

Expressive Speech Acts of The Main Character in Tim Burton's Corpse Bride: A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to classify the types and intentions of expressive speech acts of the main character, Victor Van Dort, in Tim Burton's 2005 Corpse Bride Movie.

Methodology: Utilizing a qualitative approach, this text analysis investigates Victor Van Dort's utterances containing expressive speech acts. The data were collected from the movie script using document analysis. The data were analysed deploying the framework of speech act theory by Searle (1979) and contextual pragmatics based on Holmes (2001) to understand the situational and social contexts that influence speech and its meaning.

Results: The analysis found 33 expressive speech acts i.e. eight apologizing, seven agreements, five attitudes, five exclamations, three wishes, two thanking, two lamentation, and one greeting. These speech acts mainly describe psychological conditions and emotional reactions. It is important to note the absence of speech acts such as congratulations or condolences, which indicates that the focus of the narrative is on personal emotional experiences rather than social rituals. The meaning of each expressive speech act has also been identified.

Applications/Originality/Value: This study highlights the importance of how expressive speech acts contribute to deepening emotions and character development to strengthen the movie's narratives.

Keywords: speech act, expressive speech act, movie

Introduction

Movies are interesting sites to investigate how people use language for interaction. Through a movie, viewers can see how characters communicate, what happens in scenes, and how they express their thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Recent studies show the importance of speech in movies and other media. One example is Rofe'i et al. (2024) which examines how characters speak and how this reveals their feelings and roles in the story. Another example is Chen; & Kecskes (2014) which explains how culture and situation influence the way characters speak in movie scripts as well as Astikasari & Masykuroh (2022) who investigate how implied meaning are constructed in characters' dialog. Movies present complex social and emotional contexts, making them a rich source of data for pragmatic studies, particularly in understanding the function of language in everyday life.

The language used in interaction contain various types of speech acts, determined by the context of language use. Speech act theory itself is a core field in pragmatics, which examines how speakers use language to perform various functions in communication. These speech acts include representative, directive, commissive, declarative, and expressive Searle (1976). For example, saying "Thank you" is an expressive speech act to show gratitude, while "Please open the window" is a directive speech act to request an action.

One of the speech acts is expressive speech acts. Expressive speech acts are a kind of speech act that show how a person feels or what they are thinking. Examples include wishes, thanking, congratulation, apologizing, condolences, greeting, lamentation, attitude, agreement, and exclamation Searle (1979). These speech acts go beyond simply conveying information; they also build social relationships and express the psychological identity of characters in film narratives.

The phenomena of expressive speech acts in movies, particularly romantic animated movies, is interesting to explore because these movies often explicitly display emotional expressions. By using expressive sentences in dialogue, viewers can understand the feelings and internal conflicts experienced by the characters. This analysis also helps us understand how language is used to convey feelings effectively in visual form. Moreover, the use of expressive speech acts in movies dialogue will inform us about character development and emotional involvement in the film.

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This research investigates expressive speech acts in corpse bride movie. The movie is selected as the site of the research since its main character, Victor Van Dort, communicates with other characters in various emotional situations, using sentences that express sadness, longing, hope, and confusion. In, Victor uses expressive speech acts to express his psychological condition.

A number of previous studies have examined the film *Corpse Bride* from various linguistic and representational perspectives. Putri & Juniarta (2024) examined the representation of female acceptance through the dimensions of character in Tim Burton's film. Meanwhile, Mustaqimah (2008) explored the use of deixis by the main characters in the same film. Another study was conducted by Adilayasmin & Juanda (2023), who analyzed speech acts using Betty J. Birner's framework in Emily's dialogue in *Corpse Bride*.

In addition to specific studies on *Corpse Bride*, a number of other studies highlight expressive speech acts in various films across genres. Upa (2018) analyze expressive and exclamatory speech acts in *The Lion King* (1994), while Rosiana & Afriana (2024) conduct a study of expressive speech acts in the film *Percy Jackson* (2010). Putu et al. (2025) examine expressive functional language in *A Man Called Otto*, and Aritonang & Ambalegin (2023) study expressive speech acts in *The Willoughbys*. In another study, Aritonang & Ambalegin (2023a) examined expressive speech acts in *Avatar: The Way of Water*.

