

Exploring Assertive Acts in *Lady Bird* Movie Reviews on Letterboxd

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Abstract

This research aims to determine how Letterboxd users express their opinions about *Lady Bird* movie through their comments. A qualitative descriptive method was used to describe the actual phenomena occurring in collected data. The data were collected by selecting and transcribing verbal comments on Letterboxd related to the *Lady Bird* movie. After that, the data were classified into types of assertive acts proposed by Searle and Vanderveken (1985). In this research, it was found that Letterboxd users employed the types of assertive acts admit, confess, notify, claim, report, predict, and argue. These types of assertive acts are used as a means of public self-expression and to strengthen deeper emotional bonds with fellow Letterboxd users who watched the *Lady Bird* movie. Unlike formal discourse, which uses assertive acts to simply provide information, assertive acts in informal discourse, especially movie reviews on Letterboxd, are used to seek empathy and validation, share experiences, and build a community with other users.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common yet complex types of illocutionary acts is assertive act, in which the speaker commits to the truth of a proposition. Assertive acts serve to state the actual situation, because the speaker presents the proposition as a representation of the real conditions in the context of speech (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). Assertive acts can take different forms, such as asserting, claiming, denying, notifying, stating, reporting, concluding, etc. Each type of assertive act has specific communicative power. For example, *informing* provides new knowledge to the listener, *notifying* draws attention to something relevant, while *claiming* asserts ownership of an idea or viewpoint. What unites these variations is that the speaker presents the utterance as a representation of reality. This makes assertive acts crucial in communication, as they serve not only as a tool for exchanging factual information but also to evaluate, persuade, or align with social and interpersonal goals.

The study of assertive acts in movie review is important because it provides insight into how audiences connect with and process cinematic narratives in their personal lives. A movie may reflect or convey messages that are relevant to everyday life (Young, 2000; Jones, 2011; Huyen, 2015). This happens because the dialogic emotions created by the interactions between characters in a movie make the audience live the events in the movie, which results in a response to their real life (López-Sintas et al., 2017). As stated by Searle and Vanderveken (1985), in an assertive act, words are intended to correspond to the world, meaning that the speaker's statements are intended to represent actual circumstances. Consequently, movie reviewers can share real events in their lives that relate to the issues raised in a movie through their reviews.

This research focuses on *Lady Bird* movie reviews on Letterboxd. Letterboxd is a platform widely used by movie enthusiasts. With Letterboxd, users can review, track the movies they watch, discuss, and even connect with other Letterboxd users. A24 Film mentions that *Lady Bird* is a movie that explores the joys and sorrows of the relationship between a mother and her daughter. Directed by Greta Gerwig, *Lady Bird* tells the story of Christine, a teenager from Sacramento who is pursuing her dreams while dealing with various conflicts with her family. A movie that has a strong connection to the relationship between its characters and its audiences makes "the majority of the audience seems to be eager to share these film viewing emotions with others as a part of a social situation"

(Axelson, 2010, p. 4). Therefore, this research explores audience reviews of the *Lady Bird* movie on Letterboxd.

Several researchers have previously conducted studies related to the use of assertive acts in communication within various contexts. The five previous studies are mentioned as follows. The first is written by Kusumah and Nirmala (2021). In their research with its title *Assertive Illocutionary Acts of Zakir Naik in General Lecture on Similarities between Christianity and Islam*, they find that Zakir Naik's lectures predominantly used three types of assertive acts, namely quoting, stating, and informing, with quoting being the most frequently used. The second is written by Sianipar (2022). In her research with its title *An Analysis of Assertive Illocutionary Acts on Social Media*, she determines that assertive acts are communication techniques used to express thoughts and expectations.

The third is written by Uspayanti (2020). In her research with its title *Assertive and Expressive Speech Act Used by English Teachers and Its Implications*, she focuses on the function of assertive and expressive speech acts in TEFL class, which helps facilitate understanding, build effective communication, and motivate students in the classroom. The fourth is written by Rambe et al. (2025). In their writing entitled *Analysis of Assertive Speech Acts in Minister Nadiem Makarim's Final Speech on National Education Day*, they find that Nadiem Makarim often used assertive acts such as stating, suggesting, and reminding to convey messages effectively, with a particular focus on building credibility and emphasizing shared national goals in formal contexts. The fifth is written by Izar et al. (2020), in their study with its title *Assertive Speech Acts in Mata Najwa Program of Episode Gara-Gara Corona*, they find 23 assertive acts in the speech, with the most frequent type is informing, followed by stating, suggesting, and boasting, while reporting does not appear at all.

