

The Role of Expressive Speech Acts in Revealing Character's Personality in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017)

Riftiana Dwi Rahyanti¹ and Dwi Wulandari²

Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275, Indonesia
dwiwulandari@lecturer.undip.ac.id

Abstract. The movie *Lady Bird* depicts the coming of age journey of its characters and captures the complex emotion of mother and daughter relationship. This study explores how expressive speech acts and personality traits can correspond with one another to reveal the characterizations. The purpose of this research is to examine the types of expressive acts used by *Lady Bird* and Marion and how they correspond with the Big Five Personality Traits theory. The significance of this study is to reveal how language use in dialogue can provide deeper psychological insights into the character's characterization and how it affects their relationship with each other. Employing the descriptive qualitative method, this study collected 89 data of expressive acts based on Searle & Vanderveken (1985) theory and correlated them with personality traits using McCrae & John's (1992) Big Five model. As a result, the data findings indicate that *Lady Bird* dominantly uses protest and lament speech acts, these along with traits of high neuroticism and low conscientiousness, reflecting on her emotional instability and impulsiveness. On the other hand, Marion frequently used complaint and lament speech acts, correlated with high conscientiousness and low agreeableness, reflecting her as organized yet less empathetic. This study excels on the understanding of how expressive speech can serve as indicators of personality traits in narratives, offering a relationship between pragmatics and psychological characterization.

Keywords: Speech Act, Expressive Act, Big Five Personality Traits, Personality Traits, *Lady Bird*, Marion.

1 Introduction

Language has always been a vital tool in human progress throughout history, especially in how humans communicate their needs by expressing feelings and emotions. Expressing feelings and emotions through speech is called an expressive act, which serves as a tool for the speaker to express their psychological state and attitude [1]. Expressive act usually implies that something good or bad is being expressed in a response to a certain situation [1]. However, the way people express emotion is often different. Research has shown that emotions also influence how the speech is being delivered, such as the use of tones, tempo, and word choice [2]. For example, someone expressing anger by shouting may be seen as having poor emotional management since anger doesn't necessarily require a high pitch speech. Thus, this subtle emotional expression can shape the quality of our communication and also can help us to analyze the traits and personality of the speaker.

This phenomenon of language is portrayed in the coming of age movie called *Lady Bird* (2017) directed by Greta Gerwig. The story follows the life of Christine who insists on being called *Lady Bird*. She is a senior in her high school and she is drawn on navigating the turbulent transition from adolescence to adulthood while searching for self-identity, while also dreaming of going beyond her hometown. On the other hand, her mother Marion, seems somewhat dissatisfied with her own life. Thus, she struggles in understanding *Lady Bird*'s desire for independence and self expression. She believes *Lady Bird* should simply follow the path that she already dictates to her.

Throughout the movie, expressive acts serve as a tool for communicating complex emotions, which not only reveal their psychological state but also help to reveal their characterizations. There is a noticeable gap in previous studies that investigate how expressive speech acts specifically correspond to portray personality traits in the movie. This study uses Searle and Vanderveken (1985) theory to examine the types of expressive acts, which includes; thank, apologize, protest, complain, condole, congratulate, lament, praise, boast, deplore, compliment, and greet. To understand deeper on character personality traits, this study employed the Big Five Personality Traits by McCrae and John (1992), which are; conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience

This study aims to explore how expressive speech acts reflect the psychological and emotional traits of the two main characters and highlights the importance of language in movies as a tool for both emotional expression and character development, offering a deeper understanding of how dialogue contributes to the storytelling process and enhances our comprehension of the characters.

2 Method

This study used a research of a descriptive-qualitative to examine expressive speech acts in the movie *Lady Bird* (2017). The data are all of utterances produced by *Lady Bird* and her mother, Marion in the movie. The utterances are purposely selected based on their representation on expressive acts following Searle and Vanderveken (1985) theory. The data were collected by carefully watching the movie, transcribing relevant utterances, identifying the contexts, and classified them according to types of expressive speech acts. The distributional method was applied to examine the frequency and patterns of these utterances which contain the expressive acts. Then, the utterances were interpreted onto the Big Five Personality Traits theory by McCrae and John (1992) to explore the dominant traits of personality reflected in *Lady Bird* and Marion's speech.