The diversity of studies on expressive speech acts is also evident in Meha & Heryono (2025) study on pragmatic aspects in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Nitayasa & Masykuroh (2024) examined expressive speech acts in *Little Women*, while Purnama et al. (2024) focused their research on *To All The Boys: Always and Forever*. Similar research was conducted by Rahmawati (2021) on the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, Royanti (2019) on *La La Land*, and Selsibilla et al. (2022) on the main character of the film *Joker*. Aulia & Sari (2024) examined expressive speech acts in *Scoob!* (2020), and Tanjung (2021) researched expressive speech acts in the film *Lovely Bones*. The theoretical framework that used in previous studies that have been described includes Searle (1979) categories of expressive speech acts, Vanderveken & Kubo (1985) theory of speech act functions, Yule (1996) theory, Norrick (1978) theory of expressive functions, Hymes (1974) SPEAKING model for context analysis, and Halliday (1973) theory of language functions.

This research is slightly different because it specifically examines how the main character speaks with emotional expression, and combines pragmatic analysis that pays attention to the context of the conversation. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the expressive speech acts performed by the main character, Victor Van Dort, in the *Corpse Bride* Movie. This study applies Searle (1979) theory, which categorizes speech acts into five types, including expressive speech acts that convey the speaker's psychological state or feelings. Furthermore, this study uses contextual pragmatics based on Holmes (2001) to understand the situational and social contexts that influence speech and its meaning. By focusing on Victor Van Dort's expressive speech acts this study provides valuable insights into the role of pragmatic linguistic elements in character development and storytelling in animated movies.

Research Method

This is a qualitative text analysis analysing expressive speech acts in the *Corpse Bride* movies. The data are the main character's utterances containing expressive speech acts taken from its official script by using documentation technique and using descriptive methods. This study uses the data documentation method to collect data, namely by repeatedly watching the *Corpse Bride* movie (which has been downloaded from a verified online source) to record all the words spoken by the main character, Victor Van Dort, paying attention to his tone and emotional nuances. Furthermore, all of these lines were double-checked against the official script from a reliable archive to ensure accuracy and consistency. Relevant expressive speech acts were then selected based on the categories proposed by Searle (1979), such as apologies or expressions of gratitude. The reliability of the research results was determined using theoretical triangulation, which combined the opinions of Searle (1979) and Holmes (2001), consultation with experts to ensure consistency in coding, and validation from various sources such as movies, scripts, and manual coding results.

Data analysis was carried out systematically, namely: recording utterances based on expressive types according to Searle; grouping utterances based on their patterns and frequency; interpreting the results using a contextual pragmatic approach according to Holmes, taking into account the interlocutor, situation, and illocutionary intent; and concluding the communicative and emotional functions in understanding the character. The data explanation codes used in identifying the types of expressive speech act data are as follows:

1. E1 : Wishes
2. E2 : Thanking
3. E3 : Congratulation
4. E4 : Apologizing
5. E5 : Condolences
6. E6 : Greeting
7. E7 : Lamentation
8. E8 : Attitude
9. E9 : Agreement
10. E10 : Exclamation

Findings And Discussion

I. Findings

The description of data analysis of expressive utterances by the main character of the Corpse Bride movie yielded 33 instances of expressive speech acts

A. The Types of Expressive Speech Acts

The types of expressive speech acts were analysed using Searle (1979) theory, which identifies 10 types of expressive speech acts. In this study, out of 33 data analysed, 8 types of expressive speech acts were found, and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Types Expressive Speech Act of the Main Character in Corpse Bride Movie

Types	Frequency	Percentage
E1	3	9%
E2	2	6%
E3	0	0%
E4	8	25%
E5	0	0%
E6	1	3%
E7	2	6%
E8	5	15%
E9	7	21%
E10	5	15%
Total	33	100%

The example of each type of expressive speech act is as follows:

