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An Analysis of Illocutionary Acts in Alcott's *The Little Women*: A Pragmatic Study

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ABSTRACT
Language plays an important role in shaping character development in literary works, particularly in portraying women's voices within specific social contexts. This study aims to analyze how illocutionary acts reflect the character development of the four March sisters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy in Louisa May Alcott's *The Little Women*. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with a pragmatic approach, focusing on speech act theory proposed by Searle. The data source of this study is the novel *The Little Women*, specifically the utterances produced by the four main female characters. Data were collected through documentation techniques, involving careful reading, identifying, and classifying utterances that contain illocutionary acts. The data were analyzed by categorizing the utterances into types of illocutionary acts and interpreting their functions in relation to character development and 19th-century social context. The findings reveal that each character demonstrates distinct dominant illocutionary acts that reflect her personality and personal growth. Jo frequently uses assertive and directive acts, indicating her independence and resistance to gender norms, while Meg's speech shows internal conflict between desire and social expectations. Beth's expressive acts reflect her gentle and selfless nature, whereas Amy's assertive acts illustrate her ambition and maturity. These results show that illocutionary acts significantly contribute to character development in the novel. This study implies that speech act analysis can enhance literary interpretation and support the teaching of pragmatics through literary texts.

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies how meaning is constructed and interpreted in context. Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker or writer and interpreted by a listener or reader, emphasizing that meaning cannot be separated from context. Similarly, Leech (1983) explains that pragmatics focuses on how utterances gain meaning in particular situations rather than through linguistic form alone. Mey (2001) further expands the scope of pragmatics by highlighting its social dimension, stating that pragmatics examines language use as shaped by social and cultural conditions. In line with this view, Culpeper and Haugh (2014) argue that pragmatics investigates how speakers perform actions, manage relationships, and negotiate meaning in real communicative situations. These perspectives show that pragmatics is concerned not only with language structure but also with intention, context, and social interaction.

One of the central theories within pragmatics is speech act theory, which explains how people use language to perform actions. Austin (1962) introduced the idea that utterances do not only convey information but also perform actions, such as requesting, promising, or apologizing. He classified speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Building on Austin's work, Searle (1969) emphasized that illocutionary acts are the core units of communication because they reflect the speaker's intention in producing an utterance. Later, Searle (1979) categorized illocutionary acts into

five types: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These categories explain how speech functions in everyday conversation, where speakers use language to state beliefs, influence others, express emotions, commit to actions, or create social changes.

Speech act theory can be applied not only to real-life conversations but also to fictional dialogue in literary works. According to Chapman and Clark (2019), conversations in novels function pragmatically in the same way as everyday speech because characters use language to express intentions, emotions, and social relationships. Culpeper and Haugh (2014) note that literary dialogue reflects communicative actions shaped by context, power relations, and social norms. Therefore, analyzing speech acts in novels allows researchers to interpret how characters communicate meaning beyond the literal level. In the context of Louisa May Alcott's *The Little Women*, the conversations among characters provide rich data for examining how language functions as a tool for expressing identity, negotiating roles, and responding to social expectations.

The Little Women (1868) is a classic American novel by Louisa May Alcott that portrays the lives of four sisters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy March growing up during the American Civil War. The novel focuses on family relationships, moral values, womanhood, and personal growth within 19th-century social norms. Scholars have widely discussed *The Little Women* as a feminist text that challenges traditional gender roles through its depiction of independent female characters (Gaspersz et al., 2023; Rosemary & Arianto, 2023). Alcott's use of dialogue plays a crucial role in revealing the personalities, emotions, and development of each sister. Therefore, *The Little Women* is an appropriate object of study because it offers rich conversational data that reflects both individual character development and broader social values.

Previous studies have analyzed *The Little Women* from various perspectives, particularly feminist criticism and thematic literary analysis, highlighting women's resistance to traditional gender roles (Gaspersz et al., 2023; Rosemary & Arianto, 2023). Other research has applied speech act theory to novels and films using Searle's framework, demonstrating that illocutionary acts play an important role in revealing character intentions, emotional development, and interpersonal relationships (Hendriyani & Pratiwy, 2024; Rahmawati, 2021; Nurjannah, 2025). Although these studies provide valuable insights into pragmatics, speech acts, and literary interpretation, they generally focus on either broad speech act classification or thematic analysis. They do not specifically examine how illocutionary acts function in the everyday conversations of female characters within close relational contexts such as sisterhood, nor do they adequately consider the historical and social setting of the 19th century. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by integrating speech act theory, character development, and historical context to analyze the illocutionary acts of Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy in *The Little Women*, revealing how language functions as a tool for identity construction and social interaction.

The objectives of this study are to identify the types of illocutionary acts used by the March sisters in *The Little Women* and to analyze how these speech acts reflect their character development and social interaction. Theoretically, this research contributes to pragmatic studies by demonstrating how speech act theory can be applied to literary texts to reveal character construction and social meaning. Practically, this study provides insights for students and educators in linguistics and literature by showing how pragmatic analysis can enhance the understanding of fictional dialogue and make abstract linguistic concepts more accessible through literary narratives.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on how meaning is produced and interpreted in relation to context. Unlike semantics, which examines meaning at the level of words and sentences, pragmatics considers how speakers and hearers understand meaning based on situational, social, and cultural factors. Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker or writer and interpreted by a listener or reader, emphasizing that meaning depends on context rather than linguistic form alone. Similarly, Leech (1983) explains that pragmatics examines how utterances acquire meaning within particular situations, highlighting the role of speaker intention and contextual information. These definitions show that pragmatics is concerned with how language is used to convey intended meaning in real communicative situations.