Most previous research on assertive acts has focused on formal settings such as sermons, classrooms, political speeches, or talk shows. Meanwhile, the use of assertive acts in shaping how the audience interpret and evaluate a movie has rarely been explored. This research addresses this gap by analyzing how Letterboxd users employ assertive acts in their reviews of the *Lady Bird* movie on Letterboxd to communicate their personal interpretation, share life experiences, and express judgments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assertive Act

In this research, the researcher applied the concept of assertive act according to Searle and Vanderveken (1985). Searle and Vanderveken (1985) remark that assertive points are a way for a speaker to express things as they are, and the speaker states what actually happens in an event. Furthermore, assertive act has various functions according to the intent and how the speaker states what they want to convey. Searle and Vanderveken (1985) state that there are several types of assertive act mentioned as follows; “assert, claim, affirm, state, deny, disclaim, assure, argue, rebut, inform, notify, remind, object, predict, report, retrodict, suggest, insist, conjecture, hypothesize, guess, swear, testify, admit, confess, accuse, blame, criticize, praise, complain, boast, and lament” (p. 182-183).

Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)

To determine the types of assertive acts, an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) is required. Searle and Vanderveken (1985) explain that Illocutionary Force Indicating Device is a natural language element that is used to prove that an utterance contains a certain element of illocutionary force. The typical case of Illocutionary Force Indicating Device are performative verbs, linguistic structure, mood, punctuation, intonation, stress, and contextual cues. “Some examples of illocutionary force indicating devices are word order and mood, as in: (1) ‘Will you leave the room?’, (2) ‘You, leave the room!’, (3) ‘You will leave the room’, (4) ‘If only you would leave the room!’” (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 2). In the utterances given, there are different elements in each utterance. For example, in utterance (1), there is a question mark, which means that the utterance is requesting the hearer to leave the room. Meanwhile, in utterance (2), there is an exclamation mark, which means that the utterance is directing or commanding the hearer to leave the room. Moreover, utterance (3) is a prediction or warning because the declarative sentence structure suggests a statement of fact. The utterance (4) is an expression of wish, since there is a conditional clause “If only” which means it introduces a hypothetical situation and expresses a wish.

RESEARCH METHODS

Descriptive and qualitative method was applied because this research described how Letterboxd users use assertive acts to advance their goals in reviewing movie. Using the descriptive and qualitative method, the researcher can observe existing phenomena as

they are (Sandelowski, 2000). This research used verbal comments posted on Letterboxd by Letterboxd users about the *Lady Bird* movie as the object. The instrument in this research was the researcher herself since the data were collected and analyzed by the researcher. First, the data were collected by selecting the comments posted based on the characteristic of assertive act and transcribing the verbal comments on Letterboxd about the *Lady Bird* movie. After the data were collected, the data went through several steps of analysis: the data were classified based on types of assertive act proposed by Searle and Vanderveken (1985), and the data were further described and interpreted in relation to its assertive act function. Lastly, the researcher made conclusions about the data analyzed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The researcher found types of assertive acts used by Letterboxd users in reviews of *Lady Bird*, which had different functions depending on the intentions of each user. The following sections are the types of assertive acts found: admit, confess, notify, claim, report, predict, and argue.

Datum 1: Admit

Cerys, the Letterboxd user, admits to the Letterboxd audience (other users reading the review) that she and her mother had a similar relationship to Christine and Marion. In the *Lady Bird* movie, both Christine and her mother, Marion, have strong personalities, leading to frequent arguments and misunderstandings. Thus, Cerys shares the exact same experience as the characters in *Lady Bird*.

Cerys: Me and my mother (not a flex)

According to Searle and Vanderveken (1985), to admit means to state something while recognizing that the situation described is bad or undesirable to the speaker. The datum above is classified as a type of assertive act admit because there is an addition of the linguistic element *not a flex* as the illocutionary force. This shows that Cerys, the Letterboxd user, admits that her relationship with her mother is similar to that of Christine and Marion in the movie *Lady Bird*, but she emphasizes that it is not something to be flaunted (*flex* means to show off).