- a) E1
- **Utterance** : Hand, yes... with this hand, I will...
Description of Analysis : This utterance belongs to the Wishes category because Victor expresses his sincere intention to make a wedding vow. The context occurs during the rehearsal scene when he nervously practices the line "With this hand, I will..." showing both his romantic hope and his struggle to stay composed in front of others.
 - **Utterance** : With this hand I will lift your sorrows. Your cup will never empty, for I will be your wine. With this candle, I will light your way in darkness, with this ring, I ask you to be mine.
Description of Analysis : This utterance belongs to the Wishes category because Victor speaks with heartfelt sincerity and hope for eternal union. The context happens during their wedding in the Land of the Dead, showing his full emotional commitment and compassion for Emily.
- b) E2
- **Utterance** : Thank you
Description of Analysis : This utterance is part of the Thanking category since Victor thanks the crows as if they were witnesses to his efforts. The humorous but polite context reveals Victor's kind-hearted nature and habit of expressing appreciation, even to non-human audiences.
 - **Utterance** : Thank you, yes, answers! I need answers
Description of Analysis : This utterance belongs to the Thanking category because Victor shows appreciation while demanding clarity from the dead around him. The context happens when he interacts with the corpse citizens, reflecting his politeness even in confusion and fear.
- c) E4
- **Utterance** : Oh ... I ... do forgive me. I
Description of Analysis : This utterance belongs to the category of Apology because Victor expressed his regret to Victoria after accidentally playing the piano at her house without permission. The context occurred during his meeting with Victoria's family at Victoria's house, showing his nervousness and desire to be polite.

- **Utterance** : I'm sorry. I'm sorry I lied to you about wanting to see my parents. Truth is, I'm happier not to see them
Description of Analysis : This utterance belongs to the Apologizing category because Victor repeats his apology to show sincerity. The context occurs during an intimate conversation with Emily, revealing his emotional honesty and personal growth through self-reflection.
- d) E6
 - **Utterance** : How nice to see you!
Description of Analysis : This utterance is part of the Greeting category since it expresses friendliness and recognition. The context takes place when Victor encounters Mayhew in the underworld, highlighting his polite and cheerful demeanor despite the grim surroundings.
- e) E7
 - **Utterance** : N-no, no, of course not... I mean yes!
Description of Analysis : This utterance is classified as Lamentation because it reflects Victor's embarrassment and self-correction when he fails to follow the rehearsal instructions. The context happens in front of the Pastor, showing his emotional tension and his inner conflict between wanting to appear competent and feeling clumsy.
 - **Utterance** : I... I think you dropped this
Description of Analysis : This utterance belongs to the Lamentation category because it conveys mild sadness and sympathy. The context occurs when Victor interacts with a character who has lost something, symbolizing his sensitive and caring disposition.
- f) E8
 - **Utterance** : No! I meant no, I do no, er, not wish to be married, that is, I very much want...
Description of Analysis : This utterance belongs to the Attitude category because Victor's stuttering correction expresses internal conflict and emotional stress. The context takes place in front of the Pastor and both families, where Victor's attempt to clarify himself shows honesty and genuine desire, despite confusion.
 - **Utterance** : I'm afraid so
Description of Analysis : This utterance is classified as Attitude because Victor expresses worry and reluctant acceptance. The context arises when Emily tells him they cannot be together because they belong to different worlds, showing his sadness and inner conflict.
- g) E9
 - **Utterance** : Yes, yes, of course. Well, Victoria...
Description of Analysis : This utterance falls under the category of Consent because Victor agreed with Victoria's suggestion to call him by his first name. This occurred after they had introduced themselves to each other. This situation took place during their conversation at the Everglot residence, reflecting mutual politeness and increasing comfort.
 - **Utterance** : Y-Yes, sir. Certainly
Description of Analysis : This utterance falls under Agreement because Victor confirms his willingness to follow the Pastor's command during the marriage rehearsal. The context is formal and hierarchical, highlighting Victor's respect for authority and his desire to meet others' expectations despite his anxiety.
- h) E10
 - **Utterance** : Got it!
Description of Analysis : This utterance is categorized as Exclamation because it reveals Victor's spontaneous happiness after resolving a problem. The context occurs right after he retrieves the ring, showing a brief emotional release of satisfaction and triumph.
 - **Utterance** : Murderer!
Description of Analysis : This utterance falls under the Exclamation category because it expresses intense moral outrage and anger. The context takes place in the climax scene, where Victor bravely confronts Barkis, reflecting justice and courage through emotional expression.

In this study, most of the expressive speech acts introduced by Searle (1979) were found in the data, such as apologizing, agreeing, greeting, hoping, thanking, attitude, lamenting, and exclaiming. However, congratulatory and condolence speech acts were not found significantly, which is in line with the theme and narrative of the film *Corpse Bride*. The absence of condolences may be due to the fact that the storyline does not feature explicit scenes that require the use of

condolences, such as a death that necessitates mourning rituals. Meanwhile, congratulations rarely appear because the film focuses more on personal emotional conflicts than on celebrations.

