan & Sanpatchayapong (2021) explore the frequency of pragmatic contents represented by the six speech acts of “refusal,” “request,” “complaint,” “apology,” “gratitude,” and “suggestion” in a set of Chinese intermediate textbooks. Pinsri, S. (2024) investigates the use of apologies in the beginner-level Japanese textbook, *Minna no Nihongo*. This research aims to offer new perspectives on the teaching and learning of apologies in Japanese by analyzing the frequency and contexts of apology expressions in dialogues within the textbook. Lai and Bumrungsuk (2024) studied speech acts of gratitude in Thai. However, little research has been undertaken to study the speech acts in youth literature. Language in this literature is rich, authentic dialogue depicting 19th-century family communication, which is an ideal to study speech acts in this literature. Furthermore, it relates to English language education in terms of teaching communicative competence.

METHODS

This study is a descriptive qualitative research design in which the data is collected from non-numerical data. The research subjects included all the characters in the literature. The conversations between characters that contain utterances are also the research subjects. The data collected consisted of utterances produced by the characters during their conversations in the literature. The data had been analyzed through Searle’s theory, which included five kinds of illocutionary acts (declarative, representative, expressive, directive, and commissive).

The primary data source was conversations among the characters in “Little House in the Big Woods”, written by Laura Ingalls Wilder in the paperback version. The researcher read all the movie script to understand the utterances produced by the research subjects. The collected data were described and analyzed in relation to Searle's theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of “Little House in the Big Woods” show 305 utterances from thirteen chapters. The obtained results can be directly classified into five varieties of speech acts: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

Table 1 Frequency of Speech Acts Across Chapters

Chapter	Speech act classification					Number	Percentage
	representative	directive	expressive	commissive	declaration		
1. Little House in the big woods	8	3	0	0	0	11	3.61
2. Winter Day and winter night	18	4	2	0	0	24	7.87
3. The long rifle	22	5	1	0	0	28	9.18
4. Christmas	26	9	6	0	0	41	13.44
5. Sundays	26	6	2	0	0	34	11.15
6. Two big bears	23	8	7	1	0	39	12.79
7. The sugar snow	18	8	2	1	0	29	9.51
8. Dance at grandpa's	3	7	6	0	0	16	5.25
9. Going to town	5	8	8	0	0	21	6.89
10. Summer time	22	6	3	0	0	31	10.16
11. Harvest	1	1	2	0	0	4	1.31
12. The Wonderful machine	1	2	2	0	0	5	1.64
13. The deer in the wood	17	3	2	0	0	22	7.21
TOTAL	190	70	43	2	0	305	100

According to Table 1, the results represented 4 types of speech acts. Representative speech acts were found in 190 utterances. Directive speech acts were found in 70 utterances. Expressive were found in 43 utterances. Commissive utterances were found in 2 utterances. Declarations were not found in the results.

A. Representative speech acts

“Bite it,” said Pa, and his blue eyes twinkled.

Each bit off one little crinkle, and it was sweet. It crumbled in their mouths. It was better even than their Christmas candy.

“Maple sugar,” said Pa. (Laura, 1932, p. 121)

The statement describes a situation in which the children are eating sweets that taste better than the candy they typically have on Christmas Day. The children did not know what it was. The father told them it was sugar that was made from maple trees. The father's purpose was to inform them about what he was eating.

B. Directive speech acts

Ma said, “Laura, walk back to the house.”

So Laura turned around and began to walk toward the house. Ma came behind her. When they had gone part way, Ma snatched her up, lantern and all, and ran. Ma ran with her into the house, and slammed the door. (Laura, 1932, p.105)

In the above utterance, when the mother said, “Laura, go back inside,” Laura turned around and walked back into the house as instructed by her mother. This indicates that the mother’s utterance successfully conveyed their message to Laura, resulting in Laura returning inside. This phrase is therefore a directive utterance because Laura acted according to her mother’s instruction.

C. Expressive speech acts

When all the trading was done, the storekeeper gave Mary and Laura each a piece of candy. They were so astonished and so pleased that they just stood looking at their candies.

Then Mary remembered and said, “Thank you.” (Laura, 1932, p.171)

Expressive speech acts are utterances that aim to let others know whether you like, dislike, or admire something. They contain words that describe the speaker’s emotions, feelings, and attitudes toward the listener or the surrounding context. The speaker does not intend for the listener to take any action or to convey important information.

According to the above text, the storekeeper gave Mary and Laura each a piece of dessert. They were both thrilled. Mary, stunned by the pastries, remembered and said, “Thank you,” because she wanted to express her positive feelings. This phrase, which demonstrates good manners when someone else gives you a gift, can be classified as a verbal expression of gratitude.

D. Commissive speech acts

“Can’t I go out to play, Ma?” Laura asked, and Ma said:

“May, Laura.”

“May I go out to play?” she asked.

“You may tomorrow,” Ma promised.

The text describes a situation in which Laura asked her mother if she could go outside to play. And Mom answered Laura, “You may tomorrow,” Mom promised. Mom’s words conveyed to the listener that the words are a promise. Once Mother made that statement, she had to be firm about the promise she had made to her daughter. The phrase means that tomorrow Laura will definitely be able to go outside and play.

The results revealed that no “declaration” speech act was found. “Little House in the Big Woods” involves the use of language to tell the story of Laura's family. It primarily focuses on storytelling about the lives of people in pre-modern America. Additionally, the author’s purpose was to tell one's own childhood story through the children's literature work.

The results correspond with the study of illocutionary acts in tourism slogans. Ganmanee et al. (2023)

found that approximately 70 percent of tourism slogans employed the illocutionary act of the representative type, slogans to introduce travel facts in each country. Satavetin (2018) also found that representative speech acts were frequently used for price negotiation. Dorinë Rakaj

(2023) collected data from the movie "Hive." The characters in the movie employed representative speech acts the most.

The results demonstrated that there is no declaration speech act in the literature. The declaration speech act was not found in this study because this type of speech is typically classified as announcements, which are frequently found in formal contexts. Examples of such announcements include opening remarks, appointments, and so on. However, the content in this youth literature focuses on telling the story. It tells more about lifestyle, with no formal context, so no group of declaration speech acts was found. Dorinë Rakaj (2023) collected data from the movie "Hive." Declarations were not found in the movie. In addition, the results of this study are consistent with a study conducted by Dewi (2017).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This study examined the speech acts present in Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House in the Big Woods." The classification of speech acts followed Searle's (1975) classification framework. 305 utterances across thirteen chapters were analyzed. The results revealed four categories of speech acts. The findings revealed representative speech acts were found the most with 190 utterances (62%). It reflected the literature's primary function as storytelling about life in nineteenth-century America. Directive speech acts were found in 70 utterances (23%). It represented how parents interacted with their child. Expressive speech acts were found in 43 utterances (14%). It represented the emotion of each character. Commissive appeared the least with only two utterances. Declaration speech acts were not presented in the literature. Declaration speech acts are typically found in formal contexts involving official announcements or institutional authority. Therefore, their absence aligns with the main story setting. The goal of the writer was to preserve memories of life. Future research could explore many dimensions of speech acts. The comparative of speech acts across each chapter. Cross cultural could be studied in translation of the work. Also, the investigation of speech acts in contemporary youth literature.

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