Pragmatics also examines language as a form of social action. Mey (2001) argues that pragmatics studies language use as shaped by social conditions, norms, and cultural expectations. This perspective emphasizes that communication is not neutral but influenced by power relations, social roles, and shared values. Culpeper and Haugh (2014) further state that pragmatics investigates how speakers perform actions, manage interpersonal relationships, and negotiate meaning through language. From this view, utterances function not only as carriers of information but also as tools for expressing identity, emotion,

and social positioning. Therefore, pragmatics provides an essential framework for analyzing how meaning, intention, and social context interact in both everyday communication and literary discourse.

Illocutionary Acts

Speech act theory explains how speakers use language to perform actions rather than merely to convey information. Austin (1962) first introduced this concept by distinguishing three levels of action in an utterance: locutionary acts (the act of saying something), illocutionary acts (the speaker's intended function), and perlocutionary acts (the effect on the hearer). Among these, illocutionary acts are central because they represent what speakers do in saying something, such as asserting, requesting, promising, or expressing feelings. Searle (1969) further emphasized that illocutionary acts are the basic units of communication, as they reveal the speaker's intention within a particular context.

Searle (1979) classified illocutionary acts into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Assertive acts commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition, directives aim to get the hearer to do something, commissives commit the speaker to a future action, expressives convey the speaker's psychological state, and declarations bring about changes in social reality. This classification provides a systematic framework for analyzing how language functions in interaction. In conversational contexts, these categories help explain how speakers use utterances to express beliefs, manage relationships, and negotiate social roles.

In this study, the analysis is delimited to illocutionary acts as classified by Searle (1979), specifically assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts found in the dialogue of the four March sisters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy in *The Little Women*. Locutionary and perlocutionary acts are not examined because the focus of the research is on the communicative intentions embedded in the characters' utterances rather than their formal structure or effects on listeners. By limiting the analysis to illocutionary acts, this study aims to clearly identify how each character uses language to express identity, emotion, and personal growth within the social and cultural context of 19th-century America.

METHOD

In conducting this study, the researcher employed a descriptive qualitative method to analyze language use and meaning in a literary text. Creswell (2014) states that qualitative research is an approach to understanding and exploring the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social or human phenomena, making it appropriate for examining dialogue and interpretation in fiction. This study specifically applied document analysis, as the data were obtained from a written literary work. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed or electronic documents in order to gain understanding and interpret meaning. The primary data source of this research is Louisa May Alcott's novel *The Little Women*, focusing on the dialogues of the March sisters. To analyze the data, the study employed Searle's (1979) speech act theory as the main analytical framework, which classifies illocutionary acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. This framework enabled the researcher to systematically identify and interpret how each sister uses illocutionary acts to express intention, emotion, and personal development throughout the narrative.

The data were taken from two sources: The primary data source of this study is the novel *The Little Women* written by Louisa May Alcott, originally published in 1868 and reprinted in the Penguin Classics edition (2007) by Penguin Books, London. This study uses the complete and unabridged version that combines both volumes of the novel. The Penguin Classics (2007) edition consists of 47 chapters and contains approximately 759 pages, including the full narrative of the March sisters' lives from childhood to adulthood. This novel was selected as the primary data source because it provides rich and extensive dialogue among the four main characters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy which allows for a systematic analysis of illocutionary acts and character development within the social and cultural context of 19th-century America.

The second are from any other books or articles that have the relevant materials to the topic of the research, as the secondary sources. These include scholarly articles on speech act theory proposed by John R. Searle (1979) within the field of pragmatics. Pragmatics in this research is understood as the study of meaning in context, following the definition by Yule (1996) and further supported by Leech (1983), who emphasize the role of speaker intention and situational context in interpreting utterances, literary analysis of *The Little Women* and studies on character development in literature (Gaspersz et al., 2023; Rosemary & Arianto, 2023)..

Data collection in this study was conducted using documentation and note-taking techniques. The data were obtained from Louisa May Alcott's novel *The Little Women* and consist of dialogues and

utterances produced by the four March sisters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy that contain illocutionary acts. Documentation was used to systematically collect written data from the novel, as defined by Arikunto (2002) as the process of searching for data from written sources such as books and transcripts. Note-taking was employed to record relevant utterances accurately and consistently during the reading process, in line with Hornby's (2010) definition of note-taking as paying close attention in order to remember important information. The researcher read the novel thoroughly several times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline and context, then identified and selected dialogues involving the March sisters that contained illocutionary acts. Each selected utterance was written down along with its surrounding context to maintain interpretive accuracy and was organized systematically into a data table including the page number, character name, direct quotation, contextual description, type of illocutionary act based on Searle's classification, and the stage of the narrative (early, middle, or late). This procedure ensured that the data were collected in a systematic, reliable, and context-sensitive manner. The analysis process followed Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) three steps of data analysis:

1. Data Condensation
   In the first step, data condensation, the researcher selects the dialogues and utterances in *The Little Women* that contain illocutionary acts. The researcher focused specifically on the speech of the four March sisters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy. Each selected utterance was examined to determine its illocutionary function based on Searle's classification. For example, when Jo says "I'll try to be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman,' and not be rough and wild," this were analyzed to determine whether it functions as a commissive (promising to change her behavior), an expressive (showing her feelings about her father's expectations), or another type of speech act.
2. Data Display
   In the second step, data display, the researcher organized these selected utterances into tables that show: (a) The distribution of illocutionary act types for each sister; (b) How each sister's use of different illocutionary acts changes throughout the novel; (c) Patterns in how the sisters use language differently from each other. The researcher created visual representations such as tables and charts to show how each sister's speech patterns evolve throughout the narrative and how these patterns relate to their character development. Data analysis in this study was conducted using Searle's (1979) theory of illocutionary acts, which classifies speech acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Each utterance spoken by the March sisters was identified and categorized based on its communicative function and contextual meaning. The analysis examined the distribution of illocutionary act types for each sister, changes in their use across different stages of the narrative, and patterns distinguishing their language use. The results were presented in tables and charts to illustrate how the sisters' speech patterns develop throughout the novel and reflect their character development.
3. Conclusion Drawing/Verification
   In the final stage of analysis, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted to interpret how each March sister's use of illocutionary acts reflects her character development throughout the novel. The researcher examined changes in Jo's illocutionary acts as she develops from a rebellious girl into an independent writer, Meg's speech patterns as they reflect her shift from material desire toward valuing love and family, Beth's consistently gentle and expressive communication as an indication of her selfless nature, and Amy's evolving illocutionary acts as she matures from a vain child into an accomplished young woman. These interpretations were verified by re-examining the novel's text and ensuring that each conclusion was consistently supported by the patterns identified in the data analysis. Through this process, the study demonstrates that Louisa May Alcott strategically uses dialogue and illocutionary acts as a literary device to portray the distinct personalities and personal growth of the March sisters across the narrative.

