

JO MARCH'S SPEECH ACT IN GRETA GERWIG'S FILM LITTLE WOMEN

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ABSTRACT. *This study investigates the pragmatic function of speech acts performed by Jo March in Greta Gerwig's film Little Women (2019). By adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, this research analyzes Jo's utterances using Speech Act Theory and feminist linguistic perspectives to explore how her language reflects resistance to 19th-century gender norms. Data were collected through transcription of selected scenes and categorized using Searle's taxonomy—assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. A feminist reading was applied to examine how each speech act functions to assert identity and challenge patriarchy. The analysis reveals that Jo's utterances express autonomy, emotional depth, and social critique, reflecting the broader feminist agenda embedded in her linguistic choices. Her speech not only conveys personal aspirations but also becomes a performative act of resistance, making her character a powerful voice for gender equality in modern cinema.*

Keywords: Jo March, speech acts; feminist linguistics; film pragmatics; language and identity.

ABSTRAK. Penelitian ini menganalisis fungsi pragmatik tindak tutur Jo March dalam film *Little Women* (2019) karya Greta Gerwig. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, studi ini menelaah tuturan Jo melalui teori tindak tutur dan perspektif linguistik feminis untuk mengungkap bagaimana bahasa mencerminkan resistensi terhadap norma gender abad ke-19. Data dikumpulkan melalui transkripsi dialog terpilih dan dikategorikan menggunakan taksonomi Searle—assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, dan declarations. Analisis feminis digunakan untuk menilai bagaimana tiap tuturan berfungsi sebagai sarana afirmasi identitas dan perlawanan terhadap patriarki. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa ujaran Jo merefleksikan otonomi, kedalaman emosional, dan kritik sosial, memperlihatkan agenda feminis yang melekat dalam pilihan bahasanya. Bahasa yang digunakan Jo tidak hanya menyampaikan aspirasi pribadi, tetapi juga menjadi tindakan performatif perlawanan, menjadikannya simbol suara perempuan dalam sinema modern.

Kata kunci: Jo March, tindak tutur; linguistik feminis; pragmatik film; bahasa dan identitas

INTRODUCTION

The early 21st century has witnessed a significant rise in feminist cinema, marked by an increasing number of female directors and screenwriters utilizing the medium to articulate women's experiences and societal challenges (Lauzen, 2020; Wood, 2011). Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of *Little Women* stands out as a prime example, reimagining the classic narrative of sisterhood, ambition, and resistance against 19th-century gender expectations through its portrayal of Jo March. Jo embodies female independence, emotional complexity, and the pursuit of personal freedom, challenging traditional roles by asserting her desire for a writing career and an autonomous life. The film thus transcends typical period dramas, engaging critically with feminist issues by presenting women as complex thinkers and creators rather than mere romantic interests (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000).

In cinematic storytelling, dialogue is a powerful tool for character, plot, and thematic development. Speech act theory, as established by Austin (1962) and expanded by Searle (1969), provides an essential framework for analyzing the functions performed

through language, revealing character intentions, relationships, and internal struggles, while also reflecting broader social dynamics. From a feminist perspective, language is inherently non-neutral, serving as a vehicle that both reflects and perpetuates societal power relations, often privileging male norms (Lakoff, 1975; Spender, 1980). Within this context, the speech acts of female characters become crucial indicators of agency and resistance. Jo March exemplifies this linguistic defiance; her assertive and directive speech acts signify her refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations, embodying the feminist principle that language itself can be an act of social resistance (Cameron, 2005).

Therefore, this research investigates Jo March's speech acts in *Little Women* (2019) to understand how her language reflects her feminist identity and challenges societal norms. By identifying and analyzing dominant types of speech acts, this study aims to reveal how Jo's dialogue functions as both personal expression and social resistance. The research is guided by two main questions: What are the dominant types of speech acts employed by Jo March and how do they contribute to her character development and feminist identity? And how do Jo March's speech acts reflect and challenge the societal

expectations of women in the 19th century through a feminist lens?

The objectives are to identify and categorize Jo's speech acts, analyze how they challenge or reinforce norms, and examine their relationship with her aspirations. This study's significance is threefold: it contributes to film studies through linguistic analysis of character and theme, enriches language studies (pragmatics and discourse analysis) by demonstrating speech act function in audiovisual narratives, and deepens gender studies by highlighting how female voices resist or replicate social norms, inspiring critical reflection on language, identity, and equality in media narratives.

METHODE

This study adopts a **qualitative descriptive approach** to analyze the speech acts performed by Jo March in Greta Gerwig's 2019 film *Little Women*. The core focus of this research is to investigate how Jo's linguistic choices reflect her feminist identity and actively challenge the prevalent 19th-century gender norms. This analysis is firmly rooted in **pragmatic theory**, specifically drawing upon **Speech Act Theory** as discussed in contemporary linguistic research (Curcó, 2020; Kissine, 2021). Furthermore, the study is enriched by **critical insights from feminist linguistics**, as revisited and recontextualized in recent studies on language, identity, and gender representation in media discourse (Mills, 2020; Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2019).