3 Result and Discussion

In this study, it was revealed that there are 89 data of expressive speech acts that were identified from both characters' utterances in the movie *Lady Bird* (2017). The classification of the utterances can be seen on the following table:

Table 1. The Classification of Expressive Act and Personality Traits (Lady Bird)

Expressive Act	Lady Bird	O	C	E	A	N
Thank	3				3	
Apologize	8	3		3	2	
Congratulate	1					1
Complain	10	2		2		6
Condole	-					
Lament	11	2			3	6
Protest	16	5	2	2		7
Deplore	-					
Praise	2	1		1		
Boasting	3	1	2			
Compliment	5	1		1	3	
Greet	3			2	1	
Total	62	15	4	11	12	20

Table 2. The Classification of Expressive Act and Personality Traits (Marion)

Expressive Act	Marion	O	C	E	A	N
Thank	-					

Apologize	2	2			
Congratulate	-				
Complain	11	8	1	2	
Condole	-				
Lament	5	2		3	
Protest	3	2		1	
Deplore	2	1	1		
Praise	2		2		
Boasting	-				
Compliment	1		1		
Greet	1		1		
Total	27	13	5	3	6

Table 1 shows *Lady Bird* produced 62 expressive speech acts, with protest being the most frequent (16 data) and congratulate the least (1 data). This may indicate *Lady Bird's* expression of dissatisfaction or disapproval, leads to her demands for a change in the situations [1]. In terms of personality, she scored highest in neuroticism (20 data) and lowest in conscientiousness (4 data). These traits are reflected in her frequent use of protest, lament, and complaint, suggesting emotional instability and impulsiveness—common in individuals who are anxious, irritable, and struggle with self-control [3].

Table 2 shows that Marion's most frequent expressive speech act is complaint (11 data), while compliment and greet appear least (1 data each). This suggests Marion's tendency to always express criticism or frustration of something against her establishment, this expressive speech act is aimed at conveying the speaker's negative emotions directed at an individual, a group, or an institution [1]. Marion scores highest in conscientiousness (13 data), especially in her complaints, reflecting her role as a responsible, orderly figure. Meanwhile, her low score in agreeableness (3 data) suggests emotional distance and a lack of warmth [3], as she often shows an act of complaining and demanding utterances.

In the discussion below, we will elaborate on each of the most frequently used types of expressive speech by the characters, which include; *protest*, *lament*, and *complaint*. Additionally, we will also discuss the most and least dominant types that appear on the expressive acts, which include; neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness.

3.1 Dominant Types of Expressive Speech Acts Used by the Characters

3.1.1 Complaint

Complaint best described as an expression of someone in response to wrongdoings by somebody. It is a way of showing unhappiness or dissatisfaction from the speaker [1].

Table 3. The Act of Complaint by *Lady Bird* (Data 1)

Context:	<i>Lady Bird</i> and Danny are hanging out together until its dark
Dany:	Shouldn't we go home?
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	My Mom is always mad. It doesn't matter if I get home late, she'd be
Danny:	mad at me anyway.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Your Mom is hard on you.
	She loves me a lot.

Table 4. The Act of Complaint by Marion (Data 2)

Context:	Marion, stressed over her husband's recent layoff, becomes frustrated when she sees <i>Lady Bird</i> coming home late and finds her room in a mess.
Marion:	This isn't right - we can't treat our clothes like this. I don't know what your wealthy friends do...
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Why do you care what I do to my clothes?
Marion:	

Your father does not have a job. He lost his job, okay? Do you need him to come in here and explain that to you? **Of course he wouldn't do it anyway, he's Mr. Nice Guy. I always have to be the Bad Guy.**

Lady Bird shows her complaint by saying to answer Danny's questions. It shows her negative evaluation and her dissatisfaction with her mother's behaviour, which she perceives as unfair. Marion used this act to indicate her complaints on her frustration on how she always needs to maintain order in the household. In this movie, complaining always shows disappointment or distress for a situation which sometimes happens in a personal situation, like emotional neglect and frustration.