FINDINGS

In the first step, the researcher carries out the process of selection, focus, and simplification of relevant data from the novel *The Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The data consists of dialogues and utterances from the four March sisters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy that contain various types of illocutionary acts according to Searle's (1979) classification, specifically assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. The researcher simplifies the data by reading the novel multiple times and identifying sections that clearly demonstrate these five types of speech acts. Then, the researcher focuses on the communication patterns of the March sisters throughout different chapters of the novel. Their dialogues were selected because they frequently exhibit distinct illocutionary functions that reveal

character development and individual personalities, which allows the researcher to analyze how each sister uses language as a tool for self-expression and social navigation within their 19th-century family context. The researcher condensed 25 utterances from various chapters, organizing them according to speech act type, character, context, and narrative progression to facilitate systematic analysis of how illocutionary acts function in character development throughout the story.

Table 1. Types of Illocutionary Acts in Novel *The Little Women*

Assertive Acts					
No	**Chapter**	**Character**	**Utterance**	**Illocutionary Act Type**	**Function**
1	1	Jo	"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents"	Assertive	Stating dissatisfaction
2	1	Meg	“It’s so dreadful to be poor!”	Assertive	Stating conditions
3	1	Amy	“I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things...”	Assertive	Stating injustice
4	1	Beth	“We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other.”	Assertive	Expressing gratitude
5	22	Jo	“I’m not afraid of storms, for I’m learning how to sail my ship.”	Assertive	Expressing determination
Expressive Acts					
No	**Chapter**	**Character**	**Utterance**	**Illocutionary Act Type**	**Function**
6	6	Jo	“I’m so glad you came!”	Expressive	Expressing joy
7	9	Meg	“Oh Jo, how could you!”	Expressive	Expressing disappointment
8	23	Beth	“It’s so good to be home again!”	Expressive	Expressing happines
9	7	Amy	“I’m so ashamed of myself.”	Expressive	Showing regret
10	6	Jo	“How I do wish I could manage things as you do, Beth.”	Expressive	Expressing admiration
Directive Acts					
No	**Chapter**	**Character**	**Utterance**	**Illocutionary Act Type**	**Function**
11	1	Jo	“Let’s each buy what we want…”	Directive (Suggestion)	Inviting
12	4	Meg	“Come and help me with this hem, Beth.”	Directive (Command)	Asking for help
13	6	Beth	“Please sing to me, Jo.”	Directive (Request)	Asking for entertainment
14	3	Amy	“Don’t say that, Jo!”	Directive (Prohibition)	Prohibiting
15	3	Jo	“Don’t try to make me grow up before my time.”	Directive (Complaint)	Asking to be left alone
Commissive Acts					
No	**Chapter**	**Character**	**Utterance**	**Illocutionary Act Type**	**Function**
16	1	Jo	“I’ll try and be what he loves to call me, a little woman.”	Commissive	Commitment
17	17	Meg	“I’ll take care of Beth.”	Commissive	Promise to protect
18	18	Beth	“I’ll be brave, Mother.”	Commissive	Promise to deal with illness
19	8	Amy	“I won’t burn your book again.”	Commissive	Promise to correct mistakes
20	8	Jo	“I’ll never forgive you, Amy.”	Commissive	Negative promise (emotional)
Declaration Acts					
No	**Chapter**	**Character**	**Utterance**	**Illocutionary Act Type**	**Function**
21	25	Meg	“I’m engaged to John.”	Declaration	Declaring change in status

22	31	Amy	"I am the head of the family now."	Declaration	Declaring equality with others
23	14	Jo	"I burn it up."	Declaration	Declaring agreement
24	12	Jo	"I'll never marry."	Declaration	Declaring personal identity
25	13	Jo	"I'm going to be an author"	Declaration	Declaring a decision

Based on the data presented in the table, assertive and expressive illocutionary acts emerge as the most dominant types used by the March sisters. Assertive acts are frequently employed to state opinions, describe situations, and express beliefs, indicating how the characters communicate their thoughts and perceptions of their social environment. Jo demonstrates a high use of assertive acts, reflecting her strong opinions and independent mindset, while Meg also uses assertives to express her internal conflicts and moral considerations. Expressive acts are prominently used by Beth and Amy, particularly to convey emotions such as gratitude, affection, disappointment, and concern. The frequent occurrence of expressive acts highlights the emotional depth of the sisters' interactions and their close familial relationships.

In terms of function, directive and commissive acts appear less frequently but play important roles in shaping interpersonal dynamics among the sisters. Directive acts are used to give advice, make requests, or offer guidance, especially in interactions involving Jo and Meg, showing their leadership roles within the family. Commissive acts, though limited in number, function to express promises, commitments, and intentions, marking moments of personal decision and responsibility. Declarations occur rarely, as changes in social status or formal conditions are not common in everyday family conversations. Overall, the distribution and functions of these illocutionary acts illustrate how language is used not only for communication but also for expressing emotions, managing relationships, and supporting character development within the narrative.