The research design is **library-based** and employs a **descriptive-qualitative approach**, chosen for its suitability in interpreting the nuanced meaning and functional aspects behind Jo March's utterances. This design is particularly appropriate as the study does not rely on numerical data but rather on the **contextual and functional interpretation of language** (Levitt, 2021; Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). The primary data source for this investigation is the **film script and carefully selected dialogue excerpts** from *Little Women* (2019), specifically those involving the character Jo March. Supporting materials include relevant visual scenes from the film itself, alongside pertinent literature on Speech Act Theory and feminist language studies.

Data were systematically collected through **close viewing and meticulous transcription** of scenes featuring Jo March. Particular attention was paid to instances where she articulates personal beliefs, actively challenges social expectations, or engages in meaningful, assertive interactions with other characters. The researcher employed

a **purposive sampling technique**, specifically selecting utterances that contained clear speech acts exhibiting significant social or emotional weight, with an emphasis on scenes illustrating Jo's linguistic assertiveness and resistance to patriarchal norms (Palinkas et al., 2019; Gentles et al., 2022).

The theoretical foundation underpinning this study is **Speech Act Theory**, which distinguishes between **locutionary acts** (the literal meaning), **illocutionary acts** (the speaker's intention), and **perlocutionary acts** (the utterance's effect on the listener) (Curcó, 2020; Kissine, 2021). Searle's updated classification is used to categorize Jo's utterances into **assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations**, based on their communicative function (Márquez-Reiter, 2019; Kissine, 2021). This framework is complemented by **feminist linguistic theory**, which views language as a medium for constructing, maintaining, or contesting gender roles, especially in relation to dominant patriarchal structures (Mills, 2020; Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2019). Jo's speech is thus analyzed as a **site of resistance to patriarchal language norms** and as a powerful **assertion of agency** and identity.

Data analysis followed a multi-step process: transcription of selected dialogues with contextual markers; categorization of each utterance using Searle's taxonomy; interpretation of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect in relation to Jo's character and feminist themes; and a feminist reading to assess how each speech act challenged or reinforced 19th-century gender expectations. Finally, thematic analysis identified patterns across Jo's speech, grouping them into broader themes like autonomy, defiance, emotional expression, and aspiration. This methodology allows for a deep exploration of language as a personal and political act in media narratives, with Jo March's dialogue serving as a case study for how women use speech to assert identity, resist norms, and inspire social reflection.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study's subject was Greta Gerwig's 2019 film "*Little Women*". The YouTube streaming app's screening process served as the data source for this study. First, the researcher recorded the conversation in Greta Gerwig's film "*Little Women*" (2019) and then turned it into textual data. The following findings were derived from the analysis carried out in this study:

Mapping the Speech Acts of Jo March in Film *Types of Locutionary Acts in Jo March's Dialogue*

Jo March employs a diverse range of locutionary acts, including declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamative utterances, each contributing to the depiction of her dynamic personality. Declarative sentences, such as her resolute *"I'm going to be a writer"* (Utterance 1), firmly establish her ambitions and life goals, demonstrating not just a desire but a strong determination to achieve them. Similarly, her declaration *"I'm not going to sit around and wait for someone to save me"* (Utterance 2) powerfully conveys her independence and rejection of societal expectations for women during her time. In moments of assertiveness, Jo frequently uses imperative acts; for instance, *"Don't tell me what I can and can't do!"* (Utterance 3) directly expresses her demand for freedom and her refusal to be constrained. Her direct command *"Give me that book!"* (Utterance 4) further illustrates her firm and straightforward nature. Beyond declarations and commands, Jo also voices her internal struggles through interrogative acts. Questions like *"What am I supposed to do with my life?"* (Utterance 5) reveal her deep-seated doubts and search for purpose, while *"What if I never find anyone who loves me for who I am?"* (Utterance 6) exposes her anxieties about love and acceptance. Lastly, exclamative utterances capture Jo's vivid emotional responses, as seen in *"I'm so excited!"* (Utterance 8), which portrays her infectious enthusiasm and positive emotions.

Illocutionary Speech Act Types in Jo March's Dialogue

Jo March's dialogue is particularly rich in illocutionary acts, revealing her underlying intentions and beliefs. Assertives (or representatives) form a significant portion of her speech, reflecting her convictions and aspirations. Her recurring statement *"I'm going to be a writer"* (Utterance 9) not only expresses a fact but also functions as an assertion of her life's true calling and determination. Beyond personal goals, Jo uses assertives to challenge broader societal norms, as in *"Women can do anything men can do"* (Utterance 10), a powerful declaration of her belief in gender equality. Her pragmatic views are also evident in statements like *"Money is the end and aim of my mercenary existence"* (Utterance 11), indicating her belief in financial independence as a means to freedom, further reinforced by *"So the way to be an unmarried woman is to be rich"* (Utterance 12). Directives are another prominent type, showcasing Jo's active agency. Her forceful *"Don't tell me what I can and can't do!"* (Utterance 13) functions implicitly as an order to cease restrictive behavior. Furthermore, Jo demonstrates

her commitment through commissives. Her personal vow, *"I won't give up on my dream of becoming a writer"* (Utterance 15), highlights her unwavering dedication to her literary aspirations, while a direct promise like *"I promise I'll write you every day"* (Utterance 16) illustrates her commitment to others.