Datum 2: Confess

Vitor had previously blocked his mother's Instagram account because he does not want his mother to know about his online life. In the context of the movie *Lady Bird*, the

reason Vitor blocked his mother's Instagram account was because Vitor did not have a good relationship with his mother. However, after watching *Lady Bird*, Vitor feels guilty for blocking his mother's Instagram account. Vitor is moved by how Christine and Marion tried to mend their relationship in the movie. Therefore, after watching *Lady Bird*, Vitor confesses his mistake for blocking his mother to other Letterboxd users and voluntarily unblocks his mother on Instagram.

Vitor: Just unblocked my mom from my ig stories

To confess is to admit something while also acknowledging personal responsibility for a very bad situation (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). The datum above is classified as a type of assertive act confess. In this case, contextual cues are the key illocutionary force that indicates a confession. In this context, Vitor, the Letterboxd user, feels that he is responsible for the bad thing he did towards his mother (blocking his mother's Instagram account). Therefore, Vitor made an implicit confession on Letterboxd saying that he unblocked his mother's Instagram account.

Datum 3: Notify

In the reviews section, Georgina notifies other Letterboxd users that she has the same problem as Christine. Georgina quoted dialogues between Marion and Christine in the movie *Lady Bird* ("I want you to be the very best version of yourself that you can be," said Marion; "What if this is the best version?" Said Christine) before she said *I FELT THAT*. In this context, *THAT* refers to the movie dialogue she quoted from *Lady Bird* (about how Marion emphasizes her desire for Christine to be perfect, but Christine is afraid that everything she has done is already the best she can do). Georgina feels personally connected to the dialogue from the movie *Lady Bird* that she quoted; in this case, Georgina's comment *I FELT THAT* is her emotional response as a Letterboxd user to the dialogue she quoted from the *Lady Bird* movie.

Georgina: "I want you to be the very best version of yourself that you can be."

"What if this is the best version?"

I FELT THAT

To notify means to convey something with the aim of attracting people's attention and making them aware that it is relevant or important (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). The data above is classified as a type of assertive act notify. The comment written in all capital letters (*I FELT THAT*) is the key of illocutionary force. In the context of casual texting, the use of capital letters throughout words indicates that the person is placing stress on that

sentence. In addition, the context of Georgina's comment is also the illocutionary force behind why her comment falls under the type of assertive act notify. In the context of the movie *Lady Bird*, Georgina quoted the movie dialogues to make other Letterboxd users notice that Georgina has similar exact problems to Marion and Christine in the movie.

Datum 4: Claim

In the reviews section, Yazi claims that the movie *Lady Bird* is made for girls who have problems with their mothers. The main issue in *Lady Bird* is the conflict between Christine and her mother, Marion, where they struggle to communicate openly and understand each other as mother and daughter. Therefore, Yazi shows other Letterboxd users that the movie is very suitable for a daughter who has problems with her mother because it is likely that those who watch the movie will have a very strong relationship with the characters in *Lady Bird*.

Yazi: This film is for girls with mother issues and girls with mother issues only

The datum above is classified as a type of assertive act claim. Based on the IFID theory, the comment posted by Yazi uses a standard subject-verb-complement structure that is typical for making statements. Furthermore, the use of the verb “*is*” establishes the identification or categorization that the movie *Lady Bird* is only intended for girls who have problems with their mothers. In addition, Yazi's comment also uses the restrictive clause, “*and girls with mother issues only*,” as a strong affirmation to reinforce Yazi's commitment to the proposition. This restriction indicates that Yazi's comment has a high degree of confidence in its statement, thereby reinforcing the illocutionary force of the claim itself.

Datum 5: Report

In the reviews section, W4NTBE reports the facts of what happened when she/he watched *Lady Bird* to other Letterboxd users. In the movie *Lady Bird*, Christine and Marion often engage in verbal arguments caused by their differences of opinion. While watching *Lady Bird*, W4NTBE happened to hear her/his sister and mother arguing. Therefore, W4NTBE paused the movie three times. Thus, W4NTBE reported a real event that she/he witnessed, which is similar to what happened in the movie *Lady Bird*.

W4NTBE: Had to pause this film three times because I could hear my mum and sister arguing.

The datum above is classified as a type of assertive act report. This datum has the primary illocutionary purpose of being an assertive statement that binds the speaker to the truth. In accordance with the IFID theory, the comment posted by W4NTBE presents the

past tense format, which strictly adheres to the propositional content conditions of the type of assertive act report by describing a past event. In addition, the comment has another characteristic of a report sentence, namely the presence of specific details; in this comment, such as the number of times W4NTBE paused the *Lady Bird* movie (three times).