Based on the findings of this research, the most dominant expressive speech act used by the main character Victor Van Dort in *Corpse Bride* is Apologizing, with a total of 8 occurrences. This is followed by Agreement with 7 occurrences, then Attitude and Exclamation with 5 occurrences each. Less frequently occurring speech acts include Wishes 3, Thanking 2, Lamentation 2, Greeting 1, and no Congratulations or Condolences were found.

This dominance of apologies reveals Victor's nature as a socially anxious protagonist, facing immense pressure from an arranged marriage, family expectations, and an unintentional vow he made to Emily's corpse. This forces Victor to frequently express remorse in order to repair his relationships, amid gothic romantic tensions that transcend death and class boundaries. Thus, the dominant expressive speech acts in the data correlate strongly with the themes of *Corpse Bride*, namely love, anxiety, social pressure, and supernatural mystery. This study links pragmatic speech acts to movie genre and theme, demonstrating how expressive speech acts are an important tool for character development and storytelling in dark fantasy animated movies.

B. The Intention of Expressive Speech Acts

Understanding the meaning behind the words helps reveal how the characters express feelings such as regret, hope, anxiety, and affection. This section analyses these meanings in detail, explaining how expressive speech plays an important role in building characters and telling stories in movies.

a) E1

- **Utterance** : Hand, yes... with this hand, I will...
Intention : Victor begins to express his wedding vow, showing hope and sincerity toward the promise of marriage. His communicative intention is to perform a ritualistic statement symbolizing commitment and affection, though his nervousness interrupts the fluency of his words.
- **Utterance** : With this hand I will lift your sorrows. Your cup will never empty, for I will be your wine. With this candle, I will light your way in darkness, with this ring, I ask you to be mine.
Intention : Victor solemnly expresses his love and lifelong promise to Emily during their wedding ceremony. His communicative intention is to convey genuine devotion and emotional sincerity, symbolizing acceptance and reconciliation between life and death.

b) E2

- **Utterance** : Thank you
Intention : Victor thanks the crows that witness his vow practice, even though they cannot respond. His communicative intention is to express gratitude and self-encouragement, showing that he values acknowledgment even from symbolic listeners.
- **Utterance** : Thank you, yes, answers! I need answers
Intention : Victor expresses gratitude toward the corpses who are trying to explain his situation. His communicative intention is to remain polite while urgently seeking clarity about what has happened, showing his reliance on communication to understand the strange new world.

c) E4

- **Utterance** : Oh ... I ... do forgive me. I
Intention : Victor apologized to Victoria as a sign of respect and remorse after realizing that he had acted rudely by playing the piano without permission in Victoria's house. The purpose of his communication was to restore politeness and maintain a good impression in a formal situation where he felt anxious and judged.
- **Utterance** : I'm sorry. I'm sorry I lied to you about wanting to see my parents. Truth is, I'm happier not to see them
Intention : Victor sincerely apologizes to Emily for lying about his true reason for wanting to visit his parents. His communicative intention is to confess honestly and express remorse, aiming to rebuild trust and emotional connection.

d) E6

- **Utterance** : How nice to see you!
Intention : Victor greets Mayhew with warmth and enthusiasm upon meeting him again. His communicative intention is to express friendliness and recognition, maintaining positive social relations even in the afterlife.

e) E7

- **Utterance** : N-no, no, of course not... I mean yes!
Intention : Victor expresses confusion and regret after failing to follow the Pastor's instructions correctly. His communicative intention is to correct his earlier misunderstanding and reduce tension caused by his nervous mistake, showing both embarrassment and self-awareness.
- **Utterance** : I... I think you dropped this
Intention : Victor gently reminds someone of their lost item. His communicative intention is to show concern and empathy, using a soft tone that conveys care and politeness in a delicate moment.

f) E8

- **Utterance** : No! I meant no, I do no, er, not wish to be married, that is, I very much want...
Intention : Victor tries to clarify his statement to avoid being misunderstood by the Pastor and both families. His communicative intention is to express sincerity and honesty about his wish to marry, though his nervousness makes the statement sound contradictory.
- **Utterance** : I'm afraid so
Intention : Victor admits with hesitation that Emily is right they cannot be together because they come from different worlds. His communicative intention is to express sadness and reluctant acceptance of a painful truth while maintaining honesty.