DISCUSSIONS

Assertive Acts

Assertive acts were often used by the March sisters to express personal feelings, describe their social conditions, or state values. For instance, Jo's assertive statements frequently highlight her independence and dissatisfaction with societal limitations. This aligns with Gaspersz et al. (2023), who explain that *The Little Women* reflects feminist thought through characters' verbal resistance against restrictive norms. Similarly, Hendriyani & Pratiwy (2024) emphasize that assertive acts in literary texts often function as self-representations that strengthen identity within family dynamics. Thus, the sisters' assertive utterances mirror both their socio-economic struggles and their search for self-definition.

Table 2. Assertive Illocutionary Acts in Novel *The Little Women*

No	Quotation	Interpretation
Data 1	Jo: "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents" (Chapter 1, Page 3)	This utterance is spoken by Jo in the March family home in Concord, Massachusetts, during the American Civil War era (1860s). At this time, many families struggled financially because fathers were fighting in the war and household incomes decreased. Christmas in 19th-century America was celebrated more modestly than today, but small gifts were still seen as symbols of love and celebration. Jo and her sisters are gathered in their living room on Christmas Eve, discussing how different the holiday feels because their father is away at war and they cannot afford presents. This situation reflects the economic difficulties common in American families during the war. Jo's utterance is an assertive speech act because she expresses her belief and complaint about their situation. She states her view that Christmas feels incomplete without presents. Her words reveal her emotional honesty and highlight how the war affects family traditions. Jo's statement also shows the contrast between childhood expectations and harsh wartime realities. By asserting her feelings, she helps the reader

		understand the emotional impact of poverty and separation in the 19th century.
Data 2	Meg: “It’s so dreadful to be poor!” (Chapter 1, Page 4)	This utterance occurs in the same household setting during the Civil War period, when prices of goods increased and many families lived with limited resources. In 19th-century society, financial stability was strongly connected to social status, especially for young women. Poverty was often seen as a barrier to comfort, opportunity, and marriage prospects. Meg, being the eldest sister, feels the pressure of social expectations more strongly. She wants to appear proper and respectable, as Victorian norms valued elegance, modest clothing, and polite behavior for young women. Her frustration reflects how poverty affects her ability to fit into these expectations. Meg’s utterance is an assertive speech act expressing her judgment about their financial condition. She openly states her dissatisfaction, which reveals her internal conflict between social expectations and economic limitations. Her words highlight how 19th-century standards placed heavy pressure on women to maintain appearances, even when facing hardship. Her assertive expression shows her longing for stability and recognition in a society where social class shaped a woman’s future.
Data 3	Amy: “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things...” (Chapter 1, Page 5)	Amy speaks this line at home while observing the differences between her family and wealthier girls she sees at school and in society. In the Victorian era, clothing and personal items were important indicators of status. Girls from well-off families wore fashionable dresses and accessories, which reflected their upbringing and marriage potential. Amy, the youngest sister, naturally compares herself to others. The 19th century encouraged competition in appearance among young women, as beauty and good presentation were considered valuable traits. This utterance is an assertive act where Amy expresses her opinion about social inequality. She evaluates fairness based on material possessions, showing her awareness of class differences. Her statement reflects how deeply Victorian society linked a woman’s appearance to her worth. Through this expression, Amy shows both her youthful insecurity and her desire to fit into the standards of her society.
Data 4	Beth: “We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other.” (Chapter 1, Page 6)	Beth says this during a quiet family conversation at home, also during the Civil War era, when emotional unity was crucial for families separated by war. Many American households turned to moral values, religion, and togetherness to cope with uncertainty. Beth, who represents gentleness and moral strength, views family bonds as more important than wealth or possessions. Her character reflects the Victorian ideal of the “angel in the house,” where women were expected to bring harmony and comfort. Beth’s utterance is an assertive act expressing her belief in the value of family unity. She emphasizes emotional wealth over material wealth, showing her mature perspective despite her young age. Her statement reinforces one of the novel’s main themes: that emotional support is a source of strength during difficult times. The assertive nature of her words encourages the listener to adopt a positive view despite hardship.

Data 5	Jo: "I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship." (Chapter 22, Page 263)	Jo says this later in the story while reflecting on her personal growth. The setting is still in 19th-century New England, where young women were expected to learn patience, self-control, and moral strength. The metaphor of "storms" and "sailing" reflects the Victorian tradition of using nature imagery to describe emotional experiences. Jo faces many challenges her temper, responsibilities, and growing pains. This utterance marks a moment when she recognizes her increasing maturity. This is an assertive act in which Jo expresses her confidence about facing life's difficulties. She asserts her belief in her ability to grow and handle challenges. Her utterance shows character development and aligns with the speech-act function of making statements that reveal personal conviction. It also reflects the Victorian moral lesson that developing inner strength is essential to becoming a respectable adult.

Based on Data 1 to Data 5, assertive acts play an important role in the conversations of the March sisters, particularly in expressing opinions, beliefs, and personal judgments within family interactions. Jo frequently uses assertive acts to state her strong views and assert her independence, while Meg employs them to convey moral reflections and inner conflict. These patterns show that assertive acts function as a means for the sisters to articulate their perspectives and negotiate their roles within the family. Moreover, the increasing confidence and purpose in Jo's assertive language, along with Meg's shift from material concerns toward emotional and moral values, demonstrate that assertive acts serve not only to convey information but also to reflect character development and identity formation throughout the novel.