Datum 6: Predict

In the reviews section, Sarah predicts that she will soon end her “*Lady Bird* era” because she has entered her dream college. In the context of the movie, the “*Lady Bird* era” refers to the theme in the movie *Lady Bird*, which is about high school life and the difficulties faced before leaving home for college. So, the “*Lady Bird* era” refers to the period when teenagers in their final year of school experience challenges such as choosing their life goals and convincing their families of their choices.

Sarah: Got into my top college nothing feels real and i fear my lady bird era is coming to a close.

The datum above is classified as a type of assertive act predict. The illocutionary force of the verb phrase “*is coming to a close*” is a predictive expression that describes a situation that will occur in the near future. This fulfills the propositional content requirement that the statement must be oriented toward the future relative to the time of utterance. Furthermore, the phrase “*Got into my top college*” serves as concrete evidence to predict that Sarah will soon end her “*Lady Bird* era”. Therefore, Sarah’s comment predicts future outcomes based on existing facts.

Datum 7: Argue

Golden argues with other Letterboxd users who hate the *Lady Bird* movie in the reviews section. Golden states that people who hate *Lady Bird* and think it is a bad movie have a good relationship with their mothers, which is why they cannot relate to Christine’s experience with her mother, with whom Christine often argues.

Golden: Ppl who hate Lady bird... just say you don't have mommy issues and move on

The datum above is classified as a type of assertive act argue. The illocutionary force of Golden’s comment is based on the mood conveyed and the context in it. Golden states a thesis or conclusion; people who dislike the movie *Lady Bird* do not have issues with their mothers, in contrast, they have a good relationship with their mothers. The phrase “... *just say you don't have mommy issues and move on*” is a highly rhetorical and imperative expression, but its function is to identify the reason behind the hatred. Implicitly, Golden provides relevant evidence that the movie *Lady Bird* focuses on the relationship struggle

between Christine and her mother, Marion. By identifying this reason, the comment fulfills an essential requirement of argumentation: providing reasons to support the thesis.

Discussion

The use of assertive acts by Letterboxd users in the reviews of the *Lady Bird* movie shows that users aim to share personal vulnerabilities as a way to seek empathy, validation, and a sense of kinship with other Letterboxd users. Unlike the use of assertive acts in formal situations where individuals may only provide information and express opinions, as stated in studies by Kusumah and Nirmala (2021), Sianipar (2022), Uspayanti (2020), Rambe et al. (2025), and Izar et al. (2020), Letterboxd users use movie as a backdrop to express personal struggles, such as difficult family relationships or personal insecurity. The theme in the movie *Lady Bird* provides a relatable context for Letterboxd users to publicly express their sensitive experiences. Letterboxd users do not only review movie based on their cinematography and production elements, but they also invite empathy and validation from others who have experienced similar situations.

The use of assertive acts by Letterboxd users in the reviews of the *Lady Bird* movie also shows that in informal context driven by a community with a shared background, the illocutionary force of affirmative acts is not only related to the speaker's commitment to the truth, but also to their intention to connect with others. The meaning of a statement becomes highly dependent on shared experiential knowledge with complex strategies in which illocutionary markers are rhetorically implied through paralinguistic cues. For example, assertive acts such as *admit* and *confess* are fulfilled by relying on the audience's shared knowledge of the *Lady Bird* movie theme and the inferred psychological state of Letterboxd users (e.g., feeling guilty for doing something wrong towards their mother).

CONCLUSION

The use of assertive acts on Letterboxd extends its function beyond the exchange of factual information commonly observed in formal settings. In movie reviews, which are informal discourses, Letterboxd users employ assertive acts as a means of public self-expression, strengthening deeper emotional bonds among the Letterboxd users. Some of the assertive acts found are admit, confess, notify, claim, report, predict, and argue. These types of assertive acts are used by Letterboxd users to seek empathy, validation, share experiences, and build a community among fellow Letterboxd users, as well as to reflect on themselves regarding awareness of the issues raised in the movie *Lady Bird* that relate

to their real lives. The use of assertive acts in *Lady Bird* movie reviews on Letterboxd also shows that their illocutionary force goes beyond a commitment to truth, but rather serves as a means for users to connect with others. In short, assertive act in informal digital spaces, especially Letterboxd, primarily functions as a social strategy to achieve mutual recognition and emotional alignment.

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