3.1.2 Protest

Protest can be described as a strong expression of disapproval, disagreement or opposition. The purpose of this act is demanding a change in other's actions [1]. Based on the movie, *Lady Bird* is the character that often used the expressive form of protesting.

Table 5. The Act of Protest by *Lady Bird* (Data 3)

Context:	One evening, during a school assembly about abortion in the gymnasium.
Casey:	I am that baby that she decided not to abort. That could have been me, that could have been my fate (<i>talking in front of the audience</i>)
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Just because something looks ugly doesn't mean that it is morally wrong. (<i>whispered to Jenna</i>)
Casey:	What did you say, ma'am?
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Nothing.
Casey:	Please share.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I said "Just because something looks ugly doesn't mean that it is morally wrong."

Table 6. The Act of Protest by Marion (Data 4)

Context:	In a thrift store, Marion and <i>Lady Bird</i> shop for a dress. for <i>Lady Bird</i> wears on Danny's grandmother's thanksgiving dinner. Danny, known as a wealthy family that lives on 40th street.
Marion:	Did Danny say whether his grandmother has a formal Thanksgiving?
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I don't know, there are a lot of kids, but she lives in the fab forties...
Marion:	Your dad and I went to a dinner party once in that neighbourhood, the CEO of ISC, and it was pretty formal. Lady Bird finds something - holds up a black dress.
Marion:	You're not going to a funeral!
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Well, I don't know! What does "rich people Thanksgiving"?

Based on the movie, the utterance used by *Lady Bird* show her way to show her disagreement or opposition to oversimplified moral assumptions that were based only on appearances. On the other hand, the utterance "**You're not going to a funeral!**" was a form of Marion's protest as her dissatisfaction with *Lady Bird*'s decision to wear a black dress to a thanksgiving dinner. In this movie, protest is used as an expression of objection or disapproval of the speaker towards something. This movie also shows protest as an attempt to change others' behaviour.

3.1.3 Lament

Lament is defined as an expression of grief or sorrow over a condition. It does not always have to be a serious or a great matter of conditions or situations, it can be when the speaker's pitying about themselves [1].

Table 7. The Act of Lament by *Lady Bird* (Data 5)

Context:	<i>Lady Bird</i> and Julie are hanging out at the grocery store, they casually read magazines on the corner.
Julie:	See, why don't I look like that? (<i>Pointing at girls in the magazine</i>)
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Just once I'd like to have the song 'New York Groove' play and feel like it really applies to my life

Table 8. The Act of Lament by *Lady Bird* (Data 6)

Context:	Marion finds out that <i>Lady Bird</i> got detention for protesting against anti-abortion seminar in her school. Marion is upset about <i>Lady Bird</i> 's action that she considers selfish and inconsiderate.
Marion:	Yeah, it's just a joke: "Mom and Dad, they don't care."
Marion:	We didn't think we'd be in this house for twenty-five years, we thought we'd move somewhere better. Whatever we give you, it's never enough.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	It is enough.

Lady Bird's lament appears in the utterance shows her dissatisfaction because her life was not filled with excitement or belonging. The utterance of Marion reveals her unfulfilled dreams; having a better life, moving to a bigger house, and having something more to offer to her kids. In this movie, lament being expressed as a strong, public expression of sorrow, usually about dissatisfaction with reality.