Expressive Acts

Expressive acts conveyed emotions such as joy, admiration, disappointment, and regret. These utterances were consistent with 19th-century expectations of emotional expression among women, but they also revealed the characters' individuality. Rahmawati (2021) found that expressive acts in fiction frequently mark turning points in character development, a pattern evident in Amy's expressions of shame and Jo's admiration of Beth. Moreover, Chapman & Clark (2019) argue that expressives in literature serve not only to reveal emotion but also to shape readers' empathy and narrative engagement. In *The Little Women*, the sisters' expressives perform this dual function by both reflecting social norms and reinforcing their emotional growth.

Table 3. Expressive Illocutionary Acts in Novel *The Little Women*

No	Quotation	Interpretation
Data 6	Jo: "I'm so glad you came!" (Chapter 6, Page 71)	This utterance is spoken by Jo at the March family home in Concord during the 19th-century American Victorian era, when visits from family and friends were highly valued. At that time, home visits played an important social role because people relied on personal interaction more than letters or public gatherings. Emotional support was especially meaningful during the Civil War period, when many families experienced anxiety, loss, and uncertainty. In this moment, Jo expresses happiness when someone she cares about arrives. The warm atmosphere of the home reflects Victorian beliefs about hospitality and the importance of maintaining strong relationships. Jo's words represent an expressive speech act, as she communicates her genuine emotional state happiness and relief. Instead of stating a fact, she expresses a feeling, which is the function of expressive acts in Searle's theory. Her utterance strengthens her bond with the listener and highlights her warm personality. It also shows how 19th-century culture valued emotional sincerity within close relationships.

Data 7	Meg: “Oh Jo, how could you!” (Chapter 9, Page 116)	Meg says this at home during a moment when Jo has acted impulsively. In the Victorian period, young women were expected to behave politely, avoid conflict, and maintain calmness. Family members, especially older sisters like Meg, were often responsible for guiding younger siblings’ behavior. This utterance reflects Meg’s reaction when Jo does something that violates these social expectations. The time setting mid-19th-century New England emphasizes the pressure placed on older daughters to uphold proper manners. Meg’s utterance is an expressive act because she reveals her shock and disappointment. Her emotional reaction is directed at Jo’s behavior, showing her concern for maintaining the family’s values. The utterance does not convey new information but expresses a feeling, which aligns with the function of expressive acts. It also highlights Meg’s role as the responsible, socially conscious sister in a period when propriety was seen as a woman’s duty.
Data 8	Beth: “It’s so good to be home again!” (Chapter 23, Page 276)	Beth says this after returning home from being away, possibly after an illness or visit. In 19th-century America, the home was considered the moral center of family life, especially for women. Victorian ideals emphasized the home as a place of peace, safety, and emotional warmth. The March household, despite financial struggles, is filled with love and care, and Beth values this stability deeply. Her gentle personality fits the era’s “ideal woman” model kind, loyal, and devoted to family. This utterance is an expressive speech act because Beth shares her positive emotional state. She expresses gratitude and comfort, reinforcing her close bond with her family. Her words reflect Victorian values that placed emotional importance on the home. The utterance shows Beth’s character as someone who finds happiness in simple, heartfelt connections.
Data 9	Amy: “I’m so ashamed of myself.” (Chapter 7, Page 85)	Amy speaks this line after making a mistake or behaving improperly, likely in the March home. In the 19th century, social behavior and reputation were extremely important, especially for young women. Victorian norms taught children to feel responsible for their actions and to show remorse when they misbehaved. Amy’s awareness of these expectations influences her emotional reaction. As the youngest, she often struggles to meet the standards placed on her but also tries to show maturity by acknowledging her faults. Amy’s utterance is an expressive act, showing her internal emotion shame. The function of this speech act is to reveal her self-reflection and regret. Her words demonstrate the moral lessons of the era: recognizing mistakes and displaying humility were considered essential to good upbringing. Through her admission, Amy expresses a desire to improve her behavior, aligning with Victorian expectations for young women.
Data 10	Jo: “How I do wish I could manage things as you do, Beth.” (Chapter 6, Page 74)	Jo says this at home while observing Beth’s calm, gentle behavior. During the Victorian era, women were expected to be patient, composed, and self-controlled. Beth naturally fits these ideals, while Jo often struggles with temper and impulsiveness. The family setting emphasizes the contrast between the sisters’ personalities. Jo admires Beth’s

		ability to maintain peace, a highly valued trait for 19th-century women. This utterance is an expressive act, as Jo communicates admiration and longing. Her words show emotional honesty and reveal her desire for self-improvement. In speech-act terms, she expresses a feeling rather than providing information. The utterance highlights Jo's complex character strong-willed yet aware of her weaknesses and reflects the Victorian belief that emotional self-control was an important virtue.

Based on Data 6 to Data 10, expressive illocutionary acts are used by the March sisters to convey emotions such as affection, gratitude, sympathy, and disappointment, highlighting the emotional closeness within the family. Beth frequently employs expressive acts to reflect her gentle and selfless nature, while Amy's expressive utterances reveal emotional growth as she becomes more mature and reflective. These expressive acts function not only to express feelings but also to reveal the characters' inner lives and support their character development, adding emotional depth to the narrative and providing a transition to the discussion of directive acts.

Directive Acts

Directive acts highlighted the interpersonal relationships among the sisters, often in the form of requests, advice, or prohibitions. Meg's directive utterances, for example, reflect her role as the eldest and her responsibility in guiding her younger siblings. Rosemary & Arianto (2023) note that women in Alcott's novel often resist but also embody traditional domestic roles, which can be observed in these directive interactions. Similarly, Fadilah & Sari (2022) emphasize that directives in fiction often reinforce or challenge power relations, especially in family contexts. In *The Little Women*, directive acts reveal both the sisters' cooperation in household life and their negotiation of authority within the family.