g) E9

- **Utterance** : Yes, yes, of course. Well, Victoria...
Intention : Victor politely agrees to Victoria's request to be addressed by her first name. His communicative intention is to build familiarity and show respect by accepting her invitation to a less formal relationship, while maintaining his polite tone.
- **Utterance** : Y-Yes, sir. Certainly
Intention : Victor expresses obedience and respect toward Pastor Galswells' instruction to repeat his wedding vows. His intention is to comply with authority and demonstrate discipline, revealing his sense of responsibility despite feeling anxious.

h) E10

- **Utterance** : Got it!
Intention : Victor expresses joy and relief upon finding the ring he lost. His communicative intention is to inform others of his success and share his excitement in resolving the issue.
- **Utterance** : Murderer!
Intention : Victor shouts in fury after discovering that Barkis was the one who killed Emily. His communicative intention is to express moral outrage and seek justice for Emily, showing bravery and deep empathy for her suffering.

II. Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies in recognizing various expressive speech acts used in film dialogues, across various genres. The dominant use of apologetic speech acts is consistent with the research by Selsibilla et al. (2022) in the film "Joker" and Rahmawati (2021) in the film "Crazy Rich Asians," where these speech acts reflect the characters' emotional vulnerability and social skills. The dark romantic fantasy genre of the Corpse Bride movie, which features social anxiety and emotional complexity as its main themes, as well as the personality of Victor Van Dort, is related to the dominance of apologetic speech acts in this film. Despite their genre differences, Joker and Crazy Rich Asians both depict protagonists who suffer from mental health issues and a need for social recognition, as evidenced by the prevalence of similar apologetic behavior. Apologies in Crazy Rich Asians represent an effort to conform to social standards and etiquette despite facing romantic and family problems, while in Joker, apologies reveal Arthur Fleck's fragile emotional state in a harsh environment.

This study shows that the speech act of apologizing functions universally as a pragmatic tool to express humility, strengthen social bonds, and demonstrate psychology specific to the genre. However, the conceptual implications of this speech act of apologizing vary according to the theme and character development of the film. In addition, the dominance of the second speech act of agreement and attitude in this study is also in line with Tanjung (2021) in "The Lovely Bones" and Aritonang & Ambalegin (2023b) in "The Willoughbys", where these speech acts show the characters' efforts to build social relationships and convey inner conflicts.

The use of expressive speech acts in *Corpse Bride* also supports Searle (1979) theory, which classifies expressive speech acts as a way of expressing psychological conditions and emotional reactions based on Holmes (2001) framework to understand the situational and social contexts that influence speech and its meaning.

This study expands on previous research by focusing specifically on expressive speech acts in the main character, Victor Van Dort, in the dark fantasy romance genre of *Corpse Bride*, unlike previous studies that examined various characters or genres. In particular, the absence of congratulatory or condolence speech acts in this film emphasizes the narrative's focus on personal emotional struggles rather than social rituals. Social rituals are activities and events that encourage communication and interaction between community groups during important occasions such as funerals, weddings, or celebrations. Victor Van Dort, the main character, rarely engages in social interaction with others participating in ceremonies, parties, or public events. This shows that he does not participate in or initiate expressions of condolences or congratulations.

Conclusion

This study discusses the types and purposes of expressive utterances used by the main character in the film *Corpse Bride*, Victor Van Dort. The results show that there are 33 examples of expressive utterances, such as apologizing, agreeing, expressing hope, saying thank you, showing attitude, mourning, greeting, and exclaiming. The two most frequently used types of expressive utterances are apologizing and agreeing, which reflect Victor's shy and responsible nature. By apologizing frequently, Victor shows humility and his ability to respond to pressure and formal situations. Meanwhile, the use of agreeing utterances shows his efforts to maintain harmonious social relationships and respect others. This study provides important insights into how the main character is portrayed through the use of diverse expressions and communicative intent in the context of the film's story. The results of this study enrich our understanding of the role of expressive speech in shaping characters and developing storylines in dark fantasy animation films. This study also confirms that the speech act theory proposed by Searle (1979) is relevant in analyzing film dialogue and shows that expressive language strategies are an important tool in conveying the deep feelings and psychological conflicts experienced by characters. This research makes an important contribution to pragmatic discussion and film analysis by combining aspects of theme and genre with speech act theory, thereby deepening our understanding of language use in the context of film and character development through meaningful dialogue.

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