3.2 Dominant Personality Traits appear on Characters' Expressive Speech Act

3.2.1 *Lady Bird* Personality Traits

a. Neuroticism

Neuroticism measures people's emotional stability. People with high scores in neuroticism are usually more reactive when facing pressure and more likely hard in controlling their emotion, offended easily when they feel attacked, and poorly managed with stress [3]. *Lady Bird*'s traits can be seen when she receives a rejection letter from UC Berkeley:

Table 9. *Lady Bird*'s Personality Traits (Data 7 & Data 8)

<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I thought Berkeley had to accept me. You and Miguel went there. I'm a legacy
Larry:	Eh, not if we don't give money.
Miguel:	And you get bad grades.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Oh, what do you know about it?
Miguel:	You are actually fucking evil. What is wrong with you?
Marion:	GO - GO TO YOUR ROOM!
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I'm not FIVE!

The dialogue reflects *Lady Bird*'s sense of entitlement and anxiety over rejection, followed by a sarcastic complaint when criticized by her brother, showing her difficulty accepting criticism. Her emotions escalate further when her mother intervenes, leading to an outburst. This overreaction under pressure illustrates her poor emotional regulation, aligning with high neuroticism. Neuroticism is also stated as an individual with poor self-confidence[4]. For example when she's fitting a new prom dress with her mother:

Table 10. *Lady Bird*'s Personality Traits (Data 9)

<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I love it.
Marion:	Is it too pink? (<i>Lady Bird</i> pauses and stares at her mother)
Marion:	What?
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Why can't you say I look nice?

Marion:	I thought you didn't even care what I think.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I still want you to think I look good.
Marion:	I'm sorry, I was telling you the truth. Do you want me to lie?
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	No, I just wish... I wish that you liked me.
Marion:	Of course I love you.

The utterances above show her need to be validated by the perspective of her mother, a figure that she looks up to. *Lady Bird*'s lament reveals her feelings of yearning and her fear of not being enough. This also shows one of neuroticism's characteristics which is insecurity or poor self-esteem which shows in her attachment to what others think [5].

b. Conscientiousness

People who are low in conscientiousness are often described as disorganized, careless, and impulsive [6]. *Lady Bird*'s low score in conscientiousness reveals her personality which she often lacks in organizing and planning for the future:

Table 11. *Lady Bird*'s Personality Traits (Data 10)

<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Just once I'd like to have the song "New York Groove" play and feel like it really applies to my life.
Julie:	You've never even been to New York.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	That's why I'm applying to New York colleges. Do you know if Sarah Lawrence is actually IN the city?
Julie:	Your parents would pay for that?
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	Scholarships, financial aid. I'll figure it out. My Mom thinks I can't get in but she is sorely mistaken.

Individuals with a low conscientiousness tend to be careless and undirected [7]. Individuals with low scores in conscientiousness tend to be more procrastinating and impulsive. The utterance reveals her tendency to be impulsive in planning something. She did not have the long concrete planning, which shows her lack of careful consideration of her own goals.

3.2.2 Marion's Personality Traits

a. Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness can be described as a personality with a responsible attitude, dedication, and a high self-discipline [4]. Marion's high score in conscientiousness stated that she is a person who values being in order, structured and responsible. She is disciplined and always concerned about doing things in the right way. Her conscientiousness can be seen mostly when she shows the act of complaining:

Table 12. *Lady Bird*'s Personality Traits (Data 11)

Marion:	Christine! You can't leave your room like this!
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I didn't...
Marion:	None of these things were put away right, they aren't nice, CHRISTINE! NOW!
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	(weakly) My name is Lady Bird.

As someone with a high conscientiousness, she has a tendency to be organized and careful (John & Srivastava, 1999, p. 113). Data above reveals her annoyance with disorganizations. Another example:

Table 13. *Lady Bird*'s Personality Traits (Data 12)

Marion:	Do you really need to use two towels?
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	No, I guess no.
Marion:	If you need two towels you just have to say so because this affects my whole day, I have to do laundry before work and I need to know if there are more towels I need to wash.

Lady Bird: I just need one, sorry.
 Marion: OK, well let me get to the mirror, I gotta get going.