Table 4. Directive Illocutionary Acts in Novel *The Little Women*

No	Quotation	Interpretation
Data 11	Jo: "Let's each buy what we want…" (Chapter 1, Page 7)	Jo speaks this line in the March family home during the American Civil War era, when money was scarce and purchases had to be carefully considered. In the 19th century, young women were taught to be modest and economical, especially in families affected by war. The March sisters had earned a small amount of money through their own work, and Jo suggests they spend it on themselves. The setting reflects a moment of independence because it was uncommon for young women in this era to freely decide how to use their own money. This utterance is a directive speech act, because Jo attempts to influence the actions of her sisters by proposing what they should do. She encourages them to make their own choices, which shows her independent nature. This also reflects Jo's challenge to Victorian norms that expected girls to be selfless and controlled in spending. Her directive expresses her belief in personal freedom and agency within a restrictive historical context.
Data 12	Meg: "Come and help me with this hem, Beth." (Chapter 4, Page 43)	Meg speaks this line at home while sewing, an activity that was a regular part of daily life for 19th-century women. During the Victorian period, sewing skills were considered essential because clothing was often handmade, repaired, or altered at home. Older daughters commonly taught younger siblings these domestic tasks. Meg's request happens in a peaceful household moment that reflects the social expectation for women to contribute to domestic work. This utterance is a directive act, as Meg asks Beth to perform an action to help her with sewing. The speech

		act shows Meg's role as the responsible older sister, guiding family tasks in a way expected of women during this era. The directive reinforces the Victorian belief that domestic cooperation and shared responsibilities were part of a young woman's proper upbringing.
Data 13	Beth: "Please sing to me, Jo." (Chapter 6, Page 72)	Beth says this in a quiet home setting, most likely when she is feeling weak or in need of comfort. In the 19th century, music played an important emotional role in family life. Singing together was common entertainment, especially in homes without electricity or modern entertainment. Beth's request is also influenced by her gentle personality and her close bond with Jo. Her request for song reflects the emotional comfort families often sought during the Civil War period. This utterance is a directive act because Beth asks Jo to perform an action singing. However, unlike a strong command, this directive is polite and affectionate. It shows Beth's reliance on Jo for emotional support, which reflects the Victorian ideal of family closeness. The speech act highlights her vulnerability and the nurturing atmosphere within the March household.
Data 14	Amy: "Don't say that, Jo!" (Chapter 3, Page 30)	Amy says this in the March home during a moment of disagreement or tension. In the Victorian era, children were encouraged to correct each other's behavior politely, and siblings often guided one another according to moral lessons taught by parents. Amy reacts quickly to something Jo says, showing her emotional sensitivity and her desire to maintain harmony. The 19th-century emphasis on polite speech influences her response. This utterance is a directive act, where Amy attempts to stop Jo from speaking in a certain way. She tries to influence Jo's behavior through a negative command ("don't"). The speech act expresses her concern and her impulse to protect feelings or maintain manners. Her directive highlights the social expectation of the time that young women should speak with care and avoid harsh expressions.
Data 15	Jo: "Don't try to make me grow up before my time." (Chapter 3, Page 28)	Jo says this at home during a conversation about maturity and social expectations. In the 19th century, young women were expected to behave modestly, mature quickly, and prepare for their roles as wives and mothers. Jo resists these expectations because she values her freedom and dislikes the limitations placed on women of her era. The setting reflects Jo's emotional struggle between societal pressure and her desire for independence, a common conflict for young women in the Victorian period. This utterance is a directive act because Jo instructs someone not to pressure her into adulthood. The negative command ("don't try") shows her attempt to control the behavior of others toward her. Her refusal demonstrates her strong will and her resistance to Victorian gender norms. Through this directive, Jo expresses her desire to define her own path and avoid being forced into traditional roles before she is ready.

Based on Data 11 to Data 15, directive illocutionary acts are used by the March sisters to give advice, make requests, and guide the actions of others within family interactions. These acts function to manage relationships and express responsibility, particularly in moments that require decision-making or moral guidance. Jo frequently employs directive acts to assert leadership and encourage independence, while

Meg uses them in a more careful and supportive manner, reflecting her role as an elder sister. The use of directive acts demonstrates how the sisters negotiate authority, care, and cooperation within the family, and these speech acts serve as linguistic evidence of growing maturity and interpersonal awareness, leading to the discussion of commissive acts in the following section.

Commissive Acts

Commissive acts involved promises or commitments related to family loyalty, moral values, or self-improvement. Beth's promise to be brave and Amy's promise to correct her mistakes illustrate the moral education and emphasis on virtue in 19th-century society. Hendriyani & Pratiwy (2024) also highlight how commissive acts in novels strengthen family bonds and reveal inner conflict. These findings support the idea that commissives in *The Little Women* represent the sisters' moral growth and responsibilities. Moreover, Taguchi (2019) stresses that commissives demonstrate the pragmatic negotiation of future intentions, reinforcing their significance in shaping character development.