Perlocutionary Speech Act Types in Jo March's Dialogue

The perlocutionary acts performed by Jo March's utterances reveal the intended effects on her listeners, ranging from educating and persuading to encouraging and even irritating. Many of Jo's statements aim to *"bring the hearer to learn that"* certain truths or perspectives are important. For instance, her assertion *"Women can do anything men can do"* (Utterance 17) is designed to shift perceptions about women's capabilities, while *"Just because something is different doesn't mean it's wrong"* (Utterance 19) seeks to impart the value of acceptance and tolerance. Jo also frequently employs speech acts to persuade, as seen when she encourages her siblings with *"Come on, let's go explore the attic. I bet we'll find something interesting"* (Utterance 20), enticing them into adventure. Similarly, her encouragement to a sister, *"You have so much talent. You should really consider publishing your stories"* (Utterance 21), aims to convince her to pursue her dreams. Encouragement is a hallmark of Jo's supportive nature, evident in phrases like *"Don't give up on your dreams, Meg"* (Utterance 22) and *"You can do it, Amy!"* (Utterance 22), intended to bolster her sisters' confidence. Conversely, Jo's dialogue can also produce an "irritating" effect, particularly when her bluntness clashes with others' sensibilities. Her sarcastic *"Why don't you just marry a rich man and be done with it?"* (Utterance 23), directed at Meg, and her dismissive *"Oh, please. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard"* (Utterance 24) serve to mock and challenge, often eliciting discomfort or annoyance in her interlocutors.

Beyond Boundaries: Jo March and the Redefinition of Femininity

Jo March embodies the paradoxes of her era, simultaneously advocating for female independence and questioning conventional gender roles while ultimately complying with certain dominant social norms. Her speech acts in *Little Women* (2019) illuminate this nuanced interplay, both challenging and reinforcing 19th-century expectations for women.

Jo's challenges to societal norms are evident in her rejection of domesticity, asserting her preference

for independence and a writing career over marriage and motherhood. She further demonstrates this by asserting intellectual independence, pursuing writing and education in fields largely closed to women, thereby subverting notions of female intellectual inferiority. Her refusal of conventional gender roles is also manifest in her tomboyish demeanor and unconventional conduct, directly contradicting feminine expectations.

Conversely, Jo's actions also reinforce certain social norms. Her focus on family remains paramount, prioritizing her mother's and sisters' welfare, which aligns with the traditional female role in household care. Despite initial opposition, her final acceptance of marriage with Professor Bhaer, though unorthodox, ultimately supports the societal view of marriage as a pinnacle of female fulfillment. Moreover, her dependency on male support, particularly from her father and Professor Bhaer for emotional and financial assistance, perpetuates the societal system where women were economically reliant on men.

Words as a Mirror of the Soul: How Speech Acts Shape Jo March's Identity

Jo March's speech acts serve as powerful instruments for self-definition, navigating societal pressures, and achieving personal and professional objectives. Her linguistic performances in *Little Women* are intricately linked to her aspirations and identity.

Through intellectual pursuits and assertive speech acts, Jo articulates strong ideas on various topics, from literature to social issues, enabling her to communicate effectively and challenge conventions. Her participation in vigorous debates fosters critical thinking and intellectual growth. Her independence is underscored by directive speech acts, as she makes requests and demands to assert autonomy, bargain for freedom, and seek acknowledgment for her artistic aspirations. She also provides instructions and counsel to her younger sisters, reflecting her desire to empower others.

Expressive speech acts reveal Jo's emotional depth, as she freely displays emotions from joy to dissatisfaction, managing her feelings and strengthening family bonds. Her consistent sharing of literary aspirations through these expressions is crucial for her self-discovery and resilience. Finally, commissive speech acts demonstrate her professional development, particularly through creating commitments and promises to herself and others to pursue her literary goals, providing direction and motivation to overcome challenges.

CONCLUSION

Jo March's speech act in Greta Gerwig's film *Little Women* (2019) which focuses on how her linguistic choices reflect and challenge the societal constraints placed on women in 19th-century, showed that Jo uses a variety of speech acts, including locution, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. In her directive speech acts, Jo shows her agency by using language to influence others, make requests, and direct her own life path; in her expressive speech acts, Jo reveals her emotional depth and her struggles to balance her personal desires with those of society. Lastly, by making vows and commitments to herself and her loved ones, her commissive speech acts demonstrate her dedication to her career and personal objectives. The importance of language as a vehicle for social transformation is shown by this investigation. In addition to navigating the difficulties of her era, Jo March's potent use of language encourages people to reject social norms and follow their own dreams.

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