Marion showed her high conscientiousness through her concern of her daily routine, tasks and her time management before going to work. She also explains the practical consequences of *Lady Bird*'s action which is affecting her routine and shows how Marion loves when she can play ahead.

b. Agreeableness

This trait reflects differences in how much people are concerned with social harmony. People who have a high score in agreeableness tend to be likeable and respectful, and are sensitive to the needs of others [3]. Marion is rarely using praise, which in the act of praise, sometimes we can see agreeableness. In the other utterances of Marion is also lack of agreeableness. This shows that Marion is a person who lacks empathy and warmth. One of her examples of showing agreeableness is when she praising *Lady Bird* on her graduation day:

Table 14. *Lady Bird*'s Personality Traits (Data 12)

Marion:	I'm so proud of you, Lady Bird. You walked weird across the stage, but you did it.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	I didn't walk weird!
Marion:	It seemed a little weird, the way you walked.
<i>Lady Bird</i> :	MOM!

This utterance is marked as an Agreeableness since it shows her addressing support and her effort to maintain an interpersonal relationship between mother and daughter. Although this dialogue is classified as agreeableness, it also shows how Marion is low in Agreeableness as this act is immediately being added with criticism as a joke. "**You walked weird across the stage**" undermines the warmth of her praise which shows how Marion has difficulties in showing genuine emotional reaction.

4 Conclusion

In this study, it can be shown that *Lady Bird* uses protest (16) and lament (11), reflecting her dissatisfaction, sorrow for her life and desire for change. Based on the result of dominant expressive speech acts that are being used by the main characters. These results can also determine the character's personality traits. For example, in her expressive acts, there are dominant traits shown in most of her speech which indicate she has a high score in neuroticism while also a low score in conscientiousness. This suggests her emotional instability, easily irritated and impulsive. It can be seen from her frequent outbursts, frustration with her surroundings, and desire for change show difficulty in managing emotions. Her low conscientiousness is seen in impulsive protests and disorganized thinking, emphasizing her lack of emotional control and impulsive behavior. The contrast between her high neuroticism and low conscientiousness creates a personality conflict: she wants change but struggles to regulate herself to achieve it. On the other hand, Marion frequently uses complaints (11) and lament (5), showing her tendency to express critical judgements, frustrations towards her surroundings, and also grief for her own life's condition. From these expressive acts, it reflects on her high score in conscientiousness. She is portrayed as structured, disciplined, and assertive. However, she also has a low score in agreeableness which indicates that she is emotionally distant. Her low agreeableness is shown in the rarity of warm, affirming speech acts like compliment,

greet, and praise. This suggests emotional distance and a focus on control rather than connection, especially in her relationship with Lady Bird.

References

1. John OP, Srivastava S. The Big Five trait taxonomy: History, measurement, and theoretical perspectives. In: Pervin LA, John OP, editors. *Handbook of personality: Theory and research*. New York: Guilford Press; 1999. p. 102–38.
2. Scherer K. Vocal communication of emotion: A review of research paradigms. *Speech Communication* [Internet]. 2003 Apr [cited 2020 Jan 17];40(1-2):227–56. Available from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0167639302000845>
3. McCrae RR, John OP. An Introduction to the five-factor Model and Its Applications. *Journal of Personality* [Internet]. 1992 Jun;60(2):175–215. Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1992.tb00970.x>
4. Syamsul Bahri, Rosita Batubara, Sheikha Sri Qomaria. An Analysis of Big Five Personality (OCEAN) in Linda Woolverto's Movie Alice In Wonderland. *Education : Jurnal Sosial Humaniora dan Pendidikan*. 2022 May 26;2(2):1–12.
5. Okania Mentari, Wennyta Wennyta. Personality Traits: Analysis of Main Character in Cinderella Movie 2015 by Disney. *ELT: Journal of English Language Teaching*. 2019 Jun 13;3(1):61–72.
6. Goldberg LR. An Alternative “description of personality”: the Big-Five Factor structure.. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1990;59(6):1216–29.
7. Goodwin RD, Friedman HS. Health Status and the Five-factor Personality Traits in a Nationally Representative Sample. *Journal of Health Psychology*. 2006 Sep;11(5):643–54.