Table 5. Commissive Illocutionary Acts in Novel *The Little Women*

No	Quotation	Interpretation
Data 16	Jo: "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, a little woman." (Chapter 1, Page 19)	Jo says this in the March family home during the Civil War era, when her father is away serving as a chaplain. In 19th-century America, fathers often represented moral guidance, and daughters were expected to grow into the Victorian ideal of womanhood gentle, patient, polite, and self-controlled. Jo, however, has a strong personality and struggles to fit these expectations. Her father's affectionate phrase, "little woman," reflects the cultural view that girls should be modest and well-behaved. Jo's promise arises from her desire to meet her father's expectations despite her naturally rebellious character. This utterance is a commissive speech act, because Jo commits herself to a future action trying to behave according to her father's hopes. The commitment reveals her emotional loyalty and her effort to improve her behavior. It also shows Jo's internal conflict between her independent nature and the pressure to conform to the Victorian standard of womanhood. Her words express genuine intention, which is the core function of commissive acts in speech-act theory.
Data 17	Meg: "I'll take care of Beth." (Chapter 17, Page 214)	Meg speaks this at home when Beth is ill or weakened. In the 19th century, family caregiving was considered a woman's responsibility, especially for the eldest daughter. Nursing a sick family member was usually done at home because hospitals were limited and often unsafe. As the eldest sister, Meg naturally feels responsible for Beth's wellbeing. Victorian values emphasized duty, compassion, and domestic responsibility, and Meg's actions reflect these expectations. This utterance is a commissive act because Meg promises to look after Beth. She expresses a firm commitment to future care and responsibility. The speech act shows Meg's nurturing nature and her alignment with 19th-century gender expectations. Her promise strengthens her role as the dependable, motherly sister. Through this commissive act, Meg shows dedication to family duty, a central Victorian moral value.
Data 18	Beth: "I'll be brave, Mother." (Chapter 18, Page 228)	Beth speaks this at home during a moment when she faces illness or fear. In 19th-century American families, children were taught moral courage and obedience. Mothers often encouraged their children to

		meet hardship with patience and bravery, reflecting the era's religious and moral teachings. Beth's gentle personality and her close bond with her mother influence her response. The setting emphasizes the emotional warmth of the March household during a time when illness was common and often serious. This utterance is a commissive act, with Beth committing herself to being brave in the future. She expresses intention and moral resolve, fulfilling the central function of commissive acts. Her promise also reflects Victorian values of quiet strength and moral character. Beth's commitment shows her desire to reassure her mother and maintain emotional stability within the family.
Data 19	Amy: "I won't burn your book again." (Chapter 8, Page 96)	Amy says this after burning Jo's manuscript in a moment of anger and later regretting it. In the 19th century, children were taught strict moral lessons about self-control, respect for others' belongings, and asking forgiveness. Destroying a written work was a serious offense, especially because books and manuscripts were valuable and difficult to reproduce. Amy, as the youngest sister, often learns moral lessons through mistakes. Her apology occurs in the family environment where forgiveness, discipline, and emotional growth are encouraged. This utterance is a commissive act, because Amy promises not to repeat her wrong action. She commits to future restraint, showing remorse and responsibility. This commitment fits the speech-act category of promising and reflects Victorian ideals of moral improvement. Through this utterance, Amy acknowledges the seriousness of her behavior and seeks to restore harmony with Jo.
Data 20	Jo: "I'll never forgive you, Amy." (Chapter 8, Page 94)	Jo says this after Amy burns her manuscript, during a moment of intense anger. In 19th-century households, emotional conflicts still occurred, but expressing strong negative feelings was often discouraged for girls, who were expected to remain calm and forgiving. Jo's temper and passionate nature contrast sharply with these expectations. The scene takes place shortly after Jo discovers the destroyed manuscript an extremely painful loss, since writing was her creative outlet and one of the few acceptable intellectual pursuits for women at the time. This utterance is a commissive speech act, because Jo commits herself (emotionally and verbally) to a future stance refusing forgiveness. Although this commitment is made in anger, it still functions as a commissive because she expresses a firm future intention. It shows Jo's struggle with self-control, a recurring theme in her character development. Her words highlight the emotional tension created when Victorian expectations for female behavior collide with personal expression and intense emotion.

Based on Data 16 to Data 20, commissive illocutionary acts are used by the March sisters to express promises, intentions, and commitments to future actions. These acts reflect moments when the characters take responsibility for their decisions and demonstrate personal growth. Jo's commissive acts often indicate determination and commitment to her ambitions, while Meg's commissive utterances reflect her dedication to family values and marital responsibilities. Amy also uses commissive acts to show her growing sense of purpose and responsibility. Overall, commissive acts function as linguistic

markers of maturity and self-awareness, highlighting the sisters' readiness to make commitments and shaping their development throughout the narrative, which leads to the discussion of declaration acts in the following section.

Declaration Acts

Declaration acts were the most impactful, as they marked identity shifts and life transitions, such as Meg's engagement, Jo's decision to be an author, and her refusal of marriage. These utterances function as turning points in the narrative and challenge traditional gender expectations of the time. Gaspersz et al. (2023) argue that declarations in *The Little Women* illustrate Alcott's subtle feminist critique of patriarchal norms. Likewise, Rosemary & Arianto (2023) highlight that declarations often embody resistance against domestic roles imposed on women. Therefore, the sisters' declarations not only change their personal status but also symbolize broader social transformations.

Table 6. Commissive Illocutionary Acts in Novel *The Little Women*

No	Quotation	Interpretation
Data 21	Meg: "I'm engaged to John." (Chapter 25, Page 302)	Meg says this at home during a family gathering. In 19th-century America, a woman's engagement was a major social announcement. Engagements were taken very seriously and marked a change in social identity from unmarried woman to bride-to-be. Engagements affected family reputation, social standing, and future expectations. The March family lives under Victorian norms, where marriage was considered a central life goal for women. This utterance is a declaration speech act because Meg's words change her social status: she becomes officially "engaged." According to speech-act theory, declarations create a new reality through language. When Meg says the words, her role in the family and society shifts. Her declaration reflects the importance of marriage in Victorian culture and marks a turning point in her character development.
Data 22	Amy: "I am the head of the family now." (Chapter 31, Page 386)	Amy says this while in Europe with Aunt March, reflecting on the situation at home. The March family is struggling due to illness and financial stress, and traditional family roles are shifting. In the 19th century, the "head of the family" was almost always a man, or in his absence, the eldest capable woman. Amy steps into this symbolic role during the Civil War period, when many families had to reorganize responsibilities. This is a declaration act because Amy's statement claims a new social role and responsibility. Through her words, she positions herself as a leader who can make decisions for the family. This changes how she views herself and how others may view her. Her declaration signals maturity and a shift in identity within Victorian expectations.
Data 23	Jo: "I burn it up." (Chapter 14, Page 181)	Jo says this while describing the action of burning her own or someone else's writing. In the 19th century, written work was valuable and difficult to reproduce, especially for women who had limited access to formal literary spaces. Destroying writing carried emotional and symbolic meaning. This moment happens at home during a conflict or emotional outburst. This utterance functions as a declaration, because Jo's words confirm and complete the act of destruction. By declaring it, she finalizes the action in the social reality of the moment. Her declaration reflects her emotional struggle and her relationship with creativity and control within a society that limited women's artistic expression.

Data 24	Jo: "I'll never marry." (Chapter 12, Page 160)	Jo speaks this line at home during a conversation about the expectations placed on young women in the Victorian era. Marriage was considered the primary life path for women, and refusing marriage challenged social norms. Jo's independent nature leads her to reject the idea of being defined by a husband. This happens during the 19th century when unmarried women often faced social pressure and limited opportunities. This utterance is a declaration act, because Jo's statement publicly claims a future identity: a woman who refuses marriage. It changes the expectations others have of her. Her declaration directly opposes Victorian norms and shows her desire for autonomy, creative freedom, and a life that does not depend on traditional gender roles.
Data 25	Jo: "I'm going to be an author." (Chapter 13, Page 173)	Jo declares this at home after realizing her passion for writing. In the 19th century, very few women became professional authors because publishing was a male-dominated field. Women writers often used pen names or faced criticism. Jo's declaration is bold, especially in a society that encouraged women to marry rather than pursue careers. This happens in New England during the Civil War era, when some women began challenging traditional roles. This is a declaration act, because Jo uses language to claim a new identity: a future author. By stating it, she commits to a path that reshapes her social role. Her declaration reflects her independence and ambition, aligning with speech-act theory where declarations create new social realities. Jo's words mark a turning point in her character development, showing her determination to build a life beyond Victorian gender expectations.

Based on Data 21 to Data 25, declarative illocutionary acts occur less frequently in the conversations of the March sisters because such acts require institutional authority or formal social conditions. When they do appear, declarative acts function to mark significant changes in social status, roles, or decisions within the narrative, such as declarations related to marriage, responsibility, or personal resolution. These acts highlight moments of transition and closure in the characters' lives, reflecting their movement into adulthood and social maturity. Overall, although limited in number, declarative acts play an important role in emphasizing decisive moments in the sisters' character development, providing a comprehensive understanding of how different types of illocutionary acts contribute to the portrayal of personal growth throughout the novel.

In the final stage of the analysis, the researcher formulated and verified conclusions by systematically aligning the findings with Searle's (1979) classification of illocutionary acts (assertive, expressive, directive, commissive, and declarative) while also considering the historical context of the 19th century and insights from recent scholarly studies. Through this comparative approach, it was verified that the illocutionary acts identified in Little Women function not merely as linguistic expressions but as reflections of prevailing gender norms, moral values, and social expectations of the 1860s. Consequently, language in the novel operates as both a communicative and performative tool that shapes character development and reinforces thematic depth, thereby supporting the relevance of speech act theory and contemporary literary-pragmatic perspectives in interpreting the text.

Comparison

The findings of this study support and extend previous research on speech acts and literary dialogue. Similar to Hendriyani and Pratiwy (2024), who found that illocutionary acts reveal emotional dynamics and relationships in fictional narratives, this study confirms that speech acts play a crucial role in shaping character development in *The Little Women*. The results also align with Rahmawati (2021), who emphasized the importance of expressive acts in revealing characters' emotional states, particularly

reflected in Beth's and Amy's dialogue. In addition, Nurjannah's (2025) study demonstrated that Searle's classification can be effectively applied to fictional conversations, which is affirmed by the present study's systematic categorization of the March sisters' utterances. However, unlike previous studies that focused on general speech act distribution or thematic interpretation, this research offers a novel contribution by examining how illocutionary acts function within close familial relationships and tracing how each sister's speech patterns change across different stages of the narrative within a 19th-century social context.

Limitation and Recommendation

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is limited to the four main female characters, excluding male characters and other social interactions that may provide a broader pragmatic perspective. Second, the study focuses only on illocutionary acts and does not examine locutionary or perlocutionary effects, which could offer deeper insight into the impact of speech on listeners. Third, the interpretation relies on qualitative analysis, which may involve subjective judgment despite systematic procedures. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to include a wider range of characters, apply mixed-method approaches combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, or explore other pragmatic frameworks such as politeness theory or perlocutionary effects. Further studies could also compare *The Little Women* with other 19th-century novels to gain a broader understanding of language use and gender representation in literary works.

CONCLUSION

The findings and discussions show that all five types of illocutionary acts assertive, directive, expressive, commissive, and declarative are present in the dialogues of the four March sisters: Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy. Each type of illocutionary act reflects specific aspects of the sisters' personalities and their emotional and social growth throughout the narrative. Assertive acts are the most dominant, particularly in Jo's and Meg's speech, indicating the expression of beliefs, opinions, and personal judgments. Directive and expressive acts function to influence others and convey emotional responses, highlighting the sisters' close familial bonds and emotional complexity, while commissive and declarative acts, although less frequent, mark significant moments of commitment, decision-making, and identity formation. Overall, these findings confirm that language in *The Little Women* functions not merely as a means of communication but as a performative and transformative tool through which character identity, internal conflict, and social roles are constructed within a restrictive 19th-century cultural context. This study therefore contributes to pragmatic and literary studies by demonstrating the applicability of speech act theory to literary dialogue and by offering a linguistic perspective on how language shapes character and meaning in narrative